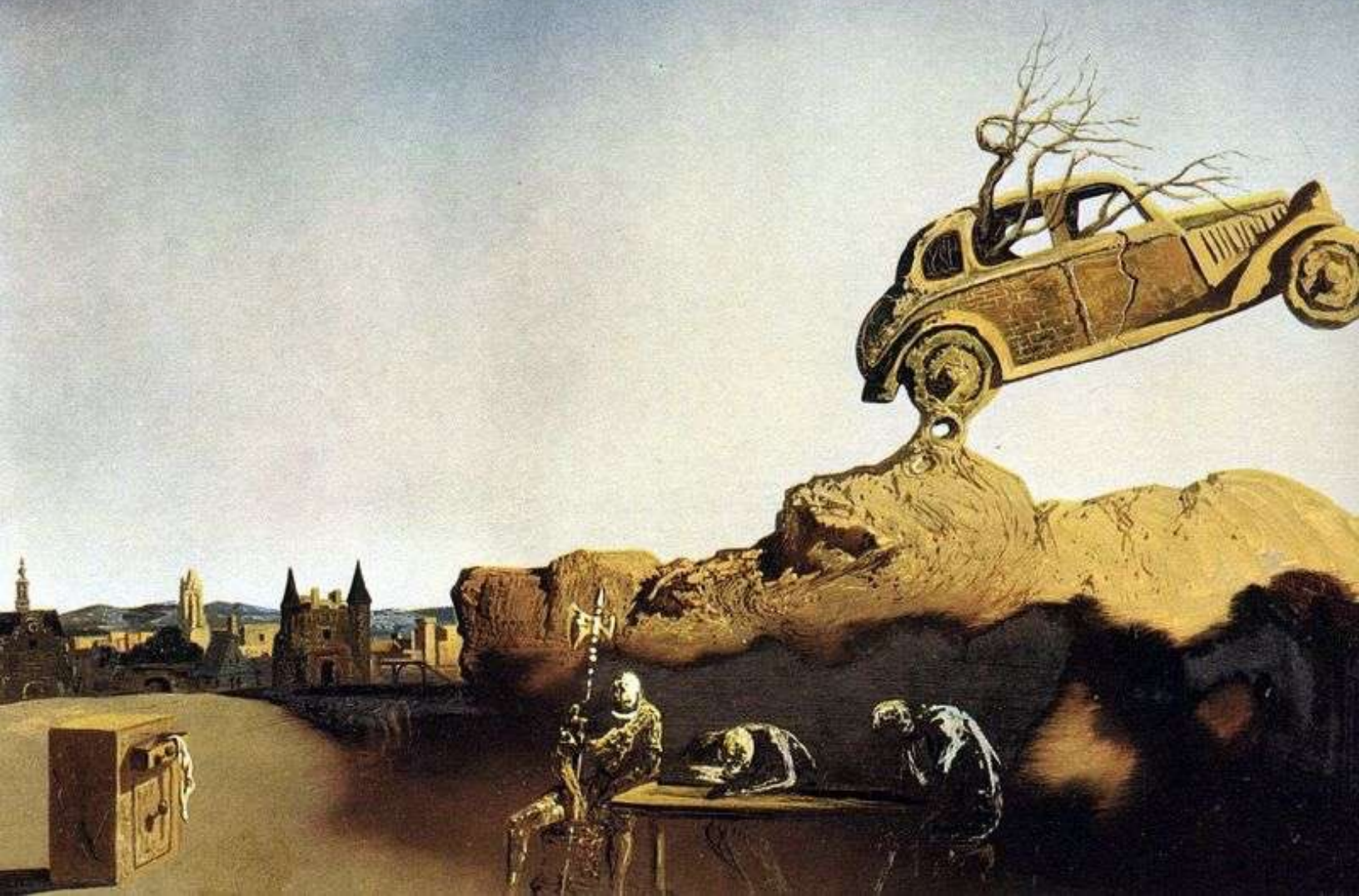


# Phenomenology and Ecology: Art, Cities, and Cinema in the Pandemic



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### Abstract

COVID-19 infects cities, here grasped as quasi-living functioning systems, and the changes inflicted can poetically open us to certain things. Drawing on ecological psychology, we maintain that this brings people into contact with different realities depending on their overall wellbeing, arguing that the aesthetic experience of cities accordingly varies. We then consider iterations of these ideas in dystopian cinema, which portrays global threats altering human relations with technology, art, and the world.

### Keywords

COVID-19, Cities, Dystopian Movies, Ecological Psychology, *poiesis*

### Introduction

This article explores the COVID-19 pandemic in cities and in relation to art, especially science fiction movies. The plain fact is that lived experience of the pandemic has sometimes gotten close to dystopian cinema with people isolated behind masks, unable to travel, and occasionally confined to their local city district. Although the less privileged are often forced out to make a living, the better-off have the option of staying at home with food delivery services and possibilities of an almost cybernetic existence by integrating with remote technologies. By merging humans with electronic tools, COVID-19 approaches the techno-viruses found in science fiction—viruses that

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transform biological agents into techno-organic entities. Simultaneously, cities share characteristics with living systems: they are influenced—one might even say infected—by illness. COVID-19 has impacted human movement, including economic, social, and political activity. It has thus altered the heartbeat of cities and the circulation of people through them.

We consider these issues through the psychology of James Hillman (1972, 1999, 2005, 2008). His writings identify poetry with both nature and soul. He regards the two as ecologically bound and uses mythic archetypes to capture experiences of existential threat. Examining how COVID-19 affects the world's "composition" in the twofold sense of "ecology" and "aesthetic arrangements," we reinforce Hillman's ideas with another psychological school that is widely characterized as "ecological." This school organizes around the thought of the perception scientist James Gibson (1966, 1967), which in turn evolves out of phenomenology, Gestalt psychology, and pragmatism (Heft 2001; Chemero and Käufer 2016). The aim here is to show that socioeconomic wellbeing affects aesthetic engagements with urban surroundings and that COVID-19 amplifies these outcomes, an idea that can be understood within phenomenological philosophy.

To explicate the techno-virus that shows up in both cities and science fiction movies, we call upon Martin Heidegger's (e.g., 1954) discussions of Greek understandings of art, both practical and fine. The Greek word for art is *téchne*—which is understood as the kind of knowledge that brings about changes in the world. *Téchne* is associated with *poiesis*, the root of the word "poetry" and also an ancient term that connotes "creating," "making," or "producing." According to Heidegger, *poiesis* means more explicitly "bursting open," "bringing forth," and "blossoming into bloom" and hence "out of concealment" and "into the open" (Crippen 2007). For Heidegger, then, "*téchne* is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsperson but also for the fine arts and beautiful arts. *Téchne* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiesis*" (1954, 16). Thus, when creative making and bringing forth occur, something has "passed from non being to being, from concealment into the full light of the work" (Agamben 1999, 68-69). We see this in poetry proper, for by means of innovatively bending language, it can open us to things that we formally missed, almost as black light divulges what was previously hidden (Crippen 2007).

Thus, while *téchne* is at the root of the word "technology," Heidegger rescues the concept to show that it is more than production and, in fact, a mode of revealing (Cortés 2009, 55). Along these lines, we want to suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has generated new ways of coping and hence see-



ing, partly through the creative use of technologies. However, ways of coping are not evenly distributed, nor is access to technology. Hence people in varying situations do not respond in the same ways, so that they bring forth different realities, aesthetic and otherwise. This situation is reflected in dystopian movies, many dealing with outbreaks and other catastrophes, highlighting the differing experiences of subgroups. Insofar as cinema helps us see realities that escape attention, one can regard it as a truth-disclosing poetical dialogue that reveals what the daily grind of existence obscures.

### Poetry and Sick City-Souls

James Hillman expresses relations between nature, art, and poetry through the Neoplatonic concept of *anima mundi* or world soul. Hillman regards his work as ecological, and *anima mundi* captures this. The Greek formulation is *psuchè kósmou*. The word *psuchè* simultaneously connotes “psyche,” “mind,” “soul,” “life,” and “breath, and the Latin term *anima* has similar meanings. Accordingly, an ancient view was that vital life functions comprise the human soul; these form societal elements integrating into a quasi-living city soul; and organic and non-organic forces ecologically unite into a world soul. Thus, to speak of a world soul is to characterize the Earth as a kind of organism or living system.

Hillman (1999, Ch. 3) sees this integrated outlook as a call for psychological principles that do not start with the subject but rather with the world in which the human soul is situated. He characterizes this approach as one that does not separate people from nature and takes as its starting point not only human desires but also the interests of the Earth and its beings. In short, Hillman asserts that our *psyches*—our being and ways of living—are characterized and defined by the world soul or *anima mundi*. Again, the Greek term is *psuchè kósmou*, so Hillman sees himself as expressing the cosmic psychology already at play on our planet. Our breath, for example, belongs to the world: we cannot distinguish the air from the oxygen dissolving on our lungs’ surface. What happens in the external *anima* happens to us. For Hillman, this applies to psychology as well.

The pandemic is a variation of this point since the virus, by infecting us, also infects the soul of cities—“soul” here understood as societal elements integrating with physical form and other constituents such as rocks and gardens that add to urban spaces. The pandemic’s assault has brought about loneliness, isolation, sorrow, and nostalgia. Hillman (1972) suggests an archetype for such loss and disarray is found in the myth of the nature-god

Pan. Pan is a protector of animals and also a god of panic and loneliness. Pan, as Hillman writes, “was in panic when the animals ran,” and “this vision of Pan’s panic set the world in terror” (p. liii). Seen thus, “Pan was himself a victim of nightmares [...] and the horror that he brings. The God is what he does; his appearance is his essence” (p. liii).

The notion that appearance *is* essence is repeated in Heidegger’s later work and is closely paralleled in classical American pragmatism, and it connects to the earlier discussed conception of poetry. The principle, in John Dewey’s (1920, Ch. 5) phraseology, is that things *are* what they do and what can be done to them, so that pine shows up as a softwood because of the ways (*téchne*) in which artisans build with it—how it appears in the structures they erect (Crippen 2017). Dewey sees art and poetry as forms of creative making, which is etymologically appropriate. Speaking of poetry proper, Dewey (1925) adds that it “radiates the light that never was on land and sea but that is henceforth an abiding illumination of objects” (360). Dewey thereby suggests with Heidegger that poetry is a form of revelation.

Understood in Dewey’s practical manner—which is, in fact, an ordinary and phenomenological way of grasping things—COVID-19 is not merely a microscopic agent, nor even just a medical illness. Like Pan, it is also what it does: it is the loneliness and panic that it has caused and that has characterized our experience of it, particularly among those who are not physically infected. The pandemic has aggressively inflicted itself in places where social intercourse is intense, such as urban centers. Hence the virus showed up in empty parks, in people going out masked and distancing from one another or else barricading themselves at home. It appeared in shuttered businesses, unemployment, or anxiety about these possibilities. It also manifested in people ignoring safety protocols to make political statements and positively discover their own work rhythms in remote situations. The outbreak of COVID-19 has accordingly brought about altered human ecologies and thus infected and thereby changed how cultural landscapes knit together—what might be called the aesthetic composition of city-souls.

### **Ecological Aesthetics and the Pandemic**

At the outset, we suggested COVID-19 affects people differently depending on their situation since the more privileged can better integrate with remote technologies and avoid exposure to the virus. We want to add that there is reason to think that personal situations—in terms of health, socioeconomic standing, and so on—affect aesthetic contact with cities. We also wish to underline the importance of Hillman’s (1999, 49) idea of psychology as

a subject for which the limits cannot be defined because it blends into the world. He suggests that this means that psychology merges with ecology. We specifically think Hillman elucidates environmental catastrophes and the current COVID-19 crisis. The latter is human-made, not because it was manufactured in laboratories. Instead, it is because the pandemic one way or another appears to have roots in the close confinement of various species—including humans—for commercial purposes. The global economy ensured that the outbreak escalated, thereby revealing the highly integrated nature of the world and human activities. Viewed this way, our panic does not merely originate in us; it is also grounded in the living world we are part of, as Hillman argues.

Another ecological variant of psychology is organized around the work of James Gibson (1966, 1979). Influenced by phenomenology, pragmatism, and Gestalt psychology (Heft 2001; Chemero and Käufer 2016), Gibson likewise has a world-oriented psychology in that he thinks that the structure of our surroundings adequately accounts for how things show up in experience. He is particularly famous for his insight that we see the world in terms of affordances, defined as features that allow or limit certain kinds of action. Gibson is a realist in that he believes that affordances, while relative to an organism's capacities, exist in the world independently of agents and their temporary interests. Thus standard Gibsonian accounts would hold that a chair affords sitting, irrespective of whether anybody is there or interested in using it, and its features remain even if it is in an empty room (Heft 2020). However, this seems overstated since people in the same physical space can at one moment bring out significantly different features, undermining the realist insistence that affordances persist independently of agents, albeit leaving anti-subjectivist aspects of the theory intact. For instance, a lake surface affords very different things to people hitting it at slow speeds and terminal velocity (Crippen 2020). Along somewhat related lines, studies show that emotional disposition affects how distant or steep hills appear (Riener *et al.* 2011). Once again, however, this leaves Gibson's anti-subjectivist standpoint intact since the perception of increased steepness and distance correspond to hills being objectively less accessible when we are depressed and hence deprived of energy. Nevertheless, this critique does give additional stress to Gibson's observation that agents play a role in defining the ecological structures they negotiate.

In recent times, affordances have been used to understand functioning in urban settings and specifically aesthetic engagements with cities (Crippen 2016a; Crippen and Klement 2020). Scholars have long suggested that im-

PLICIT boundaries funnel human movement (e.g., Jacobs 1961; Newman 1972) and thus function like affordances (Crippen 2016a, 2021a, 2021b). Such features might include a curb, followed by a lawn, decorative fencing, and shrubs with a walkway and run of stairs rising to a lobby. Non-residents penetrating these networks of what might be called “symbolic affordances” are apt to experience a sense of increasing conspicuousness. They are also likely to be more pronounced to inhabitants, who may feel licensed to question them. Adding aesthetic features such as gardens and ornamental brickwork may enhance the effect by drawing residents outside and cultivating a protective sense of ownership. Other decorative features such as neogothic ornamentation—which derives from medieval architecture—may further amplify the effect. This amplification happens because, however aesthetically appealing such adornments are, their original purpose was to repulse entry, meaning they tend to convey hostility semiotically (Crippen 2021b). The broader point is that design can “make both inhabitant and stranger [...] perceive that an area is under the undisputed influence of a particular group” (Newman 1972, 2-3).

The critical idea for our purposes is that the psychological cordoning of space can operate differentially depending on people’s wellbeing, making design selectively permeable. Thus polished wood and marble in banks signify reliability and trustworthiness to those with financial resources. They may accordingly feel invited to enter. These same features might indicate a level of prestige that may ward off those of more modest means, therefore closing the space to them. Experimental research finds that fatigue, carrying a heavy weight, low blood sugar, and sadness—in short, anything that degrades energy or mobility—make affordances more severe (Bhalla and Proffitt 1999; Riener *et al.* 2011; Schnall, Zadra and Proffitt 2010; Zadra *et al.* 2010). There is also empirical evidence that the implicit markers work more effectively with marginalized groups such as the homeless, who suffer more malaise (Crippen 2019). Almost everybody is fatigued by COVID-19. However, one can speculate that this is more so with people worn out with various forms of stress and who were already struggling before the pandemic. This case might be especially so for those precluded from the luxury of working at home and who cannot afford to lose income even temporarily. None of this implies that they cease to experience spaces as aesthetic. It instead means that specific aesthetic spaces are likely to be imbued with a forbidden status, analogous to a gothic castle that we can admire for its beauty and yet feel excluded.

Expressing the situation in Heidegger's and Hillman's terms, we can say that the poetics of space varies for different people—"poetics" again in the sense of *poiesis* and *téchne*, that is, manners of comportment that bring out realities in particular ways. The COVID-19 disaster has brought widespread pain in anxiety, depression, panic, and loss. However, the panic of joblessness and infection has likely been worse for the poor. By contrast, the affluent—while undoubtedly awaiting the end of the crisis—are at least better positioned to enjoy personalized work rhythms and escape the daily grind of commutes. Gardening, home baking, and even foraging wild foods are on the rise, but again likely more so for those having the luxury of setting their work schedules by themselves.

These reflections reiterate the opening claim that the virus has not merely infected human tissue but the surrounding world, which simultaneously means how it is poetically brought out according to our dispositions and actions. These reflections thereby highlight that the virus is techno-organic, for it is altering the technological world around us and how we meld with it, again differentially depending on personal situations.

### **Cinematic Dystopias and Technological Reproduction in the Age of Covid-19**

The techno-pandemic has repeatedly been rehearsed in art and especially science fiction films. At the same time, we are living new realities. One reason is that COVID-19 is the first planetwide pandemic in the context of a global world in which people are accustomed to rapid international travel and trade. This habituation hastened the spread of the disease, and pre-pandemic activities were accordingly curtailed. Another factor differentiating this pandemic from past ones is the availability of networks of remote technologies, which are literal extensions of our minds insofar as computing and communicating tools are welded to the substance of our thinking (Clark and Chalmers 1998; Clark 2008). Accordingly, COVID-19 nears the viruses in science fiction that transform biological agents into techno-organic entities. The virus changes our functioning and that of cities too. Recalling that in ancient contexts, the functioning of systems is their *psuchè*, *anima*, or soul—terms also connoting life—we can see that the virus has not only infected humans but cities as well.

The contemporary technological situation can itself be seen in terms of pandemics because it is all-encompassing. Cinema is an example of this: the viral reproduction of images and sounds leads to near-total dissemina-



tion. Available on computers and cellular phones, films reach people without them needing to go out to theaters. In the process, cinema alters social functioning. Walter Benjamin (1936-39) formulated much of this in his "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Given the viral reproduction of movies, it is fitting that pandemic catastrophes form a subgenre in science fiction films. The theme of mass infection shows up in *Contagion* (2011) and earlier still in *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968), along with many productions that have framed zombies and vampires as outcomes of viral contamination. The COVID crisis has seen Netflix and other companies marketing movies about pandemics.

Benjamin regards film as a powerful agent of the masses. Though one can make the case that newer forms of electronic media surpass conventional cinema, these same technologies are also expanding the reach of movies. Benjamin says: "These are processes that are in close connection with the mass movements of our day. Their most powerful agent is the film" (1936-39, II, 356). He continues: "Its social significance, principally in its most positive form, is unthinkable without its destructive, cathartic side, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage" (1936-39, II, 356). Benjamin vacillates between two poles. Positively, his prediction about cinema presents film as an emancipatory art and one open to nearly all. On the negative side, he frames the socialization inculcated by mechanically reproduced movies as the failure of the unique aura that goes with hand-crafted art. His reflections suggest that film may be circuses for the masses, an observation that perhaps applies more so during the pandemic since escape from monotony and tedium—as opposed to artistic illumination—become primary temptations during the lockdown.

The advent of COVID-19 has increased massification: entertainment is funneled into homes to greater extents through network technologies like TV cable or internet enterprises making record profits such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. Optimistically, the situation may supply a renaissance of the possibilities to remotely screen movies and experience concerts and theater. Pessimistically, COVID-19 may be pushing us towards the consumption of popular art that surrenders more power to contemporary technological arrangements that strip the unique being out of things. Heidegger suggests (1954) that the Rhine is ceasing to be a river with singular qualities that show up according to the lived experiences of those dwelling on its shores. Instead, it is becoming a "standing reserve," that is, something measured in terms of undifferentiated energy stockpiled behind dams. Fruit and meat are likewise industrially produced and sorted such that grade-A products are

treated as identical. Food thereby ceases to manifest unique land, sunlight, and the personal care that nurtured it. Franchising similarly aims at standardization as a marketing device, and many movie series, actors, and even directors are, in effect, brand names, very much like Macdonald's. Because commercial art is thus standardized, people know what is on offer before screening a Tom Cruise or Marvel movie (Crippen 2016b). Art has long transmitted ideas, but with such franchising, it may be that art increasingly standardizes and virally spreads human socialization patterns, more so, again, during COVID-19. This example provides another sense of how "viral" spread is techno-organic: it infects flesh, technologies, and personal and social functioning and thus individual souls, along with those of the *polis*, community, or city.

COVID-19 has significantly standardized behavioral functioning. We say this without criticism because the standardized behavioral precautions to prevent transmission are only prudent. Still, they are there and are yet another illustration of how human tissue is not the only victim of the virus since it also infects city and individual souls—"souls" once again used in the ancient sense to connote functioning. There is no shortage of films and television series that capture this idea. One example is *Elysium* (2013), a movie depicting a future in which technological advances have provided an equivalent to the long-sought mythical elixir of life. However, this is only for the elites, who dominate and have access to new technologies that keep them young and healthy. These same elites live in a space station, albeit one with pleasant if uninspired green spaces resembling gated communities. The rest of humanity remains in the dangerous terrestrial setting of Earth. The obvious parallel between the movie and social functioning in the COVID-19 pandemic is that the affluent have had more opportunities to enjoy the luxury of working and living in protected spaces. Another parallel is that people in developed nations are more likely to receive vaccines first while looking at the less fortunate from afar. This vaccination is just like the elites of *Elysium* dwell in their heavenly utopia, almost like gods looking down on a ravaged earth, with the distance bleeding empathy away.

Another example mentioned earlier is *Contagion*, which has anticipated many aspects of the COVID-19 crisis. This film encompasses everything from its likely origins in bats in an East Asian region to its worldwide spread to the largely empty streets that marked the early phases of the pandemic. It also includes masked masses, social distancing, isolation, and even people spreading fake information to serve their interests. Though partly inspired by the SARS 1 outbreak, Dr. Ian Lipkin (BBC 2020), a scientific consultant on

the film, has said that the movie was “made in the hope it might prevent a future worldwide pandemic like coronavirus.” Understandably, the movie gained renewed prominence in 2020 on streaming sites, and it reiterates that viruses do not just infect flesh, but human functioning too, or what might be called “*psuchic*” life. The film thereby conveys that the lived experience of a pandemic—phenomenologically speaking—is not just about the spread of illness; it is additionally about the infectivity of fear, which is even more inescapable than the virus: the risk of illness brings panic, causing social disorder.

We can interpret this again in terms of *téchne* and perhaps a warped *poiesis* since human actions bring forth harsh realities. In *Contagion*, the virus originates in the non-human natural world, in this case, bats, then spreads to pigs that are raised in a quasi-industrial manner, in some sense as a “standing reserve.” The film also displays the integration of the human and non-human natural world—in short, *anima mundi*. The virus originates outside of human circles but spreads to people because of our technological imposition on nature: we keep animals in cramped pens; we handle them like mere things; we fuel viral transmission through global travel. This is not to say that human and non-human spheres would be separate without technological imposition, but rather that the latter alters ecological interrelations in ways that come back to hurt us. From Hillman’s (1999) perspective, the film shows how the sickness of our industrialized arrangements translates not only to illness in us but also to the degradation of the world’s living soul, again through domination over nature. As Hillman observes, “the idea of a deep psychology that mixes with the ecology would say that today to comprehend the sickness of the soul we refer to the sickness of the world, to its sufferance” (49-50).

The series *Dark* (2017-2020) is another cinematic production—a TV series—that explores concerns that Heidegger and others have expressed about technological domination. Based on philosophical and physical theories advanced by luminaries such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Einstein, and Nathan Rosen, the series broadly embodies the tragedy of ecological catastrophes and resultant crises in human relations with one another and the environment. The plot unfolds in Winden, a city dominated by a nuclear plant with caves that are a gateway to wormhole-generated time loops between different realities in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In one episode, set in 1986, the two protagonists—Jonas and Martha—find shelter in a bus station to escape acid rain. Jonas asks Martha what she wants to change, and she expresses a wish that Winden disappears. Later, in 2052, most of the city is destroyed.

At various ages and in several realities, Jonas and Martha take on new names: Adam and Eva. The overriding sense is that loops from the past, future, and present cannot be closed so that time is circular, leading to and from the same fixed destiny. This state of affairs recalls Nietzsche's proposal of the eternal recurrence of the same, which he first mentioned in *The Gay Science* (see §341), initially published in 1882. The reference to the Garden of Eden carries an insinuation of falling into original sin, in this case through knowledge that opens possibilities of technological destruction. The circularity of the eternal return here involves traveling through time in the same city in non-linear ways. Each phase repeats the tragic destiny of humanity that orbits an apocalypse that occurs around the same time that COVID-19 took hold of the world. In the post-apocalyptic city of 2052, the urban landscape is desolate. There is a handful of ragged survivors wearing masks and using military equipment—some dated and some advanced—to impose their technological will on what remains of Winden. This scenario mirrors much of our history as if it is our eternal destiny at all times.

*The 100* (2014-2020), a TV series based on novels by Kass Morgan, re-states several dystopian themes in the context of a pandemic. It portrays a future ruined by the betrayal of artificial intelligence and nuclear and viral warfare with some survivors confined to a space station. Their limited food, oxygen, and medical supplies press them into drastic decisions such as birthrate control combined with promiscuous use of the death penalty and massacres to cull the population. In the first season, 100 young criminals are sent to investigate the post-apocalyptic Earth. Upon arriving, they find surviving terrestrials struggling with them, along with the dangers of biological infection. Here, too, we see how the imposition of technology by violating nature ravages the souls of individuals and communities, "souls" again used in Hillman's sense. We also see technological organization imposed on people to accentuate class divisions that already exist, paralleling the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overarching links between *The 100*, *Dark*, *Elysium*, and *Contagion* portray accentuated versions of lockdown realities associated with COVID-19. It is not just that many of us are isolated, but again that safety is disproportionately afforded to the affluent, who have better medical access and the luxury of working from home and connecting-in-the-world through the network of new technologies. All these cinematic works additionally convey how certain technological impositions degrade the world soul. Along Hillman's lines, who argues that psychology derives from the state of the world, this entails an assault on the human soul. Many philosophers have observed that humans,

by nature, are political. By this, it is meant that people can only fully function in a community or the context of a *polis*. Insofar as this is so, these cinematic works outline, in exaggerated terms, the infection of city souls around the world that COVID-19 has brought to the fore.

## Conclusion

We began this article by exploring the COVID-19 pandemic through ancient concepts revived by Hillman and Heidegger, which emphasize artistic practices and draw on mythic stories. We then connected these outlooks to more recent work by Gibson and many dystopian filmmakers in order to highlight aesthetic implications of the pandemic in cities and art. We will briefly review what has been said.

Ancient Greek understandings identify something soul-like with basically anything that resembles interactive living systems. Accordingly, we can regard “soul” as the pulse and rhythm of activity that forms an entity’s core and makes it what it is. On such a view, it is not just human tissue that is infected by the COVID-19 virus, but cities too and the world beyond them insofar as functioning is disrupted. Leaving heavy-going philosophical outlooks behind, this is the shared experience of the pandemic. Above all, we see the viral transmission of fear and panic. We also have witnessed direct manifestations of the pandemic in shuttered businesses, in people wearing masks and gloves, and eerie tented testing sites with workers in hazmat suits, not to mention receding economies and stymied global travel. While the non-human environment may have benefitted because of COVID-19, the illness’s roots can be traced to the hyper-industrial ascendancy of humans. We place caged animals in proximity that would typically be too far apart for novel viruses to jump between them and ultimately to us. We worsen matters through casual global travel and other practices that are environmentally destructive due to emitted pollution. It is almost as if the world soul has a fever and humans are the pathogens from which the planet is trying to rid itself. One can say broadly that the pandemic, by inflicting all these changes, temporarily altered how the world functions and holds together, hence the world’s aesthetic composition.

An idea expressed by Hillman and Heidegger, along with others such as Dewey, is that things *are* what they do. So, the appearance of particular circumstances becomes their essence. This idea is central to all these thinkers’ discussions of art and poetry, and it is key to any phenomenological grasp of the pandemic, which amounts to an everyday understanding accessible to

non-philosophers. The virus is what it does: it kills; it also spreads fear and disrupts the lives of even those who are not infected. As discussed, however, these disruptions are not evenly distributed. The better off can mostly do their jobs from home. This privilege not only keeps them safer but has allowed many to realize the aesthetic pleasure of setting their work rhythms themselves and avoiding the choking grind of traffic—discoveries, one hopes, that will remain after the pandemic ends. The disadvantaged are afforded these luxuries less often, in addition to being more subject to the prospect of financial ruin. We further suggested that the same physical space may be inviting to the affluent and forbidding to the poor. This aesthetic signaling occurs because those already struggling are all the more worn out by the pandemic, and symbolic barriers that already make urban spaces selectively permeable become increasingly rigid to the exhausted.

The social filtering that arguably ensues connects directly to dystopian cinema about global destruction in which a privileged few often reside in a protected citadel that the disadvantaged look upon wistfully. Such films and TV productions search beyond the mere biological danger of infectious diseases and other disasters to highlight the social disruption and segregation that accompanies pandemics. Another idea advanced is that human technological impositions are often at the root of global threats, which also applies to the COVID-19 crisis. An additional lesson is that technological solutions are unequally distributed so that the rich and poor are sorted and valued differently. One primarily overlooked case in point is emphasized in *Elysium*. Here, aesthetic experiences—even if somewhat bland ones—are afforded more to the privileged than to the poor, for the elite in this movie live in spaces manicured to look like affluent suburbs.

Broadly, then, the elites in *Elysium* have greater access to the technological reproduction of images, sounds, and entire environments that allow them to look inward and away from ecological catastrophes on Earth. Hillman (1999) proposes a “theory of psychology to demonstrate that the human subject has always been implicated in the wide world of nature” (47). Heidegger suggests a similar idea. The notion is—or ought to be—almost too obvious to bear mentioning, but it seems people often neglect the point. In crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it could be that greater access to Netflix and similar platforms are helping one swath of humanity ignore the plight of others. Truth is sometimes revealed in exaggerations, and *Elysium* and other dystopian movies reveal societal imbalances and blindness to them in embellished terms. This revelation is perhaps contributing—ironically—to the difficulties that many dystopian filmmakers seek to highlight insofar as their works provide escapist entertainment.



These movies, then, disclose actual realities in creative ways. They are also premonitory warnings. COVID-19 itself has these same reality-revealing features, highlighting disparities, including aesthetic ones, along with the uneven threat of social and economic ruin. The question is whether humankind is prepared to learn from any of this. The prospects judged from past and current history do not look promising.

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