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RE-CYCLING THE ISLAND-TROPE

IN CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE FICTION:

MORTAL ENGINES (2018)

Abstract

A recurring trope in art, the Island represents a never-ending source of inspiration for storytellers. As a culturally and historically conditioned notion, the Island has undergone several conceptual changes. Christian Rivers' *Mortal Engines* (2018), a multilayered film adaptation of Phillip Reeve's novel, problematizes the post-apocalyptic urban spatiality by transposing the island of London into a grim futuristic scenario. The island-on-wheels imagery is symptomatic of the emergent apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fictions as it embodies *par excellence* the perpetual threat of the Machine. Consequently, the movie foregrounds a dystopian future scenario, filled with predator cities-on-wheel and death-dealing engines. In such a desolate universe, the Darwinian survival of the fit replaces the ethical grounds of the human condition. This paper aims to analyze the emergence and the representational potential of a new island-typology, that of the predator-island, and its subsequent cultural scripting.

Key words: island, *Mortal Engines*, post-apocalyptic urban space(s), London, beast

> O, wonder!
> How many goodly creatures are there here!
> How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world
> That has such people in't!
> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (2006:125)

Introduction: science fiction, engines and apocalypse

Christian Rivers' *Mortal Engines* (2018), the movie adaptation of Phillip Reeve's eponymous novel, depicts, in, a post-apocalyptic narrative frame, post-industrial, decentralized societies living in mobile cityscapes, fighting for survival and power by devouring smaller cities-on-wheels in a perpetual warfare. The movie is anchored in a timeframe which follows the ultimate fall of civilization, induced by the Sixty Minutes War, which results in the birth of predator cities and new geopolitical orders. The post-apocalyptic existential condition is the direct result of human recklessness, coalesced with an insatiable lust for power. In other words, the desolate predator cities are the repercussions of the failure of social systems to cope with the looming (but preventable) world catastrophe. At the backdrop of the perpetual war for resources in a technocentric universe, two social misfits, Hester Shaw and Tom Natsworthy, are subjected to various dangerous circumstances-slavery, imprisonment, assassination attempts-until they are finally able to avenge the wrongs inflicted on them, stop mass destruction and defeat the evil forces concretized in the figure of Thaddeus Valentine, who intends to use the ultimate Quantum Energy weapon to attain world domination.

As the visual narrative unfolds, the 'new' age is revealed to be the consequence of the Sixty Minutes War, where Quantum Energy Weapons[1] (suggestively named Medusa) exterminated the vast

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majority of the population and changed completely the nature of mankind and society. Thus, the visual narrative transposes current power dynamics into a postwar setting where mortal engines threaten the survival of the human species. Thus, the political agenda espoused by predator cities undermines the prospect of a sustainable future. *Mortal Engines* explores, often parodically, imperialist aggression in a post-apocalyptic future in which urban spaces are metamorphosed into mobile islands, assuming a 'scavenger' position in the new geopolitical environment in order to feed on vulnerable settlements. As a matter of fact, the movie illustrates an alternate dystopic futurescape extrapolated from Europe's colonial past and the Eurocentric Weltanschauung of earlier eras.

Mortal Engines, like other science fiction narratives, "deals with the effects of science or technology on the human condition" (Skoble, 2008: 91) in a dystopian setting. Ultimately, the movie addresses the prospect of imminent warfare as the consequence of the abuse of bellicose technologies and its (a)moral ramifications. The opening scenes transpose the audience into a steampunk wasteland and insists on establishing the parameters of a new world order: Shrike's, a cyborg's, deep growly voice inform the viewers about the universal catastrophe befallen upon humans and the advent of the new world order:

> Sixty minutes is all it took for the Ancients to bring humanity to the brink of extinction. Those who survived mobilized their settlements to begin life anew upon a poisoned Earth. In the hunt for food and fuel, the weak perished, and the strong grew ever more powerful until a new age arose. The Age of the Great Predator Cities of the West. (*Mortal Engines*, 2018).

Right after the opening remarks, an intense scene of siege is meant to warn the viewers about the upcoming chaotic 'hunts' of the Great Predator Cities of the West as the visuals limns the new social (dis)order in settlements reminiscent of junkyards. As the lookout's resounding voice announces the arrival of the Predatory City and as the smaller Bavarian mining town prepares its defense mechanism, the archvillain is glimpsed as he is on the verge of 'devouring its prey'[2]. The appealing visual depiction of the chase encompasses an emphasis on the new urban space as mechanized islands on a sea of waste and anticipates the important role of a single female character, later revealed to be Hester Shaw, by zooming on her facial and bodily reactions in the moments of the siege. Her vengeance-driven acts (running away from home or obsessively 'hunting' Thaddeus Valentine) and Shelleyan rebellion against the 'beast'[3] are seemingly futile but ultimately Hester succeeds in avenging her mother's death and saving the world from a second apocalyptic devastation.

Generically, *Mortal Engines* belongs to the tradition of science fiction narratives which mingle apocalyptic future prospects with an acute sense of the existing contemporary anxieties and a sense of trepidation stemming from the prospect of a technocentric future. In Redmond's words,

> sf film since the 1980s is a feast of innovation and transformation. It has produced immeasurable moments of delight and wonder, terror and loathing, and it has spoken about the most important issues of the day (Redmond, 2009:143).

Nowadays, even more so, "sf television continues to do what the genre does best: picture the future by questioning the past" (Geraghty, 2009:151). This complex 'questioning' process implies, especially in contemporary science fiction novels and films, a scintilla of parody and a self-referentiality. The multilayeredness of the visual narrative and the multitude of referential structures dismantle the feasibility of a unilateral critical approach and demands an array of interpretative frames. For instance, a basic allegorical reading has the potential of unraveling postcolonial subtleties

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the works of Canadian authors such as Jack Hodgins, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Timothy Findley and Brian Moore.

[1] The Quantum Energy Weapon is suggestively named Medusa, which alludes to the deadliness of the weapon while underpinning the horrendous aspects of warfare.
[2] The allegorical undertones are clearly related to oppressive colonization.
[3] 'Beast' has a double referentiality: on the one hand, it functions as a symbol for the archvillain, Thaddeus Valentine, on the other hand, beast is also a suggestive metaphor for the vileness of the predator city. Moreover, 'beast' also carries a religious nuance and may be a reference to the Biblical Book of Revelations.

concealed in the violent struggle for ascendancy in a void, post-apocalyptic wasteland: the island of London leaves Britain in order to "feed upon the scraps of Europe", consuming smaller island-towns which are seen as mere source of fuel and resources, not human settlements. The ultimate goal is to breach to Shield Wall, which protects the peaceful realm of Shan Guo, and to ascertain their global supremacy through territorial domination, much reminiscent of imperialist creed. Moreover, the imminent prospect of destruction and ultimate conquest of the Shield Wall and the peaceful colonies beyond is an allegorical reference to the impending climate catastrophe which threatens contemporary society. Thus, the predator-island symbolically renders the 'devouring' of ecosystems through reckless exploitation and the production of immeasurable amounts of waste.

Like other science fiction works, the movie "reflects the nature of modern society" (Parrinder, 2003: 29) and articulates the fears of an imminent destruction rooted in existing issues, such as global warning, the development of newer technologies, cybernetics, bioengineering, to name just a few. If "in the twentieth century, negative valuation-realized in visions of totalitarian states, a dying Earth, crumbling empires of barbarous and hostile planets-has been the rule" (Parrinder, 77) in science fiction works, *Mortal Engines*, the twenty-first century film adaptation of Phillip Reeve's novel, consolidates the prospect of such vision in a visually stunning mode. The dystopic predator islands, most notably London, are designed as grey simulacra of contemporary cityscapes to visually epitomize social teratology in a post-apocalyptic scenario.

Mortal Engines, "a tiringly frenetic and derivative fantasy-adventure movie" (Bradshaw,2018), skillfully translates mankind atavistic dreads- fear of death, war, conquest, predators and controlling technologies- into a visually engaging cinematic narrative. The film, like other futuristic discourses is "a powerful instrument of speculation and social critique (Evans, 2009:22). The film's diegesis is rooted in the early twentieth century conventional "invasion story", which "descended from the future-war stories" (Mendlesohn,2003: 54): in *Mortal Engines*, London, the supreme predator city-island, threatens to 'invade' (or rather, to 'devour') Europe, which is reconfigured as the "Great Hunting Ground", the realm of mobile cities, and Asia, the land of the "Anti-Traction League". In the prototypical works of the "nineteenth century, these posited invasions of various parts of Europe by other parts of Europe" (Mendlesohn 54). *Mortal Engines* illustrates the British penchant for 'invasion' in a parodic manner which subverts the 'predation' idea(l) by visually alluding to its destructive potentiality.

Similarly to earlier fictions, *Mortal Engines* is "socioculturally embedded, offering reflections both on and of its contexts" (Wright, 2009:90) as the film simultaneously mediates on and (de)constructs systematically the prospect of a future (dehumanized) society, bent on hegemonizing 'inferior' cultures. According to Redmond,

> able to offer seductive visions of the future and an affecting, spectacular sense of apocalypse, and to engage with the most important political and social issues of the day, sf film affects us in our bodies and makes sense of major social events and catastrophes (Redmond, 2009:134).

The postmodern Island, engines, and (post)Gothic cityscapes

Essentially, the Island is the central metaphor whose connotative potentiality allows for conveying several (often contrasting) ideas in (visual) narratives; as Kincaid writes, "in time the island became so established a part of our literary imagination that often, I suspect, in works such as *Mortal Engines,* we may not even realize that the island lies at the core of the fiction" (Kincaid, 2007: 471).Yet the centrality of the island trope is suggested by the title of both the novel and the film, which alludes to predator islands and their destructive potentiality, gradually disclosed as the visual narrative unfolds. The supreme *mortal engine* is indubitably the island of London, which is transmuted into an organic setting from the easily localizable geographical area. London is a "discursive formation" (in the Foucauldian sense), a constructed artefact which functions as spatial canvas for ideological and cultural scripting. Moreover, the film employs the island-trope to embody human vices and destructive potential of unsupervised scientific practices. In this context, the movie is a vehicle for dismantling the excessive belief in technological progress and an illustration of an entropic system, consequence of an extremist Darwinian ideology combined with prosaic materialism.

Nicholas Ruddick commented on the importance of the island trope in science fiction:

the Island is a metaphor for the (at once) positive separateness and negative alienation of the Self from the Other as well as for the predicament of humanity itself on its island world encircled by the indifferent-or hostile- ocean of space (Ruddick, 1993:57).

The London from the film is a heavily ideologized retraction of the earlier 'flying' islands. In *Mortal Engines*, the island, a pastiche of earlier 'predator' island-tropes, is paradoxically envisioned as a perpetual annihilator and a topography prone to be annihilated, a parodic simulacrum of colonial conquest and a suggestive metaphor for the corruption of power. The movie twists-in a parodic and subversive vein- "the tradition of the imaginary voyage" (Suvin, 1979:107) by visually accommodating the familiar journey tropes within the twofold sheathing of Globalgothic[4] and Ecogothic[5]. The novel "presents his cities as predators rolling across a seemingly barren landscape; it is significant that we first glimpse London in the dried-out bed of the North Sea" (Kincaid, 470). In this post-apocalyptic framework, by first spotlighting the island of London amidst the planetary devastation, the narrative foregrounds the focal stance of London as the greatest superpower within the geopolitical order of the 'new' world. Another variation on the island-trope is Airhaven, a hovering island which, as its name suggests, is a floating oasis and its moral transcendency over the decadent, earth-bound London, is suggested even by its buoyant position. Airhaven is inhabited by members of the resistance movement, led by the lionhearted Anna Fang, who later dies in a confrontation with Thaddeus Valentine.

Kincaid highlights the relevance of the island-trope in science fiction by asserting that the "notion of the island as mobile city seems to have acquired a curious currency in contemporary science fiction" (Kincaid, 470). As a both disrupting and refreshing conceptual shift, the Island in contemporary science fiction contributes, or accentuates, the "unveiling of the promises and threats of modern technology" (Parrinder, 2003: xiii). *Mortal Engines,* a cautionary tale against the (im)possible outcome(s) of the reckless use of supreme technologies, is a visually compelling representation of the potential threats of ever-expanding technologies and renders the foreseeable of an annihilating catastrophe, which in the movie, is referred to as the Sixty Minutes War. The direct reference to war corroborates the role of political instability and technological supremacy in the actualization of such profoundly distressing future prospect.

Although the movie is overabounding in clichés, formulaic patterns, conventional plot twists, frequent plot holes and repetitive plotlines[6], the visual rendering of the teratological imagination of the Anthropocene is worth investigating because of its multilayered representation of the post-apocalyptic island. If we agree with Yaszek, who sees science fiction as "a privileged vehicle of cultural expression" (Yaszek, 2009: 202) or Roberts, who stresses the permanence of the science fiction tradition and its relevance for the collective consciousness by calling it "a cultural mode of relative antiquity" (Roberts, 2009: 3)-, then *Mortal Engines* and other contemporary media representations are pivotal cultural artefacts which encapsulate and interrogate inherent aspects of civilizations, necessary deeds for establishing the embedded patterns behind the cultural climate of a certain era.

On a basic interpretative level, the movie is a visual admonition for the pitfalls of technological advancements and the prospective ethical and ontological consequences of an eventual advent of the dominion of the Machine. The visual discourse problematizes "the capitalist use of machinery that polluted the life of man and the Earth and created ugliness and misery" (Suvin, 180) by estranging localizable topographies into manoeuverable island-vehicles in a distant temporal dimension. The predator island-city of London, crushing and devouring objects and humans alike, is a paradigmatic representation of cultural anxieties, a narrative device meant to accommodate the

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[4] Globalgothic has been defined by Byron as an expression of "the impact of transnational capitalism or the workings of technology […] Globalization itself, then, becomes a gothic manifestation, a material and psychic invasion, a force of contamination and dominance" (Byron, 2013:5).

[5] In Ecogothic fictions, "humans are cast adrift in an alien, hostile environment, encountering monsters unleashed by the destructive force of a consumerist, solipsistic society" (Smith and Hughes, 2013:11)

[6]Although its extraordinary visual potentiality, the movie was not a blockbuster and has received predominantly negative criticism. In online reviews, the movie is considered "an epic flop" and one of 2018's "biggest misses" (Lang, B. and Rubin, R., 2019).

shifting of familiar spac(ialiti)es into hostile topographies, imbued with an unsettling post-apocalyptic atmosphere. Furthermore, the island-trope is an allegorical parody of consumerist societies, whose bestiality lies in over-consumptive behavior and moral shallowness. According to Weiss, "one of the ways that fantastic literature conveys its themes is by literalizing the metaphorical" (Weiss, 2018:116); this tendency is discernible in *Mortal Engines* as well: the island of London is quite literally hunting and engulfing its prey, similarly to Britain's 'civilizing' expansion across the globe in colonial times. Furthermore, the predator-island leaves its mark on the barren land, crushing the landscape and annihilating the environment (a deeply sarcastic visual token of victorious boasting).

According to Jones, "more than in any other fiction, in sf the imaginary setting is a major character in the story (…)" (Jones, 2003:163); in *Mortal Engines*, the setting is indeed an organic part of the diegesis: the evocative, dark, mechanized cityscapes, reminiscent of (Neo-)Victorian industrial terrains, and their subsequent epitomes of entrapment (the predator cities, the mobile-prison, closed enclosures) is the materialization of the moral decadence and superficiality of a corrupt social system. London is the supreme 'living' beast, the spatial counterpart of the wicked archvillain, Thaddeus Valentine.[7]In other words, the post-industrial London reflects the degenerate nature of the new society, which, ironically, is far superior, in terms of technology and spatial mobility, to contemporary civilization. The cultural malaise is rooted in the despotic ideology promoted by the leaders of London.

According to Brantlinger, science fiction, similarly to Gothic narratives, is "about the monstrous or the demonic, and about at least the threat of social or cosmic disaster" (Brantlinger, 1980:35). In *Mortal Engines*, the demonization process is visually rendered through the depiction of the moral fall of postwar society, overcome by greedy impulses and a fetishized lust for the dyadic power/control play. Bratlinger also identifies necrophilia as the main link between Gothicism and science fiction, which is defined by Fromm as "the passion to destroy life and the attraction to all that is dead, decaying, and purely mechanical" (Fromm, 1973:332). The tendency to emphasize moral decay in a dehumanized society is best illustrated in the character construction, i.e. the insistence on Thaddeus Valentine's obsession with global ascendancy, Shrike's[8] relentless chase to kill Hester or Magnus Crome's profit-driven "hunts". *Mortal Engines* indeed illustrates how the capitalist orientation towards maximum profit is replaced with an excessive power-fetish fueled by human greed and Thaddeus Valentine's imperialist impulses. The evolutionary superiority of Londoners seeks to warrant the act of devouring lesser towns for their resources. The ingestion of smaller communities is justified by the emblematic "feeding the beast" drive which is a (bitter) parody of the assumptive belief in the civilizing force of the British Empire. In other words, the erroneous stance that "European colonialism claimed to be a civilizing mission (…)" (Reid, 2009:259) is ridiculed in *Mortal Engines* as the visual narrative dismantles the idea of Western forces-British, to be more precise- 'civilizing' the 'savage' Asian population, living peacefully beyond the Shield Wall. Constructing London as a predator-island both validates and subverts imperialist aggression and ethnical profiling. As a matter of fact, *Mortal Engines* indeed reasserts that "the mythology of Empire and Apocalypse are very closely related" (Kermode, 1967:10).

The movie allegorizes the potentialities of Engines and initiates a new approach to the Island-trope by literalizing the threat posed by the emerging technological dominion. According to Evans, "(…) the primary goal of the science in speculative/fantastic sf is more expositional: to facilitate plot progressions, to help create special effects and reader estrangement, and to build verisimilitude" (Evans, 17). *Mortal Engines* exhibits all these conventional uses of science but there is one more

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[7] As a community, the population of London is mostly shown during hunts. They are portrayed as clueless sheep, cheering during chases as if it were a theatrical spectacle, but the reason of their enthusiasm is quite unclear: common people are not influenced whatsoever by the successful completion of the hunt. The engulfment of smaller settlements generates enough resources for another chase, thus, creating a vicious cycle and perpetuating the hunting.

[8] Shrike is a reanimated cyborg, the last remaining of the Lazarus Brigade, seen as an artificially enhanced lusus naturae: "they took all the worst part of themselves, all the savagery, cruelty and hatred and poured it into these machines! These monsters!" (Mortal Engines, 2018). Ironically, the unemotional Shrike is more humane than the inhabitants of predator-cities. His backstory reveals his fascination with "collecting broken things" (*Mortal Engines*, 2018) because "in these strange machines he saw a reflection" (Mortal Engines, 2018) of his own forlorn existence.

Faustian aspect which enhances the visual enticements: the emphasis on a dualistic approach to scientific progress, which is seen as either a doom-laden discipline or a redeeming entity.[9]

Estranged topographies, parody, and metafictionality

        In cinematic productions, the metafictionality of the visual narrative is reinforced by special effects and musical background, which heighten the estrangement-effect for the audience while also maintaining the much-needed suspense and awe. *Mortal Engines* abounds in special effects and futuristic imagery in a steampunk fashion, accompanied by renowned Tom Holkenborg's mellifluous yet often brassy melodic lines. Farah Mendlesohn, in the Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, suggests that "the sense of wonder is the emotional heart of sf" (Mendlesohn, 3); in *Mortal Engines*, this perpetual 'sense of wonder' is doubled by the unsettling immanency of a second apocalypse, engendered by human folly and greed. The visual insertion of suspenseful pseudomythologies and intertextual references[10] are meant to embezzle the audience and entrap the viewer in the conceptual maze of cross-referentiality.

        As Suvin observes, science fiction is "the space of potent *estrangement*" (Suvin, viii); London and its inherent cultural symbols (for instance, London Museum) are displaced in the bleak, yet visually impressive simulacra envisioned by the adapters of *Mortal Engines*. Thus, the island-trope is defamiliarized and transposed in a dystopian setting as a devouring beast. The stereotypical villain, Thaddeus Valentine, is the operating force behind the engines of the predator island: his obsession with power and control is reminiscent to Britain's old imperialist policy. Thaddeus Valentine is the twenty-first century version of the archetypal "mad scientist" typology, "who, in his hubris-filled pursuit of knowledge and power, betrays basic human values" (Evans, 13). Ironically, Thaddeus is driven by an obsessive urge for power and world domination, yet his actions invalidate his ideal of universal despotism by destroying the very people and environment he wishes to control. As his covert actions lead to spectacular battle scenes between predator-London and the Anti-Tractionists, the viewers are absorbed into an archetypal fray between the forces of good and evil. Allegorically, the film is a cautionary tale which warns about the thin boundary between oppressive actions deemed as necessary for collective welfare and egomaniac mass destruction.

        Thaddeus' actions area form of validating his masculinity by objectifying others and subduing the environment. His ultimate aim is to rebuild the superweapon Medusa, based on the premise that "the man who controls this [Medusa], controls the world" (Mortal Engines, 2018). When the Mayor of London unravels Thaddeus's evil intentions and attempts to stop him, Thaddeus dismisses him as "a relic of a dying age. A dinosaur", whereas Thaddeus perceives himself as "the meteor" (Mortal Engines, 2018). The meteor-metaphor encompasses a solipsist Promethean defiance, highlighting the antagonist's narcissistic stance and egomaniac propensity. Apathetic towards the dire consequences of his irresponsible acts, Thaddeus is immersed in self-gratification and delusions of grandeur, which lead to his caustic death. His final outburst, embodied in the megalomaniac discourse in front of Londoners before launching Medusa is rooted in political fallacies and is centered on establishing London as the ultimate world power: "for centuries, Traction Cities have attempted to breach the Wall. Their rotting carcasses lie at its base. But that will not be our fate. Tonight, London is going to demonstrate its new power. A power that will sweep all before it" (Mortal Engines, 2018). The threat to 'sweep' the Anti-Tractionist establishment is disguised as a theatrical act, meant to entertain the masses and ascertain London's universal superiority. In a (post)Gothic convolution, Thaddeus Valentine is killed by the engines of London, by the same 'mortal engine' which Thaddeus himself intentionally led to literally devour smaller cities. The film's ultimately ironic denouement is formulaic and predictable: London stops at the gates of the Shield Wall and its population is accepted by those living beyond the wall to live a peaceful life with their until-then enemies, the Anti-

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[9] 'Engines' and super weapons visually evince Thaddeus Valentine' megalomaniac obsessions and dehumanized nature. On the other hand, in the post-anthropocentric universe envisioned in *Mortal Engines*, science is the only means for survival.

[10] The movie incorporates several fairy-tale references, mythological elements and religious allusions. Moreover, *Mortal Engines* also re-cycles elements from earlier narratives, such as the Swiftian flying island (Bradshaw, 2018) or Shakespeare's Prospero as the demonized Thaddeus Valentine.

Tractionists. In the end, the organic beast-island transmutes into a passive topography, London is remodeled into a deserted island which is a form of adaptation, or, a(n) (in)stable materialization of a new era.

Eventually, the narrative diegesis results in an existential nausea triggered by the graphic illustration of coerced automation, which, in turn, results in dehumanization and social alienation. As Palmer observed, "dystopian fiction presents us with futures that conform to our deepest terrors-and wishes" (Palmer, 2008: 172). *Mortal Engines* captures (and subverts) this paradoxical endeavor by engaging visually with the redesigning of urban societies. Yet the movie's ultimate criticism is directed towards the humans inhabiting the cities-on-wheels, humans who embody the catastrophic potentialities of mechanical societies. The projection of a technological dictatorship implies a reconceptualization of basic dyadic structures (i.e. individual-community, self-other, good-evil, survival-annihilation) and the ethical implications of such endeavor amidst an existential crisis reveals the deeply troubling prospect of complete dehumanization. The cinematic transference of an impending apocalypse constructs a visual discourse of planetary doom, rooted in solipsism and imperialist aggression. Moreover,

> science fiction of the utopian/dystopian variety, in short, is metafictional, that is, making readers conscious we are reading a text and forcing us to "think" to a lesser or greater degree the fictional and the ideological as cultural categories, as we confront in imagined futures our desire (for the impossible return of a bygone era) and fear (that progress is a destructive illusion) (Palmer, 177).

The parodic references to the earlier digitalized civilization and popular culture, i.e. the twenty-first century society, food industry, gadgets, bridges the audience's time frame with the narrated time. The insertion of familiar elements, referred to as the "old tech", are preserved at the London Museum, alongside with the "American Deities" (parodically embodied by large Minion sculptures from the *Despicable Me* franchise) heightens the narratorial intention to present the created world as an actual future prospect. The functionality of earlier 'old tech' is reduced to nostalgic relics of a glorious yet irresponsible and vacuous era and serves as a contrasting narrative device to highlight (and simultaneously subvert) the 'glory' of the new age.

Conclusions

As a genre rooted in sociocultural realities, science fiction works canvass "the possibilities of radical historical transformation resulting from technological innovation applied to social life" (Csicsery-Ronay Jr, 2009: 362). The 'radicality' of the post-apocalyptic setting from *Mortal Engines* is embodied in the estranged island-trope, an outstandingly engineered urban site which is a microcosmic representation of the new world order.

Like many other more recent science fiction narratives, the ultimate goal of *Mortal Engines* is the momentary gratification through epic war scenes, stunning visuals and the ultimately disappointing "childish phantasmagorias-the gorier the more exciting" (Bailey, 1976:80) philosophy. Nevertheless, the allegorical potentiality of *Mortal Engines* sets into motion a series of approaches which could disentangle the interwoven conjectural bifurcations which arise from the multilayeredness of the complex diegesis.

The science/culture dyad of the twenty-first century entails a reappraisal of (un)familiar notions and generates new discursive responses to the ever-expanding field of technological enhancements/advancements. If the nineteenth century science fiction narrative "can be understood only within the historical context of the industrial revolution and the transformative (and often alienating) social changes that accompanied it" (Evans, 13), twenty and twenty-first science fictions are discursive reactions against the backdrop of the changing technological landscape and the imminence of global extinction as a consequence of climate change and/or a nuclear catastrophe. These fictions reshape literary tropes and familiar objects in an estranged, often unsettling environment to caution readers about the destructive potentialities of contemporary practices, including reckless consumerism, genetic engineering, indifference towards climate change, and the unprecedented development of advanced AI technologies. In addition, these metamorphic artistic acts convey the (shifting) cultural and social fixation on the dehumanized future prospect as a consequence

of scientific evolution and the development of new technologies, which could threaten or alter altogether the (already problematic) notion of 'human(ity)'.

The ever-shifting Island-trope is reconfigured as a mechanical beast, both literally and figuratively, and functions as an embodiment of cultural and social anxieties, triggered by the technoscientific advancements which could alter the conceptual ramifications of 'humanity' and can lead to a de-humanized condition. The Island, a visual instantiation of postmodern teratogeny, becomes a social fable which cautions against the abusive use of technoscientific devices for hegemonic purposes and illustrates the devastating potentialities of 'predation'. Furthermore, the Island of London is a hyperreal entity, a Baudrillardian simulacra which re-enacts, in a parodic vein, Britain's imperialist expansion: the predator-city, a dystopic replica of London, encapsulates the polluted futurescape which mirrors Britain's colonialist history. A key metahistorical reference alludes to the contemporary concern with historicity and the direct problematization of the past. An illustrative and intense episode unfolds as Magnum Crome, Lord Mayor of London, exhorts the archvillain, Thaddeus, to eschew unnecessary bloodshed and warfare by insisting on the cyclic nature of history and the inescapability of the past: "You cannot ignore the lessons of the past as if they count for nothing" (Mortal Engines, 2018). Yet Thaddeus, adopting a stance of postmodernist cynicism and solipsistic indifference, maintains that "there are no lessons to be learned from the past. History doesn't care. It is dead." (Mortal Engines, 2018). Moreover, *Mortal Engines* accommodates conventional science fiction tropes-the mad scientist, the cyborg, advanced weaponry, engines, floating cities- and articulates the cataclysmic reverberations of an all-consuming post-capitalist Weltanschauung (referred to as "Municipal Darwinism" in the movie) on a global scale, rooted in the imperialist and oppressive zeitgeist of earlier centuries. According to Lisa Yaszek,

> (…) many of the most compelling science-fictional visions of the future are actually based on specific philosophies of the past, and careful study of these narrative futures can provide unique insight into historiography itself. (…) Sf authors have long created futures by extrapolating from what they believe to be the key social and material forces shaping history (Yaszek, 194).

Mortal Engines is no exception as both the novel and the film articulate colonial concerns, the power/control dyad, social stratification, political tyranny and the gradual dehumanization of the digital(ized) era by transposing the action in a far-future dystopian scenario and de-familiarizing contemporary topographies-London, the island-trope, Asia-as to evince the monstrous potentialities of all-too familiar geographies. As a matter of fact, *Mortal Engines* extrapolates from Britain's imperialist past to illustrate the devastating consequences of a tyrannical world empire and the (un)ethical implications of such endeavor. London reimagined as a predator island is the visual signifier of dehumanization and parodies cultural predation (Eurocentrism) by assuming the position of the scavenger-city. Furthermore, *Mortal Engines* postulates, in a visually engaging referential frame, a future prospect which satirizes over-consumptive behavior and human folly and cautions against the abusive and reckless use of technoscience in a visually stunning, post-apocalyptic setting, which prompts the audience to re-evaluate the limits of (in)humanity and the perils of contemporary consumerist zeitgeist.

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