The Alienated City in 21st Century Cinema: A Socio-Critical Analysis

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Abstract

This paper delves into the cinematic representation of the decaying city in contemporary cinema. The main objective is to understand how contemporary cinema reflects and comments on the complex dynamics of urban life in the 21st century, as well as its potential to inspire social and political changes towards a fairer, more sustainable, and habitable city. Through a socio-critical approach, employing the method of discursive analysis, a selection of films exploring urban realities marked by decay, social marginalization, alienation, and environmental crisis is examined. This representation is framed within the current socio-historical context, characterized by globalization, economic inequality, and massive urbanization. The analysis focuses on how these films offer a sharp critique of urban dynamics and the social, political, and environmental problems affecting contemporary cities. Themes such as gentrification, racial and economic segregation, urban environmental degradation, infrastructure collapse, and interpersonal disconnection in hyper-connected urban environments are explored. Additionally, the role of cinema as a tool for awareness and social activism is examined, highlighting how these cinematic representations not only serve as a mirror of urban reality but also as calls to action and critical reflection on the transformation and future of our cities.

Keywords

Cinema; City; Social Issues; Environment; Socio-Critical Analysis.

1. Introduction

Since its inception at the end of the 19th century, cinema has played a significant role in socialization (Elías-Zambrano, Ramírez-Alvarado & Jiménez-Marín, 2023) and has "served as a mirror where citizens recognize the world and themselves, especially in cities and everything that happens there" (Caldevilla-Domínguez, Barrientos-Báez & Blanco-Pérez). The importance of cinema and its sociocultural influence has been evident over time, not only as a reflection of representations and imaginaries but also as a catalyst for societal change. Cinema is not merely a medium of entertainment; it is also a powerful tool for social and urban critique. Through its ability to combine image, sound, narrative, and emotion, cinema offers a portrayal of urban life and the inherent social, economic, and environmental conflicts (Shiel & Fitzmaurice, 2001). In the 21st century, cinema has continued its evolution not only as an art form but also as a critical medium that reflects and shapes social perceptions of urbanity. The representation of the city in contemporary cinema provides a prism through which the complexities of urban life can be examined, significantly marked by decay, marginality, individualism, consumerism, social divides, and environmental crisis.

This paper focuses on how 21st-century cinema addresses these themes, sometimes operating as a channel for social critique and dialogue about the future of our cities. It analyses how contemporary cinema can discuss and critique issues related to urban and social contexts, including gentrification, segregation, urban planning, and the environmental and social challenges inherent to urban living. Additionally, it highlights the challenge of finding commercial or blockbuster films focused on representing the social and environmental issues of urban life. Nonetheless, some current cinematic productions, even within the commercial circuit, engage with and reflect on these urban dynamics and social tensions, while proposing alternative or future visions of urban organization and experience. These are the examples on which this article focuses.

Cinema, particularly in its representations of urban spaces, has been a subject of study across various disciplines. Theorists like Harvey (2008) and Soja (2010) have explored how the city operates as a space for the reproduction of social inequalities and as a scene of struggle and resistance. As Rose (2022, p. 27) states, "Cities have not become any less visible since the heyday of modernist planning. Rather, what has changed is the form of the visualizing that brings them into (new forms of) visibility". In this vein, some contemporary films have captured and critiqued urban transformations driven by globalization and nonlinearization, reflecting how these processes affect people and their environments (Shiel & Fitzmaurice, 2001; Zukin, 2010). The literature on cinema and the city has repeatedly highlighted the role of cinema in shaping urban discourses and public awareness (Zacco, 2019; Mennel, 2019). Following these theoretical orientations, the work examines how 21st-century cinema becomes a tool for reflection and awareness, offering sharp critiques of current urban dynamics and social, political, and environmental issues. Authors such as Amin & Thrift (2002) and Massey (2005) have emphasized the importance of understanding urban space as a product of interactions, conflicts, and powers in constant transformation, a vision that the selected films illustrate and problematize.

This paper aims to thoroughly explore these themes, arguing that cinema not only reflects urban life but also shapes, questions, and sometimes transforms it (Clarke, 1997). Through the analysis of various films and contexts, it seeks to better understand how cinema can serve as a mirror and a generator of new meanings for audiences, reflecting reality while also shaping it. Thus, from a socio-critical perspective and through the method of critical discourse analysis, a selection of films that address urban realities from a critical viewpoint is examined. Films such as Blade Runner 2049 (Villeneuve, 2017), Joker (Phillips, 2019), Parasite (Joon-Ho, 2019), or Nomadland (Zhao, 2020) configure models of representation of decaying and crisis-ridden cities, where themes such as segregation, gentrification, and alienation are recurrent. These films not only reflect the current or probable future reality but also provide a space for reflection and debate on possible urban futures. By doing so, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of cinema and its relationship with

contemporary urban life as both an art form and a social practice, offering new perspectives on the interpretation and future of urban societies in a globalized world characterized to some extent by uncertainty and decay (García-López & López-Balsas, 2021). Furthermore, considering cinema's responsibility to its audiences (Villén-Higueras, 2020) and its role as an educational tool (Cabezuelo-Lorenzo, Barrientos-Báez & Caldevilla-Domínguez, 2020), and recognizing that "audiences copy and imitate behaviors and habits from cinematic fiction characters" (Álvarez-Rodríguez, Jiménez-Marín & Selva-Ruiz, 2023, p. 359). Ultimately, this work seeks to deepen the understanding of how contemporary cinema can act as a reflection of the alienated city and as an agent of change, promoting critical reflection on the conditions and future of urbanization in the global era. Through this analysis, it hopes to contribute to the academic debate on the role of cinema in articulating urban discourses and the possibility of imagining and constructing fairer and more sustainable cities.

2. Objectives and Methodology

The main objective of this research is to explore how contemporary commercial cinema utilizes the representation of the city to depict current social, economic, and environmental issues, as well as to guide critical interpretations by viewers. Accordingly, the following research objectives are proposed:

O1. To examine how selected films portray 21st-century cities and their complex social, economic, and political dynamics, identifying narrative and visual elements that highlight urban alienation and marginalization.

O2. To identify how contemporary cinema uses the city as a setting for social and political critique, evaluating how topics such as gentrification, segregation, and environmental crisis are addressed.

O3. To describe and analyze how the cities in the selected films act not only as backdrops but as active entities that influence the plot and character development, contributing to the thematic depth of social alienation and disconnection.

O4. To analyze how cinema can be used as a tool for social change, examining cases where cinematic representations of cities can contribute to reflections on the future of cities and their relationship with people and the environment.

Based on these objectives, a qualitative methodology grounded in critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Van Dijk, 2002) is proposed from a socio-critical perspective. As Sánchez-Soriano & García-Jiménez (2020, p. 101) state, "CDA is analytical research on discourse that primarily studies how social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are practiced, reproduced, and occasionally contested, through texts and speech in social and political contexts." Thus, the study begins with the identification of a series of social and environmental problems, which are then related to the plots and characters of the analyzed films.

For the analysis, this study selects five films that meet the following criteria:

•   Scope and Reception: Films classified as blockbusters or highly commercial due to their successful reception. To this end, films nominated for the Oscars are used to define the final sample.
•   Temporal Relevance: The selection is limited to films produced and released in the past seven years to maintain relevance with contemporary cinema.
•   Setting and Context: Films that explicitly depict cities or urban environments. This includes both representations of real and fictional cities, provided the urban setting is central to the narrative. The city not only serves as a backdrop but also as an almost personified central element.
•   Themes Under Study:
a. Urban Decay: Films that explore the physical or moral decline of the city.
b. Social Marginality and Alienation: Films that address social exclusion, loneliness, and alienation in urban contexts.
c. Environmental Crisis: Films that deal with themes of sustainability, urban environmental disasters, or resource exploitation in cities.
d. Current Socioeconomic Dynamics: Films that discuss gentrification, segregation, and economic inequality.

Thus, the sample consists of the following four films:
•   Blade Runner 2049 (2017): A futuristic vision that offers a critical extrapolation of current urban problems in cities like Los Angeles, including themes of invasive technology, environmental decay, and social disparity.
•   Joker (2019): Gotham City represents many modern cities facing severe issues of inequality, mental instability, and violence, reflecting contemporary urban crises.
•   Parasite (2019): Provides a sharp critique of socioeconomic divisions in Seoul, South Korea. The duality between the luxurious residence of the Park family and the semi-basement dwelling of the Kim family highlights urban disparities and socioeconomic segregation, central themes in your analysis.
•   Nomadland (2020): Although not focused on a single city, this film explores the consequences of the 2008 economic crisis across various communities in the United States, depicting the reality of many who live on the fringes of conventional urban society.

3. Literature Review

To provide a profound and critical understanding of the alienated city in contemporary cinema, it is essential to adopt a multidisciplinary socio-critical perspective. Consequently, the representation of the city in cinema can be supported by a rich intersection of urban sociology, film studies, and social critique. This journey from reflecting on the city to the reflective city through cinema is necessary (Sierra-Sánchez & Rangel, 2023). The analysis of how cities are portrayed in cinema not only offers us a vision of urban spaces but also allows us to explore the social, economic, and environmental dynamics that shape them.

3.1. The Alienated City

Urban sociology provides a framework to understand how urban environments influence social relationships and individual experiences, which cinema subsequently represents. Marx (2013) and Durkheim (2012) offer fundamental concepts such as alienation and anomie, describing the disconnection and lack of social cohesion in modern cities. Similarly, Harvey (2013) expands on these ideas, arguing that contemporary urban structures reinforce class inequalities and foster alienation. In this context, the city is not merely a physical setting but a space of

conflict and social struggle where the tensions of advanced capitalism are manifest. Consequently, urban phenomena like gentrification, described by Smith (1996), illustrate how elite interests transform urban spaces, marginalizing original communities and normalizing economic and social inequalities (Van Gent & Jaffe, 2017).

Alienation in the modern city manifests through social fragmentation, the loss of community, and the disconnection between people and the spaces they inhabit. This idea has been extended by urban theorists to describe the experience of living in modern cities where social interactions and community life are eroded by mercantilist dynamics, as seen with the phenomenon of mass tourism today (Hernandez-Maskivker et al., 2021). Harvey (2013) similarly argues that contemporary cities are designed and managed to maximize economic benefits rather than promote social welfare, leading to the alienation of urban residents. Thus, current social dynamics seem to progress towards the aforementioned anomie, a situation where social norms weaken without being replaced, leading to a lack of social regulation and a sense of disorientation and insecurity among individuals. This idea is particularly relevant for understanding alienation in modern cities, where rapid social and economic change can destabilize communities and erode social support networks. In urban environments, anomie can manifest as isolation, stress, and social disconnection.

In this regard, as mentioned, gentrification exemplifies urban alienation. As low-income neighborhoods transform with the arrival of wealthier residents and investment in infrastructure and services, original residents are often displaced due to rising living costs and rents. Smith (1996) describes this phenomenon as an "urban frontier" where capital seeks new areas for investment, transforming and marginalizing original communities. As Lees et al. (2010) explain, gentrification not only displaces residents but also dismantles social and community networks, deepening alienation and social fragmentation.

This social fragmentation paradoxically relates to hyperconnectivity in modern cities, another factor contributing to alienation. Although information and communication technologies promise to connect people, they often result in greater interpersonal disconnection and isolation. Castells (2006) argues that contemporary cities, despite being highly digitally connected, can exacerbate loneliness and alienation due to the superficiality of online interactions and the loss of public spaces for meeting and socializing.

Thus, the alienated city is a theoretical construct that encapsulates how capitalist dynamics, social anomie, gentrification, and the paradox of hyperconnectivity contribute to disconnection and isolation in contemporary urban environments. Through cinema, we can explore and critique these dynamics, using visual and narrative representations to reflect on urban realities and the experiences of alienation that define life in 21st-century cities.

3.2. Cinema and the (Alienated) City: A Historical Relationship

As proposed in the introduction, the interaction between cinema and the city is not merely aesthetic or thematic but deeply dialectical. Cities offer filmmakers a vast backdrop of ever-evolving social realities, while cinema reinterprets and sometimes transforms these urban environments in their translation to the screen. In doing so, cinema not only documents urban reality but also actively participates in constructing the image and identity of the city. As Antoniazzi (2019) expresses, there is a nexus between cinema and the perception of urban space through which the image of the city is constructed and directed. In this sense, when urban space is filmed, it transforms and acquires new connotations that enrich the narrative, influencing the viewer's perception (Martínez-Puche & Castro, 2022). In other words, cinematography can transform and redefine urban space, adding layers of meaning that affect how audiences, through cinema, perceive their world and surroundings.

From the perspective of media and cultural studies, cinema is understood as a space of mediation between reality and its public perception (Couldry, 2004; Kellner, 2003). This medium not only reflects social realities but also participates in forming these realities, influencing

perceptions and urban policies. Cinematic representations of the city provide a critical window into urban tensions, offering a powerful channel for articulating social issues and mobilizing towards social change (Sealey, 2008).

Therefore, through certain films, a simultaneous representation and visual and narrative transformation of the urban realm occurs, with its social conditions, environmental determinants, and economic structures. Cinema represents spaces and reinterprets and transforms them. It could map the city emotionally and visually, presenting an urban landscape that is both familiar and strange (Bruno, 2007). One cannot overlook that cinema contributes to constructing a "third space" (Soja, 1996), a space that is simultaneously real and imagined. This space is a construction that can affect the perceptions and urban experiences of those who inhabit or imaginatively visit it through films, influencing the identity and character of urban spaces.

One of the earliest and most influential examples of how cinema can act as social and urban critique is found in early silent cinema, with films such as Fritz Lang's Metropolis (1927). This masterpiece of German expressionism not only stood out for its technical and visual innovation but also for its sharp critique of dehumanizing industrialization and social stratification in modern cities. Through its futuristic aesthetics and dystopian narrative, Metropolis raised fundamental questions about control, inequality, and social cohesion in increasingly mechanized and alienating urban environments.

As the 20th century progressed, Italian neorealism also stood out for its focus on post-war urban life, particularly in cities devastated by conflict and poverty. Films like Vittorio De-Sica's Ladri di Biciclette (1948) used the urban setting not only as a backdrop but as a central character that reflects and exacerbates the protagonist's struggles. This approach not only changed the way audiences perceived Italian cities but also influenced perceptions of the prevailing social issues of the time. Similarly, Carol Reed's The Third Man (1949) narrates post-war Vienna; the city is a dark and mysterious labyrinth reflecting the confusion and despair of its inhabitants. Later, from Hollywood, films have also

been produced where the (alienated) city has played a very significant role. Such is the case with Martin Scorsese's Taxi Driver (1976), where New York City becomes another character, reflecting the protagonist's chaos, decay, and loneliness as he roams its streets. Or Ridley Scott's Blade Runner (1982), set in a futuristic Los Angeles of 2019; a key reference in science fiction and cyberpunk genres, showcasing a dark and rainy city marked by technology and alienation. Or the depictions of New York throughout Woody Allen's filmography (De Miguel-Zamora, 2022).

In subsequent decades, cinema has continued to explore and expose the complexities of urban life and its inequalities. For example, Sofia Coppola's Lost in Translation (2003), where Tokyo is an essential character, with its bustling urban life impacting the protagonists' sense of isolation and disconnection. Similarly, in Latin America, the explosion of urban cinema has been notable in films like González-Iñárritu's Amores Perros (2000), portraying life in Mexico City through three interwoven stories exploring themes of class, violence, and redemption. Likewise, Bollywood cinema has utilized urban space to narrate stories of aspiration and despair, reflecting the rapid social and economic changes in Indian cities.

The importance of cinema as a tool for urban and social critique extends to the present, where filmmakers worldwide use the screen to challenge and question urban norms and structures. Contemporary films continue to explore how urbanization affects human relationships, personal and collective identity, and struggles for power and social justice.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Blade Runner 2049 (2017)

Blade Runner 2049 (2017), directed by Denis Villeneuve, is a sequel to the science fiction classic Blade Runner (1982) by Ridley Scott. The film revisits and expands the dystopian vision of the future in a city dominated by technology, urban decay, and social alienation. From the analysis conducted, it is evident that the film uses the city not merely as a backdrop but as an active protagonist that reflects and amplifies contemporary social, economic, and environmental tensions. The city in Blade Runner 2049 is

Figure 1. Frame of Blade Runner 2049 (2017). Source: own capture from the movie.

an extension of the state of alienation and dehumanization that permeates society. Los Angeles in 2049 is a vast and bleak urban landscape, dominated by colossal structures and advanced technology, yet marked by decay and abandonment. The perpetually rainy atmosphere and smog-covered sky reinforce the sense of oppression and isolation. This setting aligns with Harvey's (2013) description of how contemporary cities under capitalism reinforce inequalities and foster alienation.

The film portrays a deeply divided city where technological advancements coexist with extreme poverty. The disparity between the spaces inhabited by the elite and the marginalized is evident in the contrast between the Wallace Corporation's facilities and the streets filled with rubbish and waste. This contrast is a visual representation of gentrification and economic inequality, that "urban frontier" that transforms and displaces original communities (Smith, 1996). Despite the disproportionate use of technology, the characters experience profound loneliness and disconnection. The protagonist, K (played by Ryan Gosling), is a replicant who, despite his ability to interact with advanced technology, feels isolated and seeks meaningful connection. K's relationship with Joi, an artificial intelligence, exemplifies the paradox of hyperconnectivity: although technologies promise to unite us, they often result in greater personal isolation.

Moreover, environmental devastation is another central theme in this film. The city of Los Angeles is shrouded in dust and pollution, while the surrounding agricultural lands have turned into barren wastelands. This depiction underscores the ecological crisis and the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, reflecting contemporary concerns about climate change and environmental degradation. By presenting a dystopian future, the film acts as a warning about the consequences of environmental neglect and the unchecked growth of production and consumption. Blade Runner 2049 mirrors a dystopian urban landscape that projects current social and environmental conditions into the future.

4.2. Joker (2019)

Joker (2019), directed by Todd Phillips, offers an intense exploration of alienation and despair in a fictional city resembling New York of the 1970s and 1980s. The film uses Gotham City not merely as a backdrop but as a vital character that amplifies the internal conflicts of the protagonist, Arthur Fleck, and reflects contemporary social and economic tensions. Thus, the city becomes a representation of urban decay and social crisis. The city is filled with rubbish due to a garbage collectors' strike, symbolizing the state of abandonment and moral and physical decay. Gotham becomes a character that

Figure 2. Frame of Joker (2019). Source: own capture from the movie.

profoundly influences Arthur's life, exacerbating his feelings of isolation and hopelessness.

The film depicts a stark division between the rich and the poor in the city. Opulent areas, such as Wayne Manor, sharply contrast with the dilapidated neighborhoods where Arthur lives. This polarization is a clear example of gentrification, where the wealthy enjoy comforts while the poor live in deplorable conditions. Furthermore, Arthur Fleck is a deeply alienated character struggling to find his place in a society that rejects him. His isolation is driven by anomie. The lack of social support and the breakdown of community norms in Gotham contribute to Arthur's downward spiral, as he feels increasingly disconnected from his surroundings.

Joker addresses interpersonal disconnection in a modern city. Arthur tries to connect with others through his work as a clown and his aspiration to be a comedian, but he constantly faces rejection and indifference. The analysis reveals how the film openly critiques the failures of the social and economic system. The lack of support for mental health is a central theme. It shows how social and economic structures can contribute to despair and violence. Therefore, it can be said that the film serves as a fierce critique of inequality and the lack of empathy in

contemporary societies. The oppressive atmosphere and urban decay are fundamental to understanding Arthur's transformation into the Joker.

4.3. Parasite (2019)

Parasite (2019), directed by Bong Joon-Ho, is a film that examines social disparities through the lens of a family trying to survive in a contemporary urban environment. The city becomes an element that reflects the social and economic conflicts present in the narrative. Seoul is an extension of the class tensions that define the characters' lives. The film presents a stark contrast between luxurious spaces and impoverished neighborhoods. Architecture and urban spaces become visual reflections of social hierarchy, highlighting the divisions within the city. The difference between the Kim family's semi-basement home and the Parks' modern, bright house is a clear example of differentiation and economic inequality. The Kims live in a damp, dark semi-basement, while the Parks reside in a modern, luminous house. This distinction in living spaces underscores the inequalities and differential access to resources and urban comfort, illustrating how the city is segmented according to economic status.

In this way, the Kim family experiences a profound disconnection from the city's upper class. Although the

Figure 3. Frame of Parasite (2019). Source: own capture from the movie.

Figure 4. Frame of Parasite (2019). Source: own capture from the movie.

Kims work for the Parks, an invisible barrier prevents any true connection. This lack of understanding and sense of exclusion highlights the theme of alienation in an urban environment where people of different classes live in parallel worlds. Despite living in a modern metropolis, the characters in Parasite are isolated within their respective social spheres. The living conditions in contemporary societies fail to bridge the class divide, often accentuating the differences. The Park's house, equipped with the latest technology, contrasts with the Kims' modest home, underscoring how technological modernization can coexist with inequality.

The film offers a sharp critique of the social and economic structures that perpetuate inequality. It shows how precarious living conditions and lack of opportunities can lead to despair and conflict. The city, with its division between wealth and poverty, acts as a catalyst for the Kim family's narrative of struggle and survival. The careful construction of space and the use of the urban environment invite the audience to reflect on the causes and consequences of inequalities in 21st-century cities. The narrative of "Parasite" demonstrates how urban dynamics can create insurmountable barriers between different social groups, fostering alienation and resentment.

Figure 5. Frame of Nomadland (2020). Source: own capture from the movie.

44.3. Nomadland (2020)

Nomadland (2020), directed by Chloé Zhao, is a film that explores the lives of modern nomads in the United States following the Great Recession of 2008. Through the journey of Fern, the protagonist played by Frances McDormand, the film offers a profound reflection on displacement, community, and resilience in a world where cities and urban spaces no longer provide security or belonging. Unlike typical representations of cities as epicenters of alienation, Nomadland presents a different perspective by situating displacement in the absence of a fixed city. Fern and other nomads leave cities in search of a different way of life, highlighting the idea that cities have ceased to be havens of stability and community. This movement reflects how urbanization and economic dynamics have failed to provide security and belonging for many people.

The film uniquely highlights the loss of community. Instead of showing the transformation of urban neighborhoods, Nomadland illustrates the indirect expulsion of people from their homes due to the lack of economic opportunities. In their pursuit of development and modernization, cities have displaced those who cannot keep up with economic demands. Fern, for example, is forced to leave her city and home after the factory where she worked shuts down, symbolizing how urban progress can marginalize the most vulnerable. Fern's nomadic life is a constant search for connection and community amidst displacement. Throughout her journey, she finds a network of people who share her lifestyle, creating an alternative community based on solidarity and mutual aid. This network becomes a response to the alienation experienced in cities and conventional life, showing that human connection can flourish even on the margins of society.

The narrative speaks to viewers about human resilience in the face of adversity. The film invites reflection on the social and economic structure stemming from the recent major crisis that has led many to live on the margins, seeking an alternative to traditional urban life. Through Fern's story, the film offers a meditation on loss, community, and adaptation.

5. Conclusions

This paper has analyzed the representation of the alienated city in 21st-century cinema, focusing on four contemporary commercial films whose narratives specifically relate to the subject of study. Through a socio-critical approach, the audiovisual narratives of Blade Runner 2049 (2017), Joker (2019), Parasite (2019), and Nomadland (2020) have been examined. The results of this work show that these films reflect the complex dynamics of contemporary

urban life, addressing themes such as economic inequality, gentrification, and environmental crisis. Therefore, it can be concluded that these films portray urban realities marked by decay, social marginalization, and alienation within the current and future social, economic, and cultural context. At the same time, these films can serve audiences as important audiovisual platforms for forging critical, even dissident, thought regarding these negative aspects of urban life today and in the future.

In the case of Blade Runner 2049 (2017), it has been demonstrated that cinema can use the representation of the city to explore and critique social, economic, and environmental dynamics. Through its dystopian vision of Los Angeles, the film reflects themes of alienation, inequality, and environmental crisis, prompting viewers to reflect on the contemporary challenges facing our cities. Beyond the audiovisual spectacle, Blade Runner 2049 can be seen as a tool for social awareness.

On the other hand, the fictional narrative of Joker (2019) reveals that cinema can leverage urban environments to analyze and question social, financial, and ecological interactions. Gotham City is not just a backdrop but an active protagonist that reflects and amplifies Arthur Fleck's experiences of alienation and despair. Through a dark and critical perspective of the city, Joker invites the audience to contemplate the difficulties that urban societies may face today and in the future.

The analysis of Parasite (2019) demonstrates how cinema can use the city and its audiovisual representation to reflect on the pressing social and economic tensions in large cities. The city of Seoul also becomes an active participant in the story; a character in itself that reflects class divisions and the distances generated by urban life, which significantly affect its inhabitants. Parasite serves as a critique of the inequality provoked by commercialized urban life.

Furthermore, Nomadland (2020) speaks to viewers about the nomadic life that many inhabitants of our world must adopt due to the vicissitudes inherent in our needs-based capitalism. The film challenges the perception of the city as a safe haven and presents an alternative narrative where the search for community and belonging occurs outside traditional urban limits. Through a unique approach from the audiovisual narrative perspective, Nomadland offers a reflection on the economic difficulties of contemporary life and the resilience necessary to live in a constantly changing world.

Definitively, contemporary cinema, even commercial cinema, can serve as a tool for critical reflection on urban life and the obstacles it generates. The representations of cities in the analyzed films not only offer a mirror to current realities but also invite the audience to question and challenge the social, cultural, and economic structures that may perpetuate inequality and alienation. From this perspective, cities reflect a microcosm of social problems that must be addressed if we want a more compassionate life for ourselves and our surrounding environment. Issues such as excessive urbanization, inequality, and sustainability are treated in the analyzed films. Through their narratives, these works offer a critical reflection on the future of our cities and the importance of working towards more just, inclusive, and resilient urban environments. In conclusion, 21st-century commercial cinema can play a crucial role in the discussion of alienating social dynamics, using the city as a central character to think about our relationships and the necessary changes for a more balanced life. Future research in this line could focus on the relationship between gender and urbanism, the impact of emerging technologies on cities, the influence of cinema on urban policies, or the representation of the environmental crisis.

Conflict of Interests and ethics

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