Pleasure Domes and Caves of Steel: The Future of Urban Space in the Works of Isaac Asimov

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Abstract: Speculative science fiction often serves as a cautionary tale regarding the latent potential of the earth's ecological ruin, environmental degradation and technological overreach. As Isaac Asimov writes, "It is an odd form of escape literature that worried its readers with atom bombs, overpopulation, bacterial warfare, trips to the moon and other phenomenon decades before the rest of the world had to take up the problem" ("Escape" 332). Asimov contemplates the future of urban space as "warrens of humanity" (Foundation 62) as congestion, overpopulation and other environmental factors lead humanity to self-incarcerate in enclosed underground cities. Meanwhile, another fraction suffers from mysophobia, which limits the possibility of and even the desire for human contact. These heterotopias are populated by various forms of the posthuman, a society of bio-medically diverse human race with different antibodies, different resistances to germs and a very different history from the one we know. The new urban space with "endless corridors burrowed under the continental shelves and the oceans were turned into huge underground aqua-cultural cisterns" (Foundation 62) is under scrutiny in our paper, which examines these imagined urban conglomerates where the amalgam of space and its inhabitants forms a hyperreal macrocosm that may be studied through the dual lens of posthumanism and postmodernism.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Postmodernism, Urban Space, Science Fiction, Issac Asimov

Introduction: The Speculative and the Concrete

> The Earth asks us to change as everything changes and evolves, like the flesh-tearing Allosaurus who became a warbler singing from the treetops when the time for flesh-tearing was over. For if we don't change, we will, like all that does not change, perish.
>
> (Kimmerer 22)

Spaces transform with the presence of their human and non-human inhabitants. During the Renaissance, artists and architects created buildings, sculptures, and paintings that emphasised geometric shapes and harmonious symmetry. They believed that the beauty of the spaces they crafted reflected the inner peace and beauty to which they aspired (Pearson 4). Over the decades, as urban areas have evolved, these meticulously planned spaces gave way to the dense conglomeration of structures intricately woven together by a network of roads crisscrossing like veins, connecting every part in a complex, almost neural, pattern. Urban space is a heterogeneous assemblage of the organic and the inorganic, where labyrinthine streets and skyscrapers form the backdrop against which billions of interconnected individual stories constantly unfold. It is in a constant flux, reflecting life's tumultuous nature and the chaotic psychology of its denizens. In light of this, the paper deals with the science fiction stories of Isaac Asimov, particularly those that shed light on his speculations regarding the organic and inorganic future of humanity and urban space. Asimov's urban development ideas challenge the regimented demarcations between utopia and dystopia and pave the way to an open forum upon which these potentialities can be evaluated. Asimov's fiction falls within a long tradition of science fiction writers who posit ideas and theories regarding how the urban space would one day change with the people inhabiting it.

In his 1952 science fiction novel City, Clifford D. Simak presents the story of urban transformation through a series of loosely related short stories, all located in a metropolis that changes over thousands of narrative years. The book envisions a future where the fundamental realities of life have so radically changed that the future listeners of the past stories might be prompted to ask whether such a thing as 'human' ever really walked on two legs and inhabited the city:

> They will ask: "What is Man?"
>
> Or perhaps: "What is a city?"
>
> Or: "What is war?"
>
> There is no positive answer to any of these questions. (Simak 1)

Speculative fiction, as Slaughter puts it, gives us "an entire grammar of future possibility" (Slaughter 30). By venturing beyond the bounds of possibility, they offer ideas that transcend reason or empirical truths, opening up creative avenues for envisioning future innovations and sustainable living. In the words of Natalie Collie, such fiction "can be a powerful means of making highly abstract, difficult, idealistic, terrifying, or difficult ideas and situations possible to imagine and be meaningful" (Collie 426). These, therefore, provide a lens through which decades of evolution can be viewed with the hope that humanity can actively and collectively work towards a better future. The spaces within science fiction that depict the urban population and its habitations are, as Vivian Sobchack puts it, "hypnogogic site(s)" (78). In other words, these are sites of liminality existing between that which is real and that which is imagined, "where the anxieties, desires, fetishes of a culture's waking world and dream world converge and are resolved into a substantial and systematic architecture" (Sobchack 78). This liminality is made possible owing to the fact that the anxieties, desires and fetishes surrounding the city constantly haunt the minds of its denizens and reverberate in the subconscious well past one's waking hours. These "cities of imagination" (Sobchak 78) resonate with Edward Soja's concept of the "urban imaginary", which constitutes "our mental or cognitive mappings of urban reality" (324). This constitutes the ways in which we perceive urban reality, the means we employ to make sense of it, how we discover a sense of identity through the community and the roles we enact within these spaces.

While Sobchack's study deals mainly with the depiction of urban space in science fiction films, particularly the way these cinematic depictions of a speculative future intend to provide "a sunnier imagination of an inhospitable space" (86) capturing the city's "incoherence" in a "scripted order" and circumscribing the "dizzying boundlessness" and heterogeneity of the city within the constraints of a "hermetic frame" (86). One may argue that neither the inhospitality nor the sunnier aspect of the city is ever strictly contained. The implication of these speculative urban spaces extends beyond the hermetic frame of the scene or even the edges of the printed text. These constitute the psyche of the modern urban self. These spaces are a response to the problems of contemporary

urbanity, depicting either a utopian impulse towards an ideal or a dystopic exaggeration of some deep-rooted issues. These stories deepen our understanding of the spaces we inhabit and enrich the ways in which we navigate and negotiate with them. Thus, stories, specifically science fiction stories like the one discussed in this paper, play a vital role in shaping our perception of reality by framing our understanding and equipping us with the linguistic and conceptual tools necessary to engage with the past, present, and future. This idea will be further explored in the rest of the paper through a critical analysis of Asimov's stories, examining how his narratives reflect and influence our collective understanding of human potential and societal evolution.

Posthuman and the Posturban

Isaac Asimov is an author who consistently explores future cityscapes with startling optimism:

> For instance, I wrote a novel in 1953 which pictured a world in which everyone lived in underground cities, comfortably enclosed away from the open air. People would say, "How could you imagine such a nightmarish situation?" And I would answer in astonishment, "What nightmarish situation?" (Asimov, *Nightfall* 124)

Asimov's claustrophilia spawned a series of speculative future living conditions of the posthuman. These spaces are created for comfort and functionality but, above all, out of necessity as the earth we inhabit fails to support the growing population with its finite resources. While it has been argued that the city and the individual evolve together, Asimov, I argue explores this evolution in a unique light. In his books, individuals and cities are parallel sites of simultaneous development. Each evolves in its own right. Humans take to the skies and colonise distant planets in search of sustainability and resources. These colonisers lived in sparsely populated planets that were urbanised with the use of technology and became what Asimov referred to as "Spacers." Having grown up beyond the confines of Earth's microbial ecosystem, these posthuman individuals have undergone biomedical evolution, resulting in the loss of the antibodies that once defined their ancestors 'immune systems.

Having weaker immune systems has rendered the Spacers of Arora and Solaria mysophobes who live in isolation in sequestered spaces and do not feel the need to interact socially. Meanwhile,

cities on Earth have evolved into a "hundred-thousand-unit Section" connected by expressways that contain a "vast continuous trickle of humanity" (Asimov, *Caves* 17-18). These entombed hyper-functional cities, "imprisoning caves" (Asimov, *Caves* 134), contained "infinite lights: the luminous walls and ceilings that seemed to drip cool, even phosphorescence…" are also hyperreal versions of 'primitive cities 'which Asimov dismisses as "just huddles and dwellings large and small, open to the air" (Asimov, *Caves* 22). Having burrowed underground to accommodate the overpopulation, humanity now has socially ingrained agoraphobia and is unable to conceive life outside the steel domes it has built for itself. Thus, the familiar becomes uncanny and hostile, while the artificiality of the fluorescent lights and advertisements provide a sense of comfort. "Outside was the wilderness, the open sky that few could face with anything like equanimity" (Asimov, *Caves* 24). These "outside" spaces are still necessary as they are rich in coal, eternally growing yeast, water, wood and other raw materials needed by man. These heterotopias were completely run by robots, with humans supervising them from a distance. Spacers have an inherent trust in these robots and make use of them extensively to make their lives easier. On the other hand, humans distrust these robots and employ them mostly for labour in mines outside the dome. Further, there exists in the Spacers an ingrained curiosity about the future; while they perfected gerontological research to ensure that they had longevity, they also conducted extensive research in the fictional study of psychohistory, allowing them not only to predict the future accurately but also participate in it.

Between the Earth dwellers and the Spacers, there lies a grudging awareness of a shared ancestry, but little else connects them. While Earth deals with the problem of overpopulation, the spacer cities deal with underpopulation. Due to this, the Spacers have a life expectancy of more than three hundred years and selectively euthanise children who are born with any birth defects (Asimov, *Caves* 136). This systematic practice of selective breeding and Eugenics shocks and unsettles Elijah Baley, an earthman detective who frequently voices the anxieties and concerns of the readers. The Spacers, too, seem apprehensive of the perfect balance and harmony that they have created through

artificial means. Perhaps they are aware that such balance is unnatural and not sustainable. As Han Fastolfe, the creator of the humanoid Daneel, puts it,

> Changelessness is decay.
>
> A paradox. There is no decay without a change for the worse.
>
> Changelessness is a change for the worse. (Asimov, Empire 12)

The denizens of Solaria have taken the practice of Eugenics to an absurd degree. The residents inhabit urban centres that can hold millions of people, and yet, the residents of Soloria are only twenty thousand in number, living a life of loneliness and isolation and practicing regimented birth control. They are caught between the desire for human contact and interaction and the social conditioning that proximity is "unnatural." While the city is a semiautonomous unit with individuals forming an ersatz community that collaborates for sustained living, the urban space in Solaria comprises decadent individual estates housing one or maybe two Solarians each. Baley's trip to Solaria makes him realise the cultural differences between Earth dwellers and Solarians as he conducts a murder investigation. The wife of the deceased exists in a prelapsarian state of innocence as she feels no sense of shame at appearing in front of Elijah Baley in the nude during her hologram "viewing."

"Viewing" through holographic images for Solorians was not the same as meeting someone. A distinction that they had demarcated between the 'image 'and the 'real 'seems incongruous to a future society when bio-medicine and technological advancements have enabled one to endlessly replicate most things. In the age of mechanical reproduction of the 'image,' humanity has created endless copies of itself, whether in the form of spacers or humanoid robots that mimic humanity. Interestingly, one thing that remains unreplicated is the essence of interpersonal interactions and human company. Ironically, the subject of physical intimacy and children seemed to make her uncomfortable, and her replies became indignant and self-righteous:

> He said, "Well, you saw one another often?"
>
> "What? I should hope not. We're not animals, you know. . . We viewed each other whenever necessary."

> …
>
> "Do you have any children?"
>
> Gladia jumped to her feet in obvious agitation. "That's too much. Of all the indecent -"
>
> (Asimov, Naked 65)

It is clear here that Solaria functions as what Foucault called a heterotopia; it has its own set of rules, including 'viewings 'extensive use of robots for every household task and practicing extreme seclusion even among married couples. These customs set them apart from Earth dwellers even if they lie within the same plane of existence. As a space that is distinct and 'other,' Solaria has its own culturally appropriate code of conduct, which is as alien to Elijah as the rules of Earth are to Gladia.

> "Well, I've read a lot about Earth. I've always been interested you know. It's such a queer world." She gasped and added immediately, "I didn't mean that."
>
> Baley frowned a little, "Any world is queer to people who don't live on it." (Asimov, Naked 68)

Gladia is curious about the queer nature of Earth, and it dawns on Baley that for her, he is the 'Other, ' with unfathomable culture and practices to which she cannot relate. In another book of the same series, Gladia casts aside her initial reluctance to be blunt and is much more direct about how the 'Other 'is perceived by her and the other spacers. "You were not - forgive me - altogether a man. You were a creature of Earth. You were human in appearance, but you were short-lived and infection-prone, something semihuman at best" (Asimov, *Dawn* 131). Humans on Earth and Solaria have thus evolved in two distinctly different ways. This has bifurcated the idea of what it means to be human. This led to a bio-political contention between the two fractions as each lay claim to the contested title of "human," "more human", or even "semihuman," Asimov himself doubted that overpopulation would ever accommodate human dignity, but his science fiction depictions of Earth dwellers suggest a more nuanced and complex take on the issue.

With the introduction of identity-altering biotechnology, bioethics has, over the last century or so, struggled to accommodate the changing definitions of what constitutes a human being.

Humanity has been reduced to what Derrida would refer to as a complex code (Qtd. in Wolfe 15) that can be deconstructed and reconstructed to alter what are essentially human paradigms, i.e., transience, ageing and disease.

Gladia's ignorance and subconscious biases, as well as Baley's response, underline the broader theme of Asimov's writing, which is that the unknown and the uncanny are the result of our limited perspectives. Asimov dismantles the bifurcated notion of evolution, making a case for a heterogeneous humanity across different spaces. The world is diverse, and our understanding of humanity is as limited as our understanding of the universe:

> That totality of human lives—past and present and to come—forms a tapestry that has been in existence now for many tens of thousands of years and has been growing more elaborate and, on the whole, more beautiful in all that time. Even the Spacers are an offshoot of the tapestry and they, too, add to the elaborateness and beauty of the pattern. (Asimov, *Empire* 228-229)

Elijah Baley can reconcile the inconsequential nature of his existence with the longevity and resilience of the human species. Perhaps without the same bio-medical and gerontological innovations that enable the Spacers to live for hundreds of years, Baley is blessed with the perspective that is unique to his temporality and impending mortality. We do not know what the future holds and what alterations and modifications are yet possible both for the urban space and for the human/posthuman body. Debra B. Shaw points out that technology and urban architecture must evolve in tandem with bio-medical advancements to accommodate the needs of the posthuman:

> Accepted divisions of gender, race, class, sexuality and, more specifically, species emerge as arbitrary and open to challenge. Beyond this, the posthuman idea violates the sanctity of the institutions which have traditionally served the human ideal and have been largely responsible for its perpetuation. The isolated domesticity of the modern family and its association with private property, inherited wealth and sanctioned reproduction, already under threat, begins

> to look distinctly alien to beings no longer invested in policing biological boundaries. (Shaw 9)

As the posthuman becomes a reality, it is the job of the modern-day architect to respond to changing conditions of life. Ontological change in the idea of 'human 'and 'body 'should, in other words, correspond with ontological changes in the concepts of inhabitation (Shaw 1). What, then, are the ethical implications of the changes to the human form that we witness in science fiction? Along a similar vein, one might also ask about the implication of the ever-changing and ever-evolving essence of the City, which Edward Soja calls a "pseudo-biological organism" (qtd. in Judd 5).

The City as a Unifying Agent at the Apex of its Functionality

The city not only evolves as all biological organisms do, but it also contains sites of deformity and disease. The city is an anthropomorphic entity that breathes, lives and dies like any of its denizens. "Most of all there was the noise that was inseparable from life: the sound of millions talking, laughing, coughing, calling, humming, breathing" (Asimov, Caves 11). This city is a response to the biggest quandaries that threaten urban development. Asimov dreamt of a future where technology works relentlessly to cope with the population's increasing demands. He conjectured, not incorrectly, that by the year 2010 (far into his future), "We'll be having to grow twice the food out of soil that is being poisoned at seven times the rate" (Asimov, Isaac 165). Asimov, therefore, was by no means blind to the faults of humanity that had overextended the generosity of the planet on which they were both. He knew them to be "nasty, materialistic and aggressive people, careless of the rights of others, imperfectly democratic at home though quick to see the minor slaveries of others, and greedy without end" (Asimov, Triangle 54). Despite this, he forwarded a more hopeful vision of the future firmly planted in the idea of settlements and community.

Urban spaces, for Asimov and man's quest for new and sustainable urban areas, whether it was in dome–like structures, underground, or colonies set up on distant planets, would act as a unifying agent:

> the clear necessity of expanding humanity's horizons would cause ... space settlements to be built. The construction would also serve as a great project that not only would be clearly of great benefit, but might induce human cooperation in something large enough to fire the heart and mind, and make people forget the petty quarrels that have engaged them for thousands of years in wars over insignificant scraps of earthly territory. (Asimov, *Exploring* 153)

Faced with the threat of extinction, Asimov believed would stir in humanity the spark of camaraderie necessary to set up future empires. These empires would take the form of future cities, which would be characterised by, at worst, adequacy, and at best, luxury, opulence and abundance. For Asimov, the City symbolized "the culmination of man's mastery over the environment" (Asimov, *Caves* 25) more than any technological and scientific innovation that came before it. This was perhaps owing to the symbiotic relationship that these spaces created with their inhabitants. They provided all that man could ask for, "but it made demands of its inhabitants" (Asimov, *Caves* 33). Without cooperation and structure within society, the edifices that contained them would also crumble.

> Thus, whether it was the biomedically advanced Spacers or the infection-ridden Earth dwellers, it's more important to be human and to have a human heritage . . . It is delightful to have the human heritage exist in a thousand varieties, for it makes for greater interest, but as soon as one variety is thought to be more important than another, the groundwork is laid for destroying them all. (Asimov, *In Joy* 147)

A sense of begrudging kinship is set up between different individuals who co-habit the face of city spaces since it is only with cooperation and intimacy that the human race can advance. Elija Baley, over the course of the Robot Series, succeeds in changing the overarching sense of difference between the Earth people and the Spacers into an attitude of tolerance. In the beginning, he is given a case that forces him to work with the Spacers against his own wishes, but in the later books, he continues to be assigned to such cases because he has developed a good relationship with them. In Robots of Dawn, Baley attempts to overcome the fear of space that humanity has inherited through generations

of confined living. And in Robots and Empire, we are told that humans have managed to conquer this fear.

This becomes an important lesson in light of modern-day isolationist tendencies. With most human needs delivered to their doorsteps by the use of the internet and telephonic applications, man's need to interact has diminished. Lives grow increasingly more isolated as we alienate ourselves from the community that is bound together by primitive village or tribe cultures. The growth of agoraphobic tendencies can be seen in the post-COVID-19 world as we readjust to a world where all social interactions are increasingly becoming optional. Asimov both predicted and feared this reclusive tendency, "Without the interplay of human against human, the chief interest in life is gone; most of the intellectual values are gone; most of the reason for living is gone" (Asimov, *Naked* 398). The city depends on this interplay for its optimum functionality, thereby creating a space for it and necessitating it. It creates spaces of conservation within which, though individuals age and die, the essence of human life and dignity remains preserved.

Conclusion

Asimov's speculative fiction offers an exploration of the future of urban spaces and human evolution. His narratives envision a world where humanity and its habitats undergo parallel transformations, each influencing and reflecting the other. Asimov's cities, whether enclosed underground or sprawling across distant planets, are more than mere backdrops—they are active agents in shaping human identity and societal structures. By blurring the boundaries between utopia and dystopia, Asimov invites readers to critically engage with the possibilities and challenges that lie ahead. His stories underscore the importance of cooperation, adaptability, and a shared sense of humanity in navigating the complex, ever-evolving urban landscapes of the future.

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