




<https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2026.02.13>

Research article

Dead City: The Semiotics of Post-Apocalyptic Urbanism in Contemporary Cinema

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Abstract.

The city is viewed as the quintessence of human civilization – a space where architecture, infrastructure, and social practices form a unified semiotic mechanism for the production of meaning. This study focuses on the transformation of this mechanism following the disappearance of its primary actor, the human. Drawing on key genre works – *28 Days Later* (2002), *I Am Legend* (2007), *The Road* (2009), *A Quiet Place* (2018), *Mortal Engines* (2018), and the television series *The Last of Us* (2023) – the article analyzes the visual and acoustic semiotics of the “dead city.” Particular attention is paid to iconic imagery: the deserted Westminster Bridge (*28 Days Later*), where the absence of urban noise generates the effect of “silence as text;” a vegetation-overgrown New York City (*I Am Legend*), where nature consumes the architectural symbols of capitalism; and the post-industrial ruins in *The Road*. Through the theoretical lenses of Marc Augé, Jean. Baudrillard, Yurii. Lotman, Michel Foucault, and Andrey Tarkovsky, the transformation of urban space from a locus of vital activity into a zone of semiotic entropy is examined. The research methodology combines visual film semiotics, the cultural anthropology of urbanism, and phenomenological spatial analysis. A frame-by-frame analysis of key scenes reveals the specifics of post-apocalyptic representation: the capturing of the city as an archaeological monument to itself (*28 Days Later*); the transformation of the soundtrack into an instrument of terror (*A Quiet Place*); and the phenomenon of natural recolonization that creates a visual palimpsest where nature and culture enter into dialogue (*The Last of Us*). The study also conceptualizes the phenomenon of “automated systems without humans” – an infrastructure that continues to function in the absence of its creators. Three key dimensions of post-apocalyptic urbanism are identified: visual ruination (architectural decay as a metaphor for civilizational collapse), acoustic inversion (the replacement of urban noise with anxious silence), and natural recolonization (the return of the biosphere to anthropogenic space). The dead city is shown to function not merely as a backdrop for catastrophe, but as a complex semiotic text that encapsulates not only the end of civilization but also a critique of contemporary urbanism, anthropocentrism, and technological progress.

Keywords: Post-apocalypse; Urban semiotics; Urban anthropology; Visual culture; Acoustic environment; Film analysis; Cultural memory; Anthropocene; Ruination; Natural Recolonization; Artificial intelligence; Non-places; Simulacrum; Heterotopia; Semiosphere; Baudrillard; Augé; Lotman; Foucault; Tarkovsky

Acknowledgment: The work was carried out with the support of the Committee on Higher Education and Science of the Republic of Armenia (project No. 1-29/24RL-6A032).

Citation: Margaryan, Y. (2026). Dead City: The Semiotics of Post-Apocalyptic Urbanism in Contemporary Cinema. *Technology and Language*, 7(2), 159-171. <https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2026.02.13>



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УДК 81`22: 791

<https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2026.02.13>

Научная статья

Мёртвый город: Семиотика постапокалиптического урбанизма в современном кинематографе

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Аннотация

Город рассматривается как квинтэссенция человеческой цивилизации – пространство, где архитектура, инфраструктура и социальные практики образуют единый семиотический механизм производства смыслов. В фокусе исследования – трансформация этого механизма после исчезновения его главного актора, человека. На материале постапокалиптического кинематографа последних двух десятилетий анализируется семиотический коллапс урбанистического пространства, в котором привычные знаковые системы продолжают функционировать в отсутствие интерпретаторов. На материале ключевых кинопроизведений жанра – “28 дней спустя” (2002), “Я – легенда” (2007), “Дорога” (2009), “Тихое место” (2018), “Хроники хищных городов” (2018) и сериала “Одни из нас” (2023) – анализируется визуальная и акустическая семиотика “мёртвого города». Особое внимание уделяется иконическим образам: пустынному Вестминстерскому мосту (“28 дней спустя”), где отсутствие урбанистического шума создаёт эффект “тишины как текста»; заросшему растительностью Нью-Йорку (“Я – легенда”), где природа поглощает архитектурные символы капитализма; постиндустриальным руинам (“Дорога”). Через призму концепций М. Оже, Ж. Бодрийяра, Ю. Лотмана, М. Фуко и А. Тарковского рассматривается трансформация городского пространства из локуса жизнедеятельности в зону семиотической энтропии. Методология исследования сочетает методы визуальной семиотики кино, культурной антропологии урбанизма и феноменологического анализа пространства. Выявлены три ключевых измерения постапокалиптического урбанизма: визуальная руинизация, акустическая инверсия и природная реколонизация. Доказано, что мёртвый город функционирует не в качестве декорации катастрофы, а как сложный семиотический текст, содержащий критику современного урбанизма, антропоцентризма и технологического прогресса.

Ключевые слова: Постапокалипсис; Семиотика города; Урбанистическая антропология; Визуальная культура; Акустическая среда; Киноанализ; Культурная память; Антропоцен; Руинизация; Природная реколонизация; Искусственный интеллект; Не-места; Симулякр; Гетеротопия; Семиосфера; Ж. Бодрийяр; М. Оже; Ю. Лотман; М. Фуко; А. Тарковский

Благодарность Работа выполнена при поддержке Комитета по высшему образованию и науке Республики Армения (проект No 1-29/24RL-6A032).

Для цитирования: Margaryan, Y. *Dead City: The Semiotics of Post-Apocalyptic Urbanism in Contemporary Cinema* // *Technology and Language*. 2026. № 7(2) P. 159-171. <https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2026.02.13>



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THE CITY AS TEXT AND BODY: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The City as a Sign System

Yuri Lotman defined the city as a complex text of culture, within whose structural architectonics streets perform the function of syntax, architecture acts as morphology, and everyday human practices operate as pragmatics (Lotman, 1996). Roland Barthes, in his foundational research on urban semiotics, similarly emphasized that the city continuously “speaks” to its inhabitants through multiple heterogeneous codes – ranging from monumental architectural forms to street names and commercial signs (Barthes, 1986).

In a post-apocalyptic context, this sign system undergoes a radical and irreversible transformation. The disappearance of the human being as the primary decoder leads to the emergence of a phenomenon that Umberto Eco conceptualized as “semiotic drift” – a situation where signs permanently detach from their original denotations and begin to function completely autonomously, generating uncontrollable chains of connotations (Eco, 1976). In the film *28 Days Later* (2002), this process is visually manifested through the melancholic images of an empty London, where traffic lights and road indicators continue to transmit imperative regulations to non-existent transport flows.

The iconic scene of a lifeless London in *28 Days Later* lasts about four minutes and represents a methodical, cinematically precise deconstruction of urban space through the category of absence. The camera closely follows Jim (Cillian Murphy), who has just awakened from a coma, on his existential journey from St. Thomas' Hospital across a silent Westminster Bridge toward the monumental Houses of Parliament. Director Danny Boyle deliberately utilizes the digital wide-angle optics of the Canon XL1, which, due to its specific, grainy resolution, creates a pseudo-documentary effect of “immediate witnessing.” Each frame panoramically captures the main sign markers of the British capital – Big Ben, Piccadilly Circus, and Trafalgar Square. However, all these global simulacra are presented here as dead archaeological artifacts, having totally lost their pragmatic function as urban landmarks.

In this context, the *mise-en-scène* featuring an overturned red double-decker bus against the backdrop of the Palace of Westminster's clock tower is highly representative: a key cultural symbol of British identity and stability is literally upended, desacralized, and reduced to a heap of scrap metal. The final touch of this semiotic collapse is the bank notes scattered chaotically across the asphalt – a material signifier of economic value and capitalist exchange that has completely and irrevocably lost its signifier in the new world (Baudrillard, 1994).

The Organic Metaphor of the City: Tracing the Phantom Bios

The concept of the city as a living organism has deep roots in urban planning. Patrick Geddes conceptualized the city as an evolving bio-social system that undergoes natural phases of growth, maturity, and decay (Geddes, 1915). In post-apocalyptic cinema, however, this organic metaphor undergoes an inverted, necrophilic transformation: the city is represented as a corpse – a macro-body whose vital, metabolic processes have ceased, yet whose rigid anatomical structure remains intact.



By extrapolating Giorgio Agamben's concept of “bare life” (zoe) – which describes a biological existence violently severed from its political and social framework (bios) (Agamben, 1998) – we can define the dead city as the absolute spatial limit of this dichotomy. The post-apocalyptic city is a terminal space where the architectural “body” (the material substrate of civilization) continues to physically persist in the landscape, but its social “breath” and institutional life have been entirely extinguished. It speaks to us not through active speech acts, but through the traumatic muteness of its architectural organs, remembering a form of life that it can no longer sustain.

Non-lieux and the Totality of Placelessness

While in late modernity non-places (non-lieux) function as isolated islands of anonymity within a sea of historically and culturally rooted spaces (Augé, 2017), the post-apocalyptic catastrophe dialectically transforms the entire city into a total, all-encompassing non-place. Edward Relph anticipated this spatial amputation, describing “placelessness” as the systematic erosion of local authenticity and meaningful human attachment (Relph, 1976).

Zygmunt Bauman argued that in “liquid modernity,” the rigid, fixed structures of early modern institutions dissolve into fluid, unstable postmodern networks (Bauman, 2000). In the post-apocalyptic urban landscape, this spatial deterritorialization reaches its absolute zenith. The post-city is no longer liquid; it is evaporated. All utilitarian, sacred, and social delineations within the urban matrix are permanently erased, flattening the landscape into a homogenous, entropic medium of ruins and alienation where every street is a corridor to nowhere.

Heterotopia and Negative Spatial Production

In the dead metropolis, a process of total heterotopization unfolds: every location becomes radically 'other' in relation to its original teleology and pragmatics — what Michel Foucault defined as spaces that exist outside all places, yet remain localizable (Foucault, 1986). Henri Lefebvre demonstrated that social space is not a passive container, but is actively produced and reproduced through daily human practices (Lefebvre, 1991).

When these practices are abruptly annulled, the space enters a phase of “negative production.” It does not vanish physically; instead, it continuously produces its own emptiness, its own absence. It becomes a heterotopia in its purest form – a place where real cultural spaces are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. The post-apocalyptic city “speaks” to the survivor and the viewer precisely through this negative production: its signs are no longer instructions for action, but monuments to a vanished referent.

Extending the Urban Text: The Spatial Boundaries of Stalker and Wall-E

A potential critique of this framework might suggest that landscapes such as the “Zone” in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) or the planetary garbage dump in Andrew Stanton's *Wall-E* (2008) transcend the boundaries of the classical city. However, within a semiotic reading, both spaces remain fundamentally urban texts. The Zone in *Stalker*,



littered with the drowned industrial artifacts of a vanished modernization, is a post-city – an urbanism that has been deconstructed and re-wilded, where the “grammar of things” has broken down into a mystical topology.

Similarly, the waste-towers of Wall-E are literally composed of the discarded material culture of a hyper-consumerist metropolis. The city here has not disappeared; it has been repackaged by automated algorithms into monolithic cubes of compressed history. Both cases demonstrate that the post-apocalyptic space is never truly vacant of urbanity; rather, it represents the terminal stage of urban serialization, where the city continues to communicate its traumatic memory through its residual infrastructure.

VISUAL SEMIOTICS OF RUINATION

The Aesthetics of Decay

The visual language of post-apocalyptic cinema is entirely grounded in the aesthetics of entropy. Robert Smithson, in his essays on new monuments, conceptualized ruins as “monuments of entropy” – specific objects in whose material structure time is objectified in the form of progressive decay (Smithson, 1996).

In *I Am Legend* (2007), Manhattan is represented as a monumental ruin of global proportions, where modernist skyscrapers have turned into silent vertical tombs of a departed civilization. Director Francis Lawrence actively utilizes high-budget computer-generated imagery (CGI) to create expressive images of trees and wild grass piercing through the deformed asphalt of Times Square.

The hunting scene, in which Robert Neville (Will Smith) pursues a herd of deer down Fifth Avenue, is extraordinarily expressive in this regard. The dynamic camera captures the once-elite storefronts of Tiffany, Gucci, and Louis Vuitton, overgrown with wild ivy and shrubs: the former shining temples of consumerism and global capitalism appear as lifeless archaeological monuments. In this perspective, nature asserts itself as an active semiotic agent, deliberately and aggressively rewriting the once-rigid anthropogenic urban text.

Natural Recolonization as a Visual Code

The invasion of the wild biosphere into the urban landscape represents a distinct, plot-defining visual code of the post-apocalyptic narrative. Anna Tsing (2015), in her anthropological work on the ruins of capitalism, describes in detail how nature inevitably returns to abandoned, devastated industrial loci, generating new, unforeseen forms of life.

In the television series *The Last of Us* (2023), this process is pushed to its visual and conceptual absolute: the metropolis is transformed into a self-sustaining post-anthropogenic ecosystem, where deadly fungal spores replace the air, and entanglements of roots and vines simulate former cable and communication networks.

Donna Haraway, within her concept of the “Chthulucene,” proposes thinking of the era that succeeds the destructive Anthropocene as a period when multiple interspecies life forms are forced to create strange, new symbiotic connections (Haraway, 2016). The post-apocalyptic city visually instantiates this posthumanist idea through images of hybrid



landscapes within which the natural and the cultural, the organic and the tectonic, are diffusely and indistinguishably interwoven.

Architecture of Fear

Post-apocalyptic architecture functions as an immanent generator of intense affects of fear, existential anxiety, and vulnerability. The ruined constructivist skeletons of buildings, the window openings gaping with blackness, the dark enfilades of corridors, and the deserted streets form a spatially distributed, highly suggestive emotional field.

Paul Virilio (1986), within his research on “dromology” and the logic of speed, predicted that the late-modernist megacity would inevitably evolve into a global space of total catastrophe. In post-apocalyptic cinema (most representatively expressed in the post-industrial, lifeless world of *The Road*), this prophecy is realized literally. The city appears as a frozen, permanent catastrophe, where historical time has irreversibly stopped at the very moment of civilizational collapse, turning the former protective urban structures into a labyrinth of permanent threat.

Stalker: Sand as the Dust of Civilization

Perhaps no one in world cinema has expressed the latent ontology of a decaying urban space more accurately and poignantly than Andrei Tarkovsky in *Stalker* (1979). The artistic space of the Zone represents not just an abandoned location, but a polar “post-city” – a locus where technogenic civilization has completely dissolved in the chaotic fluctuations of an alien environment (Tarkovsky, 1986).

In the famous, meditative scene with sand dunes filling the floors of ruined rooms, the visual means of the film filigree create a physically palpable effect of internal, implosive decay of architecture. These undulating drifts of sand act not as a banal sign of a triumphant invasion of wild nature, but as a complex visual metaphor for time that has become tangible matter. Dust and sand in Tarkovsky's artistic system are the dispersed remnants of former meanings, the material substrate from which absolute oblivion is woven.

The director captures the Zone as an organic macro-body in whose depths the latent, elusive processes of mortification, decay, and, simultaneously, paradoxical, mystical sanctity continue. An industrial building, slowly swallowed by a sea of sand, broadcasts the image of a temple turned to dust. At this point, a key transition for visual semiotics is manifested: from architecture as a tectonic construction and the triumph of human will, to architecture as a relic, dust, and desacralized remains.

ACOUSTIC SEMIOTICS OF SILENCE

The Soundscape of the Apocalypse

Raymond Murray Schafer, the founder of acoustic ecology, introduced the fundamental concept of “soundscape” for the description and analysis of the sonic environment (Schafer, 1977). In a post-apocalyptic city, a radical, catastrophic



transformation of this landscape unfolds – from an oversaturated industrial noise to a total silence.

In the context of *A Quiet Place* (2018), film theorist Michel Chion defines such a condition as “acousmatic,” where the source of sound is latent, invisible, or completely alienated from the object (Chion, 1994). Silence in this space ceases to be a passive void; it turns into a hyper-semiotized locus where absolutely any decibel is instantly articulated as a sign of deadly danger.

Sound designers Erik Aadahl and Ethan Van der Ryn created a unique auditory environment in which minimal micro-noises – the creaking of wooden floorboards, the rustling of dry leaves, breathing – acquire a hypertrophied, existential significance. The *mise-en-scène* in the abandoned pharmacy is highly representative in this regard: the automatic sliding doors open silently, the electronic scoreboard blinks speechlessly in the twilight, but these once-familiar signs of a normal, safe urban life are now read as a sinister trap. A radical inversion occurs: sound turns from a neutral domestic background into a direct signifier of imminent death.

Echoes of Civilization

In the space of a dead city, sound begins to function as a specific archaeological trace – a ghostly echo of an irreversibly vanished civilization. In *The Last of Us*, a pop music composition from the pre-war past, sounding lonely in the depths of a ruined shopping mall, produces an almost unbearable emotional affect on the viewer.

As Joel and Ellie make their way through the mall's atrium, overgrown with wild trees, under a randomly preserved automated broadcast, this track manifests itself as the auditory equivalent of a ruin. We capture the phenomenon of a “simulacrum-sound” – a sign that has completely lost its empirical addressee but has not lost its ability to intensely generate meanings and transmit cultural memory.

Conversely, in the film adaptation of *The Road* (2009), the post-apocalyptic continuum is totally devoid of musical accompaniment and the living sounds of nature. This absolute acoustic devastation and vacuum are perceived by the viewer psychologically harder than any most expressive visual image of architectural destruction. Here, the very absence of sound becomes the dominant signifier – the darkest of all possible codes of non-being.

Bioacoustics of the Post-City

Bernie Krause, in his pioneering studies of “biophony,” clearly demonstrates how natural environmental sounds are organized into strictly differentiated, complex acoustic niches (Krause, 2012). Under the conditions of the megacity's demise, a process of total replacement of urban “anthrophony” (the technogenic noise of human activity) by the sovereign “biophony” of advancing nature unfolds. This fixes a fundamental shift in the acoustic semiotics of space.

In the screen universe of *The Last of Us*, each dead city possesses a unique, highly individual bioacoustic identity: wild birds build nests in the voids of office skyscrapers, groundwater breaks through the concrete arteries of the subway with a hollow echo, and the wind wanders unobstructed through empty shopping galleries. Nature does not simply



colonize concrete remains; it constructs a fundamentally new acoustic order on top of the old one, textually rewriting and recoding the urban landscape.

TEMPORALITY OF THE DEAD CITY

AI Without Humans

A special place in the semiotic structure of the dead city is occupied by automated systems and elements of infrastructure that continue to function after the disappearance of the human population. Philosopher Nick Bostrom describes a hypothetical scenario in which artificial intelligence and autonomous algorithms pedantically perform the functions embedded in them in the total absence of their creators (Bostrom, 2014).

In post-apocalyptic cinema, this phenomenon becomes a source of a specific type of existential anxiety – the effect of the uncanny (*Das Unheimlich*) in the psychoanalytic understanding of Sigmund Freud, when the familiar and domestic suddenly turns into something alien and frightening. In *28 Days Later* (2002), traffic lights continue to switch mechanically for non-existent traffic; in *I Am Legend*, the electronic media facades of Times Square broadcast glossy advertisements for viewers who are no longer there; in *The Last of Us*, escalators move silently without shoppers. The city turns into a total ghost-automaton, imitating vital processes after the physical disappearance of living beings.

The visual poetics and tragedy of the useless, looped labor of machines are particularly vividly embodied in the animated film *Wall-E* (2008, dir. A. Stanton). The screen action unfolds under the cheerful musical theme from the musical *Hello, Dolly!* (1964), which creates a paradoxical semiotic contrast: the optimistic melody of the anthropogenic past accompanies the monotonous mechanical routine of the robot cleaner in the posthuman present. *Wall-E* methodically sorts garbage, compresses waste, and builds giant towers of trash – the algorithm works flawlessly, but its pragmatic results are needed by no one.

A direct conceptual parallel is found in the Soviet animated masterpiece *There Will Come Soft Rains* (Tulyakhodzhayev, 1984), based on Ray Bradbury's short story. In the middle of a city scorched by a nuclear catastrophe, a robotic house continues its daily program: it prepares breakfast, broadcasts music, and persistently invites the owners to the table – however, the inhabitants themselves have long since turned into ashen shadows on the melted wall. Unlike the Hollywood *Wall-E*, where the finale leaves hope for a new reclamation of home, the Soviet adaptation ends with an absolute entropic finale: the automated system burns down, and only the indifferent rain of nature remains in space.

Theorist Rosi Braidotti, within the framework of critical posthumanism, notes that the onset of the posthuman era means not the physical end of man as a species, but a radical deconstruction of the very understanding of the human and subjectivity (Braidotti, 2013). In the space of the dead city, this transformation is clearly materialized through melancholy images of autonomously functioning machines that are completely devoid of teleology and a higher purpose.



Time After Time

The post-apocalyptic urban landscape exists in a specific temporal regime that literary theorist Frank Kermode conceptualized as “the time after the end” (Kermode, 1967). This is not the cyclical time of archaic myth, nor the linear, progressivist time of modern history, but what Giorgio Agamben defines as “messianic time” – a compressed, residual time that still endures after the accomplished finale (Agamben, 1998).

In the film adaptation of *The Road*, the screen world is totally devoid of any chronological markers: the viewer is not informed exactly how many years have passed since the global catastrophe. Father and son make their tragic journey through a homogenous space in which historical time has irreversibly frozen at the moment of civilization's demise and is now slowly degrading along with its material substrate. Charred forest massifs, a permanently gray leaden sky, buildings crumbling from old age – all these are signic representamen of the same phenomenon: time that has become a total space of decay.

Memory of Ruins and the Palimpsest of Time

In *The Last of Us*, the directorial and camera optics continuously combine and rhyme the traces of the pre-war past – faded advertising billboards, road markings, ruined playgrounds – with aggressive live vegetation growing through concrete. Before us unfolds the phenomenon of the palimpsest in its literal, textual understanding: on top of the decaying text of human civilization, advancing nature writes its sovereign narrative, without erasing the former cultural codes completely, but entering into a tragic dialogue with them.

A diametrically opposite semiotic technique is used by Andrei Tarkovsky in *Stalker* (Tarkovsky, 1986). The space of the Zone exists absolutely outside of a determined historical time. The exact moment of the catastrophe is fundamentally bracketed out of the narrative: the Zone represents an autonomous temporal bubble that has completely fallen out of the continuum of history. It is this oppressive and simultaneously fascinating feeling of total timelessness that makes *Stalker* the deep philosophical and aesthetic prototype of all modern post-apocalyptic urbanism in world cinema.

POSTHUMAN PRESENCE

POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF CATASTROPHE

Capitalism of Ruins

Naomi Klein, in her concept of the “shock doctrine,” describes in detail how large-scale geopolitical and natural disasters are cynically used for a radical restructuring of socio-economic systems (Klein, 2007). In post-apocalyptic cinema, the dead city often appears as a paradoxical “capitalism after capitalism,” where the processes of



accumulation, structuration, and hierarchy continue even in the total absence of the subjects of accumulation themselves.

Anna Tsing and several contemporary theorists introduce the concept of the “Capitalocene” – an era in which the logic of global capitalism acquires the proportions of a destructive geological force (Tsing, 2015). In this optics, an abandoned megacity manifests itself as a monumental monument to the Capitalocene, whose predatory infrastructure has physically outlived its creators.

The most literal, grotesque embodiment of this idea is found in the film *Mortal Engines* (2018, dir. Christian Rivers). The post-apocalyptic continuum here is rigidly organized according to the principle of so-called “municipal Darwinism”: giant traction cities on wheels and tracks continuously hunt each other in the barren wastelands, literally devouring smaller settlements for resource extraction. The moving London swallows a small mining town in the very first minutes of screen time, methodically dismantling it for spare parts in its giant mechanical bowels. When London collapses at the end of the film, its debris freezes in the desert, turning into monumental ruins of an unrestrained expansion that has nowhere else to advance.

This image correlates perfectly with David Harvey's concept of the “spatial fix,” which argues that capitalism temporarily resolves its internal systemic contradictions exclusively through continuous geographical expansion and the colonization of new spaces; when this territorial resource is finally exhausted, the technogenic system inevitably implodes and collapses (Harvey, 2001).

Ecology Without Nature

Timothy Morton, in his fundamental work *Ecology Without Nature*, convincingly proves that the very classical concept of “nature” as something external and separated from man is a fading ideological construction (Morton, 2013). In the space of a post-apocalyptic city, this dichotomy is finally annulled, making the markers of the natural and the cultural completely indistinguishable.

Bruno Latour conceptualizes such a state as a “parliament of things,” within which non-human actors receive an equal ontological status with the human subject (Latour, 1993). In the series *The Last of Us*, the collective fungal intelligence of the *Cordyceps* constructs its own emergent communication networks directly through the ruins of human infrastructure. The mycelium spreading underground replaces the fiber-optic Internet, and deadly spores replace atmospheric air. Nature does not simply destroy human traces; it creates an alternative, fundamentally non-human, rhizomatic semiotic system on top of the ruined sign codes of the Anthropocene.

CINEMATIC ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE FUTURE

Media Archaeology of the Apocalypse

Post-apocalyptic cinema functions as a specific archaeology of the future: it represents our actual present as a future inevitable ruin, generating a paradoxical phenomenon of “nostalgia for the present.” The screen dead city becomes a powerful



trigger for the “affect of absence” – an intense emotional experience of emptiness as a hyper-semiotized space, deeply saturated with latent meanings.

The silent London in *28 Days Later*, the depopulated Manhattan in *I Am Legend*, the Boston overgrown with wild vegetation in *The Last of Us* – all these visual markers exploit the psychological mechanism of painful, traumatic recognition. The viewer is confronted with the deconstruction of well-known global urban topoi from whose structure the human being itself has been radically subtracted.

Post-Apocalypse as a Cultural Diagnosis

The powerful wave of post-apocalyptic cinematic discourse in the 2000–2020s chronologically and symptomatically coincides with a growing global anxiety about the climate crisis, the Anthropocene, pandemic threats, total technological dependence, and the rapid erosion of modernist social institutions.

Philosopher Fredric Jameson once formulated a famous cultural diagnosis: it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Jameson, 2003). Post-apocalyptic cinema acts as a striking symptom of precisely this mental and ideological stagnation – the total impossibility of conceiving an alternative historical future otherwise than through the total ruination and collapse of the present. The dead city in this context is a giant speculative mirror into which living modern megacities look fearfully, trying to reflect the contours of their probable end. And what they find in this reflection testifies explicitly to the deep phobias and crises of our actual society.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the post-apocalyptic city in contemporary cinema represents a multidimensional, complex semiotic phenomenon within which visual, acoustic, temporal, and political-ecological codes form a unique metalanguage for articulating the latent cultural anxieties of the late modern era. A city deprived of man exposes the total dependence of the urban sign system on the permanent presence of an interpreting and decoding subject. At the moment when this subject is annulled, the megacity is transformed into a cyclopean palimpsest where heterogeneous temporal, natural, and technological layers of meaning are chaotically superimposed on each other in a situation of permanent “semiotic drift.”

The conducted research allows for the recording of three key theoretical conclusions.

First: semiotic collapse as a mirror of modernity. The dead city explicates the latent fears and crises of late capitalism and the Capitalocene – phobias of total automation, ecological collapse, and the loss of existential meanings in a world oversaturated with simulacra.

Second: posthumanist perspective of urbis. The space of the city after man demonstrates the empirical possibility of a non-anthropocentric, symbiotic existence of the landscape, in which non-human agents (from AI to fungal mycelium) form a “parliament of things” and enter into new interspecies interactions.



Third: a new poetics of ruins. Unlike classical romantic ruins of the 18th and 19th centuries, which melancholically referred to a distant ancient or medieval past, post-apocalyptic ruins generate a unique affect of “premature nostalgia” – a longing for our own present, which has not yet physically had time to become history.

The screen image of the dead city outgrows the framework of a banal genre element of mass visual culture, manifesting itself as a major conceptual and epistemological tool for the critical analysis of contemporary urbanism, globalization, and their potential futurological trajectories. In the critical era of the Anthropocene, this image functions simultaneously as an uncompromising civilizational warning and as an open invitation to reimagine the relations between humanity, technology, and the biosphere — and, on this basis, the present study has sought to identify and characterize the precise moments at which the city, even in its silence, can still be heard.

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Статья поступила 29 января 2026
одобрена после рецензирования 17 апреля 2026
принята к публикации 10 июня 2026

Received: 29 January 2026
Revised: 17 April 2026
Accepted: 10 June 2026