

Atmosphere as a Language in the Dystopian Cinema: Examination of Dark City

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Abstract

This study examines the atmospheric language of dystopian cinema, focusing on Alex Proyas's *Dark City* (1998), through a tripartite theoretical framework drawing on atmosphere, film, and language studies. It posits that cinematic atmosphere functions as a distinct mode of communication, employing architectural representations and sensory elements to convey meaning. Drawing on Gernot Böhme's atmosphere generators, Michael A. K. Halliday's metafunctional linguistic theory, and Roland Barthes's semiotic framework—particularly his distinction between denotative and connotative meaning—the study analyzes audience interpretations through ideational sketches and interpersonal discussions to reveal the generators.

Findings show that *Dark City*'s atmospheric design effectively communicates themes of control, isolation, and existential anxiety. Ideational sketches predominantly represented “things,” “non-things,” and “bodies,” while interpersonal discussions highlighted “movements,” auditory atmosphere in “non-things,” and newly proposed categories: perception of space and control, time, and narration. The integration of Barthes's model further illuminates how denotative categories emerging from visual data often give rise to connotative meanings articulated in verbal responses, demonstrating the interdependence of these semiotic layers. Keywords such as “oppression,” “surveillance,” and “darkness,” consistently identified, underscore the film's (con)textual structure.

Findings show that audience interpretations validate the film's ability to evoke emotional responses, highlighting the active role of viewers in constructing cinematic meaning. Future studies could explore cross-cultural dimensions of this atmospheric language and the impact of emerging technologies on cinematic atmospheres, further enriching our understanding of film as a complex communicative medium.

Keywords: spatial atmosphere; dystopian cinema; perception of space; narrative space; semiotics.

Stable URL: <https://arcc-journal.org/index.php/arccjournal/article/view/1319>

DOI 10.17831/enqarcc.v23i1.1319

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1. INTRODUCTION¹

The concept of atmosphere is deeply embedded in human expression as a fundamental aspect of design and aesthetics (Griffero, 2016). Acting as a powerful architect of experience, atmosphere shapes diverse settings and creates connections that go beyond verbal communication. This intangible force transforms spaces into meaningful moments, lived experiences, and sensory perceptions (Canepa and Condia 2023). It produces the *genius loci* and is shaped by its evolving spirit, influencing the moods of those who experience it, while also being affected by them through modes of communication embedded with aesthetic codes inscribed on space, time, and bodies (El Moussaoui 2024). Gernot Böhme (2017a) defines atmospheres as “felt” or “tuned” spaces that surround us. They are sensory phenomena perceived through the senses—not merely physical objects. These environments arise from the combination of sensory elements such as color, light, music, and spatial arrangements, which together evoke specific feelings or moods in the perceiver (Lipkin 2019). In this respect, such moods align with Roland Barthes’s (1972 [1957]) notion of the connotative layer of myth: the transformation of literal sensory-spatial elements into culturally and emotionally charged meanings.

The concept of atmosphere, especially concerning space and time, can be further enriched by Gilles Deleuze’s influential film theory. Deleuze’s works *Cinema I: The Movement-Image* (1983) and *Cinema II: The Time-Image* (1985) (Deleuze, 2019a, 2019b) provide a philosophical framework to understand how cinematic time and space are perceived and manipulated. The “movement-image” closely relates to spatial and bodily perception—how movement within an environment is represented and experienced—while the “time-image” emphasizes temporal experience that can disrupt linear narrative flow. This dual framework complements Böhme’s (2013) atmospheric generators and Barthes’s (1972 [1957]) semiotic layering, offering a more nuanced understanding of how dystopian cinema creates immersive atmospheres that operate across sensory, temporal, and symbolic dimensions.

Building on Barthes’s theory of myth (1972 [1957]), this study proposes that atmospheres, like language, are produced in at least two overlapping layers: first at the denotative level, and then at the connotative level. The denotative layer is directly tied to objects—such as spatial layouts, lighting, and material textures—while the connotative layer relates more to the subject, shaped by cultural memory, emotions, and ideology. Barthes thus provides a vital bridge, dissolving the traditional object–

subject dualism in atmosphere studies by translating physical spatial codes into culturally loaded meanings through a gradual process.

In cinema, this process becomes more complex. Film is a constructed representation of reality. When viewed, it becomes a representation of a representation, inherently imbued with connotative meaning from the outset. In dystopian cinema, where atmospheres are deliberately ideologically charged, this dynamic can extend to a third, meta-connotative layer, in which viewers interpret meanings that are themselves already interpretive. Thus, atmosphere in these films is not a static sensory background but an active, ongoing producer of meaning—creating not only meaning from form but also meaning from meaning in a recursive semiotic loop.

Cinema communicates through aesthetic codes, representing spaces rather than physical realities (Yacavone 2014). Dystopian cinema excels at this, using these codes to build dense, immersive aesthetics that vividly convey oppressive, alienating, or lonely atmospheres (King and Krzywinska 2000; Prakash 2010). These atmospheres are not intrinsic properties of space but experiential qualities arising from the interplay of sensory codes such as light, sound, color, and texture (Edensor and Sumartojo 2015). Viewers’ experience of harsh or disorienting settings in dystopian films is deeply shaped by these atmospheres and sensory codes.

According to Böhme (1993, 2017a), a film’s atmosphere plays a crucial role in shaping how viewers perceive both setting and emotional tone. Dystopian films often emphasize themes of control, surveillance, and dehumanization through oppressive atmospheres (Mursheeda 2021). Examining elements like architecture, lighting, and sensory design reveals how these components evoke emotional reactions and immerse viewers in dystopian worlds. Peter [GG1.1] [IE1.2] Zumthor’s (2006) work on the emotional power of architecture shows how materials, light, and texture can elicit varied emotions. His ideas resonate in dystopian cinema, where directors use architecture to amplify or distort reality, intensifying the dark narrative atmosphere. The aesthetic codes of spatial atmospheres translate into the visual language of film (Bruno 2002), forming a dystopian language that creates negatively charged moods within the narrative (Marks 2015).

Language itself is another code-based communication system—a complex symphony of feelings, words, and sounds that is both structured and fluid (Harris 1996). Given the shared code-based nature of atmosphere

¹ An expanded treatment of the subject is partially presented in a master’s thesis completed at the Department of Architecture, Yaşar University, titled *Atmosphere as Spatial Language: Semiotics of Atmospheric Aesthetics in Sci-Fi Dystopian Films* (Üge 2025).

and language, we can study these systems reciprocally, using insights from one to deepen understanding of the other. Semiotic theory, which analyzes signs, symbols, and meanings, enriches the interpretation of dystopian films (Katsaridou and Kostopoulou 2024). For example, Charles Sanders Peirce's (1931–1958) triadic model of the sign adds the “interpretant”—the meaning derived by the viewer—enhancing comprehension of dystopian worlds (Ehrat 2005). Ferdinand de Saussure's (1977 [1916]) signifier–signified relationship is arbitrary and shaped by social and cultural norms, influencing how audiences interpret cinematic signs. Michael A. K. Halliday's (1978) metafunction theory—ideational, interpersonal, and textual—offers a valuable framework to examine character dynamics, narrative structure, and thematic depth in dystopian cinema.

By integrating theories of atmosphere, dystopian cinema, language, and semiotics, this study argues that atmosphere in dystopian films functions as a distinct form of language. Films are emotional canvases, where dialogue, music, and sound converge to enrich storytelling (Clarke 2012). These films captivate audiences by blending silent atmospheric imagery and resonant sounds, creating a dynamic interplay of sight and sound (Newton 2015). This research analyzes Alex Proyas's *Dark City* (1998) through the lens of atmosphere as a language, exploring how architectural and atmospheric elements communicate meaning and evoke emotions. The study's framework centers on the audience's reception while examining the object of study—the perceived atmospheres—using Böhme's (2013) “atmosphere generators,” Halliday's (1978) metafunction theory, and Barthes's (1972 [1957]) semiotic layering. This integrative approach expands film theory and criticism by illuminating film as a complex communicative medium where atmospheric aesthetics and linguistic structures interact deeply.

2. A DIALOGUE OF FOUR: SPATIAL ATMOSPHERES, DYSTOPIA, LANGUAGE, AND SEMIOTIC LAYERING

2.1. Generators of Spatial Atmospheres

The experience of spatial atmosphere arises from a reciprocal relationship between the individual and the environment: as the visitor enters a space, the space simultaneously enters the visitor, suggesting a process of mutual influence (Pallasmaa 2014, 232). Böhme (1993) emphasizes that atmospheres are not merely personal sensations but can be collectively experienced. This means shared environments can evoke similar emotional responses among multiple individuals, creating a communal experience. He further develops this idea in *Architectural Atmospheres* (Böhme 2014), describing atmosphere as a shared aesthetic experience that oscillates between objective and subjective realms

and among different individuals. The components of a space's atmosphere contribute to a holistic experience, perceived through their collective presence rather than in isolation (Böhme 2017b). Therefore, atmosphere in architecture and urban settings is multifaceted, transcending the purely physical realm to function as a mode of collective communication.

Urban elements, through the design language of the built environment, continuously interact with individuals on a city-wide scale, eliciting emotional responses via sensory and cognitive experiences (Degen and Rose 2012). Within this framework, atmosphere is understood as the interplay between objects and subjects. Böhme's (2013, 27, 29, 31) concept of atmosphere as an “in-between” phenomenon provides the foundation for this relational understanding. Andreas Rauh's (2019) interpretation of atmosphere as a phenomenon where relationships can be “read” builds on this. Tonino Griffero's (2019) re-interpretation of the “felt-body,” inspired by Herman Schmitz (1969), further enriches this framework. The “felt-body” interacts with “affordances” (Griffero 2019, 2022)—similar to Böhme's (2013) “generators of atmosphere”—which convey emotionally charged messages. Griffero's (2016, 2019) emphasis on “quasi-things,” akin to Böhme's (2013) “non-thing-like” generators, highlights their significance in shaping urban atmospheric experience.

Thus, spatial atmosphere reflects a complex interaction between subjective experience and objective design (Weidinger 2018). Böhme's theory of the New Aesthetics (1993) provides a key framework, focusing on “felt spaces”—environments shaped by sensory inputs such as light, sound, and spatial layout that create distinct emotional ambiances (Böhme 1993, 2017a). While perception may vary among individuals, atmosphere is grounded in tangible components of architectural and urban environments (Gandy 2017). These “generators of atmosphere” operate across scales and are crucial to the sustainability and legibility of urban identity (Böhme 2014). Specifically, Böhme (1993, 27) defines atmosphere generators as “things,” “non-thing-like or non-corporeal” elements, “bodies,” and “movements suggested by architectural forms.” Understanding these components is essential, as this study uses Böhme's (2013) framework to analyze how cinematic language constructs represented space.

“Things,” rooted in phenomenology, emphasize “thingness”—an inherent quality revealed through human interaction that transcends mere materiality. This challenges viewing objects as passive. “Non-things” are immaterial spatial elements—like light, smell, and sound—that, despite lacking physical form, influence human experience and consciousness, demonstrating diverse ways people interact with space. “Bodies”

refer to human subjects inhabiting and perceiving space, but also functioning as elements within others' spatial experiences. This dual role—both experiencers and experienced—may be called “co-subjective” and distinguishes them from inanimate objects and passive observers (Hiçsönmezler 2023, 43–50). “Movements” are the content of physical spaces, constrained and defined by corporeal entities including architectural forms. Yet this relationship is reciprocal: spaces influence movement and are modified by it, especially in circulation design.

The assumption that physical presence is essential for spatial experience (as traditionally understood and by Böhme, 2013) is challenged by cinema's immersive power. Böhme's (2013) atmosphere generators offer a valuable lens here. In cinema, “things” become represented objects shaping atmosphere; “non-things” manifest as light, color, and sound, producing dominant aesthetic effects; “bodies” are characters embodying co-subjective experiences for audiences (Hiçsönmezler 2023); and “movements” arise through character actions. These elements together form a cinematic language of atmosphere that constructs and communicates the narrative (Ehrat 2005).

Beyond sensory orchestration, these generators also function as signifiers in a Barthesian sense—forms carrying connotative meanings that naturalize ideological narratives (Barthes 1972 [1957]). For example, in dystopian cinema, oppressive urban grids, recurring darkness, or persistent mechanical hums operate as myths embedding cultural anxieties and political critiques within atmospheric design. Thus, Böhme's (2013) sensory-spatial framework intersects with Barthes's (1972 [1957]) semiotics, revealing atmospheres as both felt spaces and cultural texts to be read. Consequently, atmosphere transcends the physical to play a vital role in shaping identity and mood, applicable across disciplines from urban planning to cinematography (Bergfelder et al. 2007). Cinematographic aesthetic codes differ from those of real-world urban spaces—often improvised out of necessity—as they are intentionally designed. Decoding these codes uncovers a language grounded in filmic atmosphere. Narrative elements further strengthen the connection between designed atmosphere (by filmmakers) and perceived atmosphere (by audiences). In dystopian narratives, this link is especially strong, as sharp aesthetic effects with shared emotional tones aid memorability and recall.

2.2. Components of Dystopian Design in Cinema

Filmmakers and urban planners share a fundamental objective: shaping environments that impact human experience. While filmmakers employ set design,

lighting, and cinematography to craft immersive narratives, urban planners manipulate spatial layout, lighting, and soundscapes to influence how people perceive and interact with physical spaces (Bergfelder et al. 2007). Both disciplines engage with sensory elements intentionally to evoke emotional and behavioral responses. Film, like urban design, transcends mere visual representation by constructing atmospheres that shape audience or user experience (Freitag et al. 2020). Each cinematic scene is meticulously designed to elicit specific reactions, paralleling how urban spaces shape behavior and identity formation (Silver and Clark 2016). Importantly, both use a shared semiotic language—combining design principles and narrative techniques—to communicate layered meanings through spatial atmosphere and storytelling. Dystopian cinema exemplifies this intersection by intensifying atmospheric elements to dramatize social and spatial conditions, providing a valuable lens to understand how constructed environments generate affective experiences that resonate with urban realities.

The term “dystopia” originates from the Greek words “*topos*/τόπος” (place) and “*dys*/δυσ” (bad), describing imagined societies characterized by adverse conditions such as oppression, deprivation, and despair (Claeys 2022, 53–64). Unlike utopias that envision idealized futures, dystopias function as critical warnings about the potential consequences of unchecked social, political, and economic developments (Madhusudana 2018). Common features of dystopian settings include authoritarian governance, pervasive surveillance, societal fragmentation, exploitative use of advanced technologies, political instability, totalitarian atmospheres, erosion of human dignity, and environmental degradation (Matarazzo 2023). Understanding these elements is essential, as dystopian narratives intensify atmospheric conditions to reflect and critique real-world spatial and social dynamics, linking directly to the study of constructed environments and their impact on human experience.

In dystopian settings, extreme control mechanisms suppress freedoms such as speech, individualism, and even independent thought. Power is maintained by governments or corporations through methods including punishment, propaganda, and pervasive surveillance, which enforce strict social conformity (Thuta 2023). This constant monitoring erodes privacy and trust, even within close personal relationships (Richard 2017). Additionally, pronounced social stratification divides privileged elites from impoverished masses, who struggle to meet basic needs and face severe repercussions for dissent (Merrifield 2000). Rather than serving as a means of liberation, technology becomes a tool for oppression and manipulation (Gruenwald 2013). These dystopian elements are deeply rooted

in historical contexts—for example, George Orwell's 1984 (1949) reflects anxieties about post-World War II authoritarianism (Bhatta 2025), while Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) critiques the conservative political climate of the 1980s (Weiss 2009). Recognizing these aspects highlights how dystopian narratives use intensified atmospheres to mirror and critique real social and spatial power structures, reinforcing their relevance to the study of constructed environments.

Totalitarianism, characterized by absolute government control, is a recurring theme in dystopian narratives (Pierson 2022). These stories critically examine the ethical dilemmas faced by individuals who resist such regimes, highlighting the tension between the dangers of rebellion and the pursuit of freedom. Characters often experience dehumanization, reduced to mechanistic roles that disrupt authentic relationships and underscore the struggle to preserve human dignity (Mette 2024). Moreover, environmental devastation frequently serves as a bleak backdrop, where ecological collapse, resource scarcity, and toxic environments contribute to a pervasive sense of psychological and existential despair (Vasso 2018). By intensifying these atmospheric elements, dystopian works provide a powerful framework to understand how constructed environments reflect and influence social and emotional realities.

Dystopian fiction's power lies in evoking strong emotions. Desolate settings, complex characters, and conflicts generate empathy, anger, despair, and sometimes hope (Claeys 2016). This emotional engagement deepens narrative impact and invites critical reflection on societal issues, reinforcing the genre's relevance today. This process aligns with Barthes's (1972 [1957]) semiotic framework, distinguishing denotative (literal) and connotative (cultural, emotional) layers of meaning. Atmospheres in dystopian cinema operate on at least these two intertwined levels: the denotative layer grounded in tangible visuals and sounds (urban decay, oppressive architecture), and the connotative layer where such elements evoke emotions like fear, control, or alienation. Barthes's (1972 [1957]) model moves beyond a rigid object–subject divide by presenting a gradual transition from sensory input to subjective interpretation, bridging cinematic space and viewer response.

In dystopian films, this is further complicated: the film is a constructed reality, and the viewer's reception becomes a representation of a representation. This amplifies connotative richness, allowing multiple layers of atmospheric meaning to emerge. Thus, atmospheres in dystopian cinema function as complex, multi-layered languages—denotation grounds perception,

while connotation deepens emotional and ideological resonance. Deleuze's (2019a, 2019b) movement-image and time-image concepts enrich this understanding by showing how dystopian cinema manipulates space and time to engage viewers cognitively and emotionally.

In dystopian narratives, the setting itself functions as a character, embodying societal and environmental deterioration (Klonowska, 2018). Desolate and degraded landscapes symbolize broader themes of decay and loss. Authoritarian governments, pervasive surveillance, and rigid social hierarchies cultivate a palpable atmosphere of fear and control. Within these oppressive environments, character archetypes serve as vital tools for world-building and narrative development (Vaitsas 2018). These archetypes reflect collective human anxieties and conflicts, intensifying the genre's unsettling mood (Rosenfeld 2020). By analyzing these archetypes, we can better understand dystopian storytelling as a powerful aesthetic language. This language is realized through meticulously crafted visual and auditory spatial elements that shape audience perception and construct the films' atmospheric qualities. Furthermore, narrative scenarios amplify and consolidate these sensory effects, positioning them as key generators of the perceived atmosphere.

2.3. Semiotics and Language in Film Design

Dystopian films communicate through a distinct design language based on a strong aesthetic code. This language is especially evident in spatial settings, where architectural arrangements convey themes like decay, resistance, and oppression. Semiotics plays a key role in decoding the symbolic meanings of these architectural elements (Kiessel and Stubbs 2023; Katsaridou and Kostopoulou 2024). Using Peirce's (1931–1958) triadic model—representamen, object, and interpretant—buildings, landscapes, and technologies become signs that represent ideas such as resistance, decay, or control (Ehrat 2005).

Building on Saussure's (1977[1916]) distinction between signifier and signified, Barthes (1972[1957]) extends semiotics to include how cultural myths and ideologies are embedded in everyday signs. In his two-level model, a denotative sign—such as a depiction of a crumbling cityscape—also functions at a connotative level, conveying broader ideological narratives about social collapse, authoritarian control, or rebellion. This is especially relevant in dystopian cinema, where spatial and architectural signs serve both as literal depictions and as carriers of cultural myths, or what Barthes (1972[1957], 114) calls “metalanguage.” Combining Barthes's (1972[1957]) approach with Peirce's (1931–1958) concept of the interpretant highlights not only how signs are understood but also how they become

naturalized within ideological frameworks, connecting to Halliday's (1978, 2004) functional view of meaning-making.

Halliday's (1978, 2004) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) offers a useful framework here. According to him, language has three primary metafunctions: "ideational," "interpersonal," and "textual" (Halliday 2004). The ideational function represents thought, expressing concepts, states, and ideas. The interpersonal function manages social relations through communication. The textual function organizes language grammatically to create cohesive and coherent texts, shaping the context within which meaning arises.

A deeper analysis reveals that the ideational metafunction consists of two sub-functions: experiential and logical (Halliday 2004). The experiential function represents the world of experience via participants, processes, and circumstances, while the logical function organizes these representations, establishing logical relationships between ideas and propositions. While the ideational function focuses on representing the world, the interpersonal (active) metafunction, according to Halliday (2004), highlights the dialogic nature of language. It examines how speakers and listeners (for example, writers and readers, filmmakers and audiences) engage in communication, creating and shaping social relationships through language. Halliday (2004) also introduces a third metafunction, the textual, which, while providing a base for the ideational and interpersonal functions, also possesses its own distinct character. This function is concerned with the intricate organization of language, the way it is structured to create cohesive and coherent texts, and in so doing, defines the (con)text within which meaning is made.

The connection between Halliday's SFL and design language has been explored in depth. Andrew Dong (2007, 2009) argues that language is not merely descriptive but actively shapes design. Drawing on Halliday (2004) and Halliday and Matthiessen (1999), Dong (2009) emphasizes how transitivity (part of the ideational function) and appraisal (part of the interpersonal function) are particularly useful for analyzing design. His transitivity model includes material, mental, behavioral, relational, and existential processes, while appraisal involves expressing evaluation, attitudes, and emotions, shaping interpersonal dynamics (Dong 2009).

The structure of this linguistic model by Halliday (2004) and especially these two sub-systems (transitivity and appraisal) by Dong (2009), is mirrored in design language. Specifically, the experiential sub-function of the ideational metafunction finds its counterpart in the designer's reflective process of sketching, where experiences and observations are translated into design

proposals. The material, mental, behavioral, relational, and existential dimensions of design reflect Dong's (2009) transitivity model. Furthermore, a designer's initial reflections are organized logically within the design proposal itself. Finally, this structured proposal must be effectively communicated, interpersonally, to a wider audience for their appraisal. Similarly, film viewing involves an active process of decoding the narrative. Audiences may interpret the film's coded messages (material, mental, behavioral, relational, and existential—transitivity) in relation to their prior experiences, thus creating a meaningful interpretation by logically (re)organizing the codes of the narrative. Audiences utilize these predominantly aesthetic and atmospheric codes for appraisal and to communicate the film's narrative structure, enabling others to construct comparable mental representations. At the (con)textual level, on the other hand, the design (con)text, or the project itself as text, serves as a manifestation of the designer's language, showcasing the organization of architectural elements into a meaningful whole. This suggests that Halliday's (2004) SFL framework and Dong's (2009) contributions to this model provide a valuable lens for understanding the design process—including a film design—from the initial reflective stages to interpersonal communication and the final artifact.

In this theoretical framework, this study proceeds from the premise that film atmosphere (and aesthetics) can be understood as a form of language. Halliday's (2004) SFL model informs the data collection and evaluation processes, while Barthes's (1972 [1957]) semiotic approach highlights how denotative and connotative meanings, as well as cultural myths, are embedded in the perceived cinematic signs. In parallel, Böhme's (2013) theory of atmosphere generators guides the analysis by linking aesthetic codes to the production of spatial experience. The dystopian film *Dark City* serves as a case study to enhance legibility and comprehension for research participants. The methodology, limitations, and analysis are detailed in the following section.

3. DECODING DARK CITY'S DYSTOPIAN ATMOSPHERIC LANGUAGE

This research investigates the dystopian world of *Dark City* as a compelling case study. The film constructs a complex spatial and atmospheric framework that profoundly shapes its characters' movements, existential experiences, and perceptions of reality. Architecture students, as study participants and audiences, engaged in a workshop involving sketching exercises and group discussions, enabling the collection of both visual and verbal data. In this context, the study explored how students' analyses—through visual representations (ideational function) and verbal descriptions

(interpersonal function)—reflect the film’s architectural and atmospheric design, its dystopian urban vision, and surrealist influences. The sample consisted of 20 architecture students in their second, third, and fourth years. First-year students were excluded due to potential conceptual challenges in understanding spatial atmosphere codes expressed through design terminology. Instead of working from the film’s original script or screenplay, participants based their analyses entirely on their sensory and interpretive engagement with the Turkish-subtitled film itself, followed by reflective sketching and group discussion. This approach ensured that both visual and verbal data captured direct audience perceptions and interpretations formed through cinematic experience, focusing on experiential and interpretive processes rather than textual or script-based narrative analysis.

To systematically and comparatively track possible differences (and similarities) in audience expressions, data were collected and analyzed according to Halliday’s (1978) SFL framework, dividing the process into three main groups: (1) ideational (including experiential and logical subcategories) for data collection and evaluation, (2) interpersonal for data collection and evaluation, and (3) (con)textual for data evaluation. In the first phase, selected participants were given the opportunity to watch and review the film. This was followed by ideational sketches and descriptions (experiential and logical) focused on specific themes and scenes during a one-day workshop. After the communal viewing, participants analyzed particular scenes that evoked strong memories and atmospheric impressions. In this ideational phase, they worked individually using either digital or hand-drawing techniques to create sketches. In addition to visual sketching, participants were encouraged to verbally articulate the auditory qualities they remembered from specific scenes, including silence, ambient sound, mechanical noise, and music, and to relate these to the perceived atmosphere. At the interpersonal level, participants engaged in a facilitated group discussion, responding to semi-structured questions that encouraged sharing reflections, with each response opening new avenues for exploring the film’s atmospheric design language.

Böhme’s (2013) atmosphere generators—namely “bodies,” “things,” “non-things,” and “movements”—formed the foundational framework for analyzing the emotional impact of dystopian cinematic settings. The analysis focused on how each element contributed to the film’s atmosphere and emotional tone by examining audience sketches (ideational function) and verbal expressions (interpersonal function) collected during the workshop. These analyses revealed the need to expand Böhme’s (2013) original framework by adding three new categories: (1) time, (2) narration, and (3)

perception of space and control. The data capturing these observations were then (con)textualized following Halliday’s (2004) textual metafunction within the SFL framework. Halliday’s (2004) textual metafunction facilitated interpreting how the film’s aesthetic codes—from architectural design to lighting, sound, and camera movement—combine to produce meaning. This (con)textualization linked these specific aesthetic choices to broader filmic themes such as control, oppression, and resistance, ultimately constructing a richer understanding of the film’s particular dystopian (con)textual milieu and its connotative impact on the viewer as conceptualized in Barthes’s (1972 [1957]) semiotic model.

Thus, in addition to Halliday’s (2004) textual metafunction, the analytical framework was enriched by Barthes’s (1972 [1957]) semiotic theory, particularly his distinction between denotation and connotation. Within this framework, Böhme’s (2013) original generators—“bodies,” “things,” “non-things,” and “movements”—were categorized at the denotative level, representing the perceivable, material elements of the cinematic environment. The newly proposed time category also operates at the denotative level, given its immediate perceptual basis. In contrast, narration and perception of space and control were positioned at the connotative level, emerging from interpretive processes that connect and unify literal cinematic elements with broader ideological, thematic, and cultural meanings. This dual-level categorization allowed a more precise mapping of how dystopian atmospheres are both materially constructed and culturally interpreted. Furthermore, this understanding is deepened by Deleuze’s (2019a, 2019b) concepts of the time-image and movement-image, which emphasize the role of cinematic temporality (time category) and spatiality (perception of space and control category) in shaping perceptual and affective experiences.

Using this expanded and layered framework—integrating Böhme’s (2013) atmosphere generators, the new categories, Barthes’s (1972 [1957]) denotation/connotation distinction, and Halliday’s (2004) metafunctions of language—the study combines quantitative, qualitative, and interpretive analyses of space and atmosphere representation. Visual data from audience sketches (ideational phase) and verbal data mainly from group discussions (interpersonal phase) were examined not only for their direct, denotative references to cinematic elements but also for their connotative readings linking these elements to themes such as control, oppression, and resistance in a (con)textual manner. Quantitative analyses of visual and verbal data are presented in Tables 1 and 2, while qualitative interpretations, due to their complexity, are discussed narratively. Finally, the (con)textual

metafunction as articulated by Halliday (1978, 2004) was explored through interpretive content analysis of the synthesized data. This tripartite approach—further layered with semiotic distinction—offers a nuanced comparative evaluation of how dystopian space, confined environments, and shifting structures are designed, narrated, and perceived through both language and imagery.

The quantitative analysis of visual (ideational phase) and verbal (interpersonal phase) data (Tables 1 and 2) reveals distinct patterns in the distribution of atmosphere generators identified by participants. In the visual data, denotative elements are prominent: “things” (~ 25.3%) and “bodies” (~27.8%) rank highest, followed by “non-things” (~20.1%). This indicates that participants primarily focus on tangible, sensory

Participants	Denotative														Connotative (and Denotative in the 2nd level)				
	Böhme's Framework												Proposed		Proposed				
	Things		Non-things			Bodies			Movements			Time		Narration		Perception of Space and Control			
	Architecture, Urban Design, Built Environment, Space	Objects	Lighting and Shadow	Color and Visual Texture	Sound	Characters	Gestures	Isolation	Shifting Space	Flow of People	Repetitive Motion	Loops	Repetition	Storytelling	World-building	Surveillance	Confined Spaces	Identity	Disorientation
1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	0	0	0
3	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
4	2	0	2	0	0	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
5	0	1	2	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	0	0	0
6	6	0	1	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
7	1	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
9	1	1	2	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
11	4	0	2	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13	5	0	2	2	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0
14	2	2	3	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	0	0
15	3	1	0	2	0	2	2	2	2	1	3	1	2	2	2	0	0	2	1
16	0	0	1	2	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
17	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0
18	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2
19	1	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	2	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
20	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Total:	58	21	23	20	0	38	34	15	10	1	3	5	3	18	9	14	11	10	19
	79		63			87			14			8		27		54			
	~25.3%		~20.1%			~27.8%			~4.4%			~2.5%		~8.6%		~17.3%			

Table 1. Quantitative analysis of visual data (ideational phase), detailing the frequency of mentions of atmosphere generators in the film (the highest three scores are underlined).

Participants	Denotative													Connotative (and Denotative in the 2nd level)					
	Böhme's Framework											Proposed		Proposed					
	Things		Non-things			Bodies			Movements			Time		Narration		Perception of Space and Control			
	Architecture, Urban Design, Built Environment, Space	Objects	Lighting and Shadow	Color and Visual Texture	Sound	Characters	Gestures	Isolation	Shifting Space	Flow of People	Repetitive Motion	Loops	Repetition	Storytelling	World-building	Surveillance	Confined Spaces	Identity	Disorientation
1	5	3	5	0	0	4	2	0	0	0	0	5	0	2	3	0	3	0	2
2	6	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	4	3	3	1	3
3	4	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	2	0	2	3	3	2	3	0
4	4	0	5	1	0	3	1	0	2	0	0	2	0	3	4	1	1	1	1
5	3	2	4	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	1	0	1	0	2
6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
7	2	6	4	4	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	4	0	1	1	0	3	0	0
8	1	0	3	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
9	13	9	8	0	5	0	3	3	1	0	0	1	0	2	4	5	5	1	2
10	22	0	6	0	5	5	2	6	0	0	1	0	0	9	8	1	11	5	0
11	3	3	3	0	0	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	0	1	1	0
12	6	7	9	4	0	1	1	0	4	0	0	2	0	0	4	4	4	2	2
13	2	0	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	1	0	2	0
14	5	1	1	0	0	7	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	1	0	0
15	7	2	7	0	0	2	1	0	4	1	0	1	0	4	2	5	3	5	3
16	7	2	5	0	2	2	4	5	4	0	1	2	2	5	6	3	3	3	6
17	1	1	3	0	0	1	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	3	3	1	0	1
18	5	2	0	0	0	2	2	1	2	0	0	0	0	2	2	2	1	2	3
19	4	0	2	4	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1
20	4	3	1	3	2	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	2	3	1	0	1
Total:	104	41	75	19	14	34	22	16	31	1	2	24	2	40	53	35	45	27	27
	145		159			72			34			26		93		134			
	~23.6%		~25.9%			~11.7%			~5.5%			~4.2%		~15.1%		~21.8%			

Table 2. Quantitative analysis of verbal data (interpersonal phase), detailing the frequency of mentions of atmosphere generators in the film (the highest three scores are underlined).

features when representing atmospheric qualities in sketches. In contrast, verbal data show a stronger presence of a connotative category, with perception of space and control (~21.8%) standing out alongside notable mentions of denotative “non-things” (~25.9%) and “things” (~23.6%). These results point to a shift from concrete, denotative perceptions in the visual phase toward more interpretive, socially and emotionally

nuanced meanings in the verbal phase. This pattern reflects Barthes’s (1972 [1957]) distinction between denotation and connotation, where immediate sensory impressions develop into layered meanings through language and interaction. Moreover, the findings suggest that this process does not end with a single connotative layer: some verbal interpretations reveal a second, and occasionally even a third, level

of connotation, in which earlier connotative readings themselves become the basis for more abstract, symbolic, or ideological associations. Additionally, the proposed denotative category time (~2.5% visual, ~4.2% verbal) and the connotative categories narration (~8.6% visual, ~15.1% verbal) and perception of space and control (~17.3% visual, ~21.8% verbal) highlight the evolving, multidimensional nature of atmospheric experience. They show how participants move from recording immediate sensory input to constructing increasingly complex narrative, affective, and ideological interpretations.

Consistent with the ideational metafunction's focus on how participants conceptualize and reflect on the built environment, movement, and spatial perception. The analysis shows that audiences' ideational sketches (experiential)—along with brief descriptions and keywords (logical)—primarily reflect Böhme's (2013) categories of "things," "non-things," and "bodies." In Barthes's (1972 [1957]) terms, these correspond to the denotative level of meaning, representing the immediate, perceptual content of the cinematic environment. The interpersonal metafunction, which concerns the impact of the city's spatial configurations on human relationships, agency, and emotional engagement as expressed through verbal descriptions, is clearly illustrated by the newly proposed category perception of space and control. Positioned at the connotative level, this category generates interpretive and ideological meanings. The textual metafunction, which relates to participants' contextualization of the film's spatial dynamics within broader thematic, world-building, and narrative frameworks, serves as an overarching analytical lens. This metafunction is primarily informed by data within the newly proposed time (denotative) and narration (connotative) categories, especially in verbal expressions. By interpreting audience sketches and verbal descriptions through the combined framework of Böhme's (2013) atmosphere generators, the new categories, Barthes's (1972 [1957]) denotation/connotation distinction, and Halliday's (1978, 2004) SFL metafunctions, the analysis provides a layered understanding of how dystopian atmospheres are both materially constructed and culturally interpreted. The detailed findings are presented below.

3.1. "Things": Objects and the Built Environment

The "things," especially the built environment in *Dark City*, operate as a controllable, mutable, and oppressive force, influencing both character behaviors and audience interpretations. Audience sketches consistently depict dense and vertically layered urban forms with narrow, maze-like passageways, high-rise blocks, and enclosed courtyards. Architectural elements include repetitive modular façades, massive geometric volumes, stepped

building profiles, and angular silhouettes. Several sketches integrate retro-futuristic skylines with floating or suspended cityscapes, while others convey rigid, fortress-like massing (Figure 1). Across all drawings, the compositions emphasize spatial enclosure and vertical dominance, reinforcing an atmosphere of confinement and monumental scale. These visual elements align with Barthes's (1972 [1957]) denotative level of meaning, representing the immediate, perceptible aspects of the cinematic environment. This denotative content is corroborated by verbal descriptions emphasizing the city's rigidity, mechanical reconfiguration, and psychological confinement. Quantitatively, "things" accounted for about 25.3% of ideational sketches—the second highest category frequency (see Table 1)—characterized by repetitive urban structures, narrow corridors, decaying and oppressive architecture, including extremely tall buildings, steel frameworks, and dystopian urbanization.

Qualitatively, however, interpersonal descriptions often transcend the denotative to enter the connotative domain, where these architectural elements are interpreted as symbols of alienation and control. Descriptions such as "restrictive," "claustrophobic," "suffocating spaces," and "sterile imposing spaces" (representing 23.6% of interpersonal descriptions; see Table 2) evoke cultural and ideological readings consistent with Barthes's (1972 [1957]) connotative level. Terms like "monotonous structures," "abandoned places," and "dark metallic interiors" further reinforce the city's oppressive atmosphere. Mechanisms including tuning devices, surveillance technology, and shifting architecture function as instruments of control, manipulation, and psychological entrapment. While the ideational phase sketches highlight the importance of "things" as denotative markers, the interpersonal phase reveals how these same elements are culturally coded and ideologically charged, reflecting a layered understanding of dystopian atmosphere that integrates both material presence and symbolic meaning.

3.2. "Non-Things": Atmosphere and Sensory Manipulation

The oppressive atmosphere of *Dark City* is carefully constructed, extending beyond tangible structures to include the intangible realms of light, shadow, sound, and sensory distortions. From a Barthesian perspective, these "non-things" operate on two interconnected semiotic levels. At the denotative level, audience sketches and verbal descriptions capture the immediate, perceptible qualities of lighting, color, texture, and sound—sensory elements that directly shape the film's atmospheric field. Quantitatively, "non-things" appeared in approximately 20.1% of ideational sketches—the third most frequent category—and

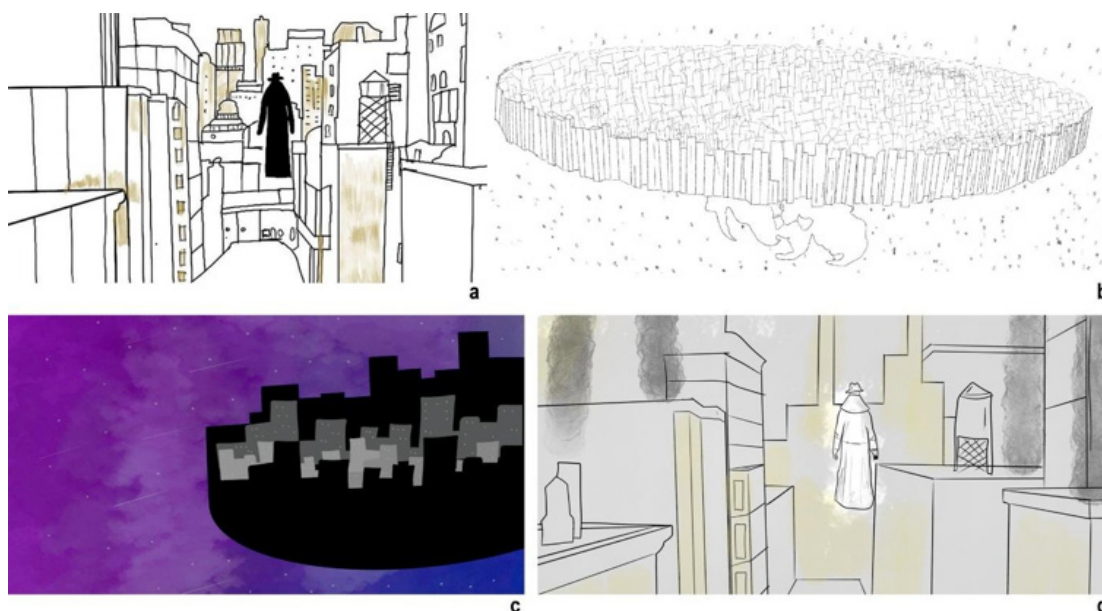


Figure 1. Audience sketches depicting “things” in the film (a, b: Participant 2; c, d: Participant 17).

in 25.9% of interpersonal descriptions, the highest among all categories (see Tables 1 and 2), highlighting the significant role of these immaterial elements in audience perception.

As participants engaged interpretively, these sensory features gained connotative meanings, symbolizing control, disorientation, and alienation. While “non-things” were mainly documented in the ideational sketches and reinforced through verbal descriptions, they were often understood as inherently connected to “things,” particularly within the built environment, layering symbolic meaning atop their material counterparts. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses revealed several sub-categories:

Lighting and Shadows: High-contrast lighting with low ambient illumination, dim artificial lights, flickering

effects, and deep shadows featured in 82% of student sketches (ideational; Figure 2). Denotatively, these describe the film’s visual style; connotatively, verbal responses such as “darkness is used as a method of control,” “the city is perpetually nighttime,” and “absence of natural light adds to the disorienting environment” position these features as signs of systemic oppression and temporal dislocation.

Color and Texture: Quantitative analysis showed that 68% of sketches featured muted monochrome tones—such as green, gray, black, blue, and brown—denotatively reflecting the film’s color palette (see Figures 2 and 3). Connotatively, these colors and textures—metallic, reflective, wet surfaces, cold blues and grays, and gritty urban decay—signify emotional detachment, alienation, and the erosion of human warmth.

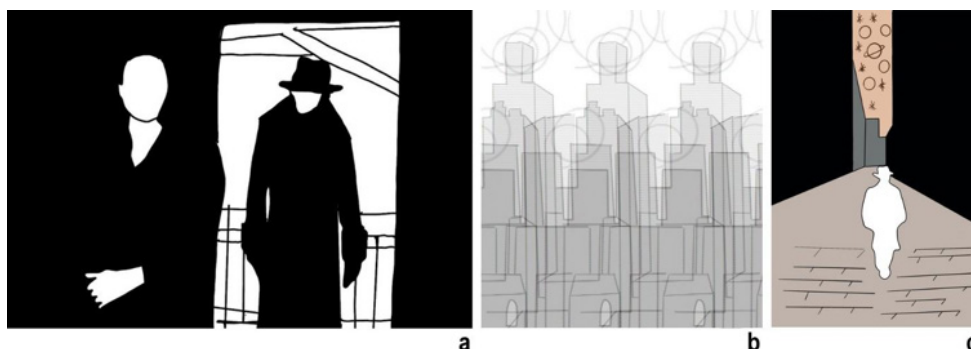


Figure 2. Audience sketches depicting lighting and shadow effects as “non-things” in the film (a: Participant 2; b: Participant 11; c: Participant 16).

Sound and Auditory Atmosphere: At the denotative level, the auditory landscape is characterized by descriptions of “absence of natural sounds,” “echo chambers,” “reverberation effects,” and “eerie ambient noises” in the interpersonal data. Connotatively, verbal annotations such as “silence,” “low-frequency hums,” and “artificial sounds” function as metaphors for psychological confinement and the mechanization of human experience, reinforcing the city’s oppressive control over its inhabitants.

Although sound was explicitly included as a subcategory under “non-things” within Böhme’s (2013) framework and participants were not restricted from representing or describing auditory elements, the quantitative results reveal a notable asymmetry between visual and verbal data. In the ideational phase, sound-related representations were almost entirely absent from the sketches (Table 1), whereas in the interpersonal phase, sound emerged—albeit in limited frequency—as a meaningful atmospheric component (Table 2). This discrepancy is not interpreted as a methodological limitation, but rather as an indicator of the representational nature of sound itself. Unlike light, color, or spatial form, sound resists direct visual translation and instead manifests more readily through verbal articulation, metaphor, and affective description. In this sense, sound operates as a paradigmatic “non-thing”: experientially powerful yet visually elusive.

At the denotative level, participants referred to auditory elements such as silence, ambient noises, echoes, reverberation, mechanical voices, and the contrast between underground sounds and aquatic environments. These descriptions emphasize the material qualities of sound—its presence, absence, and acoustic behavior within space. At the connotative level, however, sound was repeatedly associated with emotional states and atmospheric meanings such as loneliness, tension, isolation, oppression, and, in certain scenes, temporary relief or calm. Silence, in particular, was frequently described as more unsettling and emotionally charged than sound itself. Participants noted that silence intensified feelings of loneliness, amplified internal conflict, and heightened tension when combined with dark or shifting environments. In scenes involving spatial transformation, silence was perceived as an auditory extension of control, reinforcing the instability of both space and identity.

Acoustic effects such as echo and reverberation further contributed to the perception of vast yet empty spaces, abandoned interiors, and oppressive confinement. These effects were often described as “strengthening” the emotional impact of scenes by mirroring spatial emptiness and human isolation. Conversely, certain soundscapes—such as water echoes in the thermal pool

or the sound of the sea—were associated with peace and momentary emotional release, demonstrating sound’s capacity to modulate atmosphere rather than uniformly intensify dystopian tension. Within Barthes’s (1972 [1957]) semiotic framework, these auditory elements operate at both denotative and connotative levels: while sound and silence are first perceived as sensory conditions, they rapidly acquire symbolic meanings related to control, alienation, and temporal suspension. Furthermore, when considered alongside Deleuze’s (2019a, 2019b) concept of the time-image, the continuity of ambient sound and the strategic use of silence contribute to the experience of suspended time, reinforcing the film’s cyclical and non-linear temporality. Thus, although sound remains visually underrepresented, its atmospheric function is central to the verbal construction of meaning and plays a crucial role in the film’s dystopian language.

3.3. “Bodies”: Character Presence and Isolation

The spatial arrangements of “bodies” in *Dark City* are carefully designed to express themes of fragmented identity, psychological disorientation, and pervasive loss of autonomy. From a Barthesian semiotic perspective, these bodily configurations operate on two interconnected levels. At the denotative level, audience sketches and verbal descriptions capture the visible placement of characters within space—such as enclosed rooms, labyrinthine corridors, rigid architectural constraints, and patterned movements through the city. At the connotative level, these configurations function as signs of existential vulnerability, systemic control, and the fragility of selfhood under oppressive spatial regimes.

Quantitatively, the “bodies” category comprised roughly 27.8% of sketches (ideational)—the highest proportion—and 11.7% of verbal descriptions (interpersonal) (see Tables 1 and 2), showing that physical presence and spatial positioning strongly influenced audience perception. This prominence is reflected across both ideational and interpersonal phases, with the following sub-themes emerging:

Characters and Gestures: Denotatively, sketches commonly show characters navigating disorienting corridors, being surveilled, or trapped in confined spaces. Connotatively, verbal accounts such as “being followed,” “wandering aimlessly,” “restricted movement,” and “trapped in an artificial space” transform these visuals into signs of helplessness, loss of agency, and enforced passivity. The contrast between the fluid, floating movements of the Strangers and the erratic, uncertain navigation of the humans carries symbolic weight, signifying an absolute hierarchy of control, where movement itself becomes a metaphor

for autonomy—or its absence. In Figure 3a, a participant emphasized the bodily vulnerability of John Murdoch confronting manipulation, describing how even gestures and movements became scripted within the city's oppressive system. In Figure 3b, the Strangers are shown extracting memories, underscoring the fragility of human bodies as passive recipients of imposed identities.

Isolation and Oppression: Denotatively, sketches often depict solitary figures dwarfed by vast architectural forms, while 70% of verbal responses (interpersonal) link these images to the city's "mutable architecture." Connotatively, these lone bodies symbolize alienation, the erasure of individuality, and emotional severance from social ties. The scarcity of open communal spaces and the city's relentless transformation underscore identity as unstable, malleable, and ultimately expendable—effects achieved through deliberate spatial oppression. This was reinforced in Figure 3c,

where the figure of the Stranger looms large above the city, visually dominating the human presence below and signifying systemic control. Audience reflections add further nuance: in Figure 3d, one noted, "we realized that everything is a lie," while Figure 3e underscored "how far the Strangers can go." In Figure 3f, another described the moment of breaking through the Shell Beach wall as "one of the scenes that healed me the most." In Figure 3g, the oppressive use of artificial lighting and constant "tuning" was interpreted as stripping bodies of autonomy, while in Figure 3h the metaphor "John Murdoch = Fish" encapsulated bodily fragility and eventual liberation, with the fish's release mirroring Murdoch's own escape into the ocean.

3.4. Movement: Spatial Shifts and Repetitive Motion

In *Dark City*, the transformation of space functions not just as a backdrop but as a pivotal narrative mechanism, where architecture transcends static form to become a living, dynamic force actively shaping

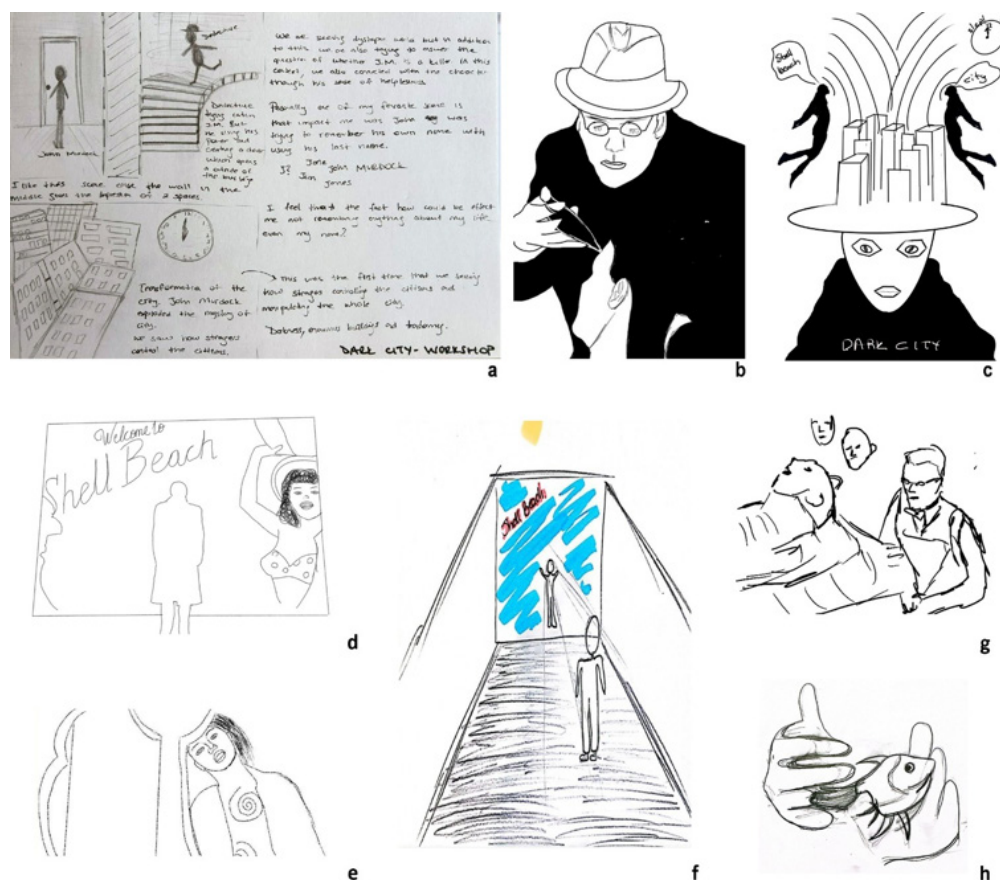


Figure 3. Audience sketches depicting gestures and movements of "bodies" in the film (a: Participant 14; b: Participant 2; c: Participant 16; d-e: Participant 15; f: Participant 5; g: Participant 12; h: Participant 1).

characters' realities. Applying Barthes's (1972[1957]) semiotic framework, "movement" operates on two interconnected levels. At the denotative level, audience sketches and verbal descriptions capture observable spatial phenomena such as shifting buildings, rearranging streets, synchronized crowds, and cyclical action patterns. At the connotative level, these movements symbolize deeper thematic concerns: manipulation of identity, erosion of free will, and the Strangers' omnipotent orchestration of reality.

Interpersonal discussions primarily revealed the "movement" category, with supporting quantitative data showing about 4.4% of sketches (ideational) and 5.5% of verbal descriptions (interpersonal) (see Tables 1 and 2). This category comprises three interconnected sub-themes:

Shifting Space: Denotatively, audience sketches depict architectural distortions, unstable horizons, and continuously reconfigured streetscapes. Connotatively, verbal descriptors such as "spatial instability," "disorientation," and "city's transformation into a labyrinth" render these images as signs of lost autonomy and systemic control. This spatial instability metaphorically reflects fractured identities and the Strangers' total dominion over the city's spatial and psychological realms. Audience sketches such as Figure 1a and 1d depict labyrinthine streetscapes and distorted architectural perspectives, visually evoking the film's shifting, unstable spaces and the resulting disorientation. Similarly, Figure 1b presents the city as a single, monolithic structure suspended in space, suggesting large-scale spatial reconfiguration and the cyclical transformation of the urban fabric. Figure 3c illustrates "shifting space" through the depiction of the city as an extension of the human mind, symbolizing spatial instability. The distorted perspective of the city and the figures rising above it reflect the loss of autonomy and the city's transformative power over individuals. Therefore, these images visually encode the "shifting space" sub-theme, foregrounding instability as both a physical phenomenon and a metaphor for systemic control.

Flow of People: At the denotative level, audiences describe characters as "wandering aimlessly," "following dictated paths," or forming "eerie, synchronized crowds." Connotatively, these regulated movements signify the stripping of agency, portraying humans as components in a choreographed system designed to suppress individuality. This directed flow reinforces the city's role as an instrument of domination, based on sketch annotations rather than purely visual data.

Repetitive Motion: Denotatively, audiences note cyclical repetitions of events and recurring spatial reshaping.

Connotatively, this repetition functions as an existential trap, where characters suffer "loss of orientation and identity" and escalating "psychological turmoil." The endless loop serves as a metaphor for inescapable oppression, emphasizing the film's focus on manipulation and the futile quest for self-definition within an artificial environment. Figure 2b vividly encapsulates the theme of "repetitive motion" through its layered architectural silhouettes and overlapping translucent forms. This visual layering not only suggests the city's ongoing process of cyclical reconstruction but also evokes a sense of mechanical rhythm and inevitability. On a denotative level, the repeated architectural patterns imply a continuous, almost automated reshaping of urban space. Connotatively, this creates an atmosphere of entrapment within an "existential loop," reflecting the characters' lack of agency amid systemic forces that impose relentless transformation.

3.5. Time: Loops and Repetitive Chronology

In *Dark City*, time manipulation functions both as a narrative device and as a symbolic framework to explore themes of control, disorientation, and unstable identity. The film's perpetual night—lacking natural temporal progression—acts as a powerful metaphor for existential entrapment within a carefully engineered reality. This deliberate removal of diurnal cycles eliminates temporal reference points, preventing characters from situating themselves within a coherent chronology. The absence of such temporal markers reinforces the sense that their world is an artificial construct, designed to perpetuate confusion and subjugation.

The recurring use of time loops and repetitive chronology intensifies this destabilizing effect, producing a cyclical temporality that mirrors the characters' internal fragmentation. Quantitatively, this category appeared in only 2.5% of sketches (ideational) and 4.2% of verbal descriptions (interpersonal) (see Tables 1 and 2), making it the least frequently represented theme both visually and verbally. Notably, the data gathered under this "time" category remain primarily at the denotative level, reflecting literal temporal observations rather than extended connotative meanings. However, when present, ideational sketches often illustrated cyclical spatial restructurings—suggestive of ongoing identity erasure and rewriting—while verbal responses frequently used terms such as "eternal night," "time resets," and "timelessness" to describe the city's manipulated temporality.

Through Barthes's (1972 [1957]) semiotic framework, the perpetual night operates as a mythic signifier: a secondary level of meaning where "darkness" transcends its literal absence of light to symbolize total epistemological uncertainty and the impossibility of

historical continuity. Furthermore, the manipulation of time is reinforced not only visually through perpetual night but also aurally through the continuity of ambient soundscapes, where the absence of rhythmic variation mirrors the suspension of chronological progression. The repetition of these temporal motifs across categories contributes to the film's overarching (con)textual architecture, where narrative, spatial, and emotional disorientation converge to construct a closed system of control.

3.6. Narration: Architecture as a Storytelling Mechanism

Dark City employs architecture as a potent narrative device, actively shaping the storyline while serving as a metaphor for the characters' psychological entrapment. The contrast between urban confinement and the illusory freedom represented by Shell Beach underscores a false sense of escape, reinforcing the film's overarching theme of a fabricated reality. Within Barthes's (1972 [1957]) semiotic framework, these architectural elements function as mythic signifiers, where the built environment transcends its literal, denotative role as "city" to assume connotative meanings linked to control, alienation, and identity manipulation.

The film's architectural critique of technological overdependence, paired with its dystopian portrayal of urban alienation, highlights spatial manipulation as a central narrative mechanism. Architecture thus becomes an active narrative agent, simultaneously constructing the visible world and encoding ideological messages concerning autonomy, oppression, and the precariousness of reality. These thematic expressions appeared in approximately 15.1% of audience verbal descriptions during the interpersonal phase and 8.6%

of their sketches in the ideational phase (Figure 4; see Tables 1 and 2).

The interpersonal data, serving as the primary analytical source, featured recurring concepts such as "free will," "mind game," "surveillance," "futuristic elements," "societal fears," "resistance," "oppression and control," "ominous darkness," and "dreamlike atmosphere." Collectively, these motifs contribute to the film's (con)textual spatial atmosphere, enriching its complex narrative fabric.

In this sense, narration emerges primarily as a connotative category nourished by all denotative categories, yet its substance is drawn more heavily from verbal accounts, where language transforms architectural settings into carriers of myth and ideology.

3.7. Perception of Space and Control: Surveillance and Disorientation

In Dark City, space functions not simply as a physical setting but as an active agent of surveillance and manipulation. Through Barthes's (1972 [1957]) semiotic framework, this category can be understood on two interconnected levels. At the denotative level, audience sketches and verbal descriptions register tangible spatial features—hidden vantage points, narrow alleyways, shifting landmarks, and labyrinthine corridors—that overlap with elements classified under the "things" category. At the connotative level, these spatial elements symbolize the weaponization of architecture as a tool of control, representing the erosion of personal agency, identity instability, and the pervasive dominance of unseen forces, thus constituting the connotative dimension of the perception of space and control category.

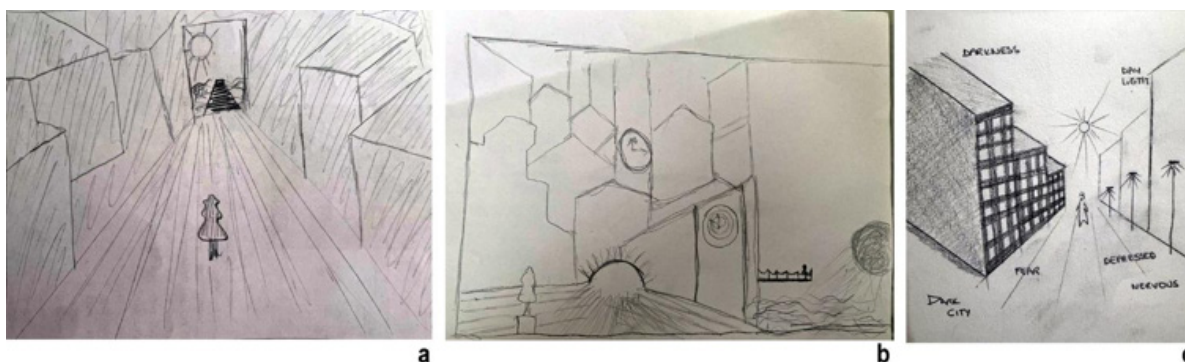


Figure 4. Audience sketches depicting the pivotal role of architecture in driving shifts in the film's "narration" (a: Participant 9; b: Participant 7; c: Participant 16).

Quantitatively, this category accounts for approximately 17.3% of sketches (ideational) and 21.8% of verbal descriptions (interpersonal), ranking third in prominence (see Tables 1 and 2). Three interrelated sub-themes articulate this category:

Surveillance: Denotatively, audience data (ideational) especially in the “things” category depict shadowed streets, towering structures, and elevated vantage points implying constant observation. Interpersonal verbal responses include phrases such as “hidden observers,” “feeling of being watched,” and “panoptic control.” Connotatively, these signs generate a sense of omnipresent authority where architecture functions as a disciplinary mechanism—aligning with Michel Foucault’s (2012) concept of the panopticon as a metaphor for systemic power.

Confined Spaces and Identity: At the denotative level and again in the “things” category, sketches illustrate cramped interiors, oppressive high-rises, and convoluted corridors. Connotatively, audience descriptions frame these as metaphors for “identity manipulation,” “loss of autonomy,” and “fabricated memories.” Spatial confinement operates not only physically but psychologically, acting as a prison that shapes thought, memory, and selfhood, reinforcing the film’s theme of domination through design.

Disorientation: Denotatively in the “things” category, participants note “shifting architecture,” “repetitive structures,” and “vanishing landmarks” that hinder navigation. Connotatively, these features manifest as existential dislocation, with spatial fragmentation mirroring identity fragmentation. The instability of the environment metaphorically reflects the instability of the self, deepening the film’s exploration of uncertainty, alienation, and the dismantling of agency under total control.

Ultimately, the perception of space and control emerges entirely at the connotative level, drawing its substance mainly from denotative “things” (mainly in verbal accounts) that are reinterpreted as signs of systemic domination.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the atmospheric design of *Dark City* functions as a sophisticated language, effectively conveying themes of control, isolation, and existential anxiety. Through a meticulous analysis of architectural representations, sensory manipulations, and narrative structures, the study has revealed how the film’s atmosphere acts as a potent communication tool, transcending mere visual spectacle to become a fundamental component of

the film’s thematic articulation. The integration of Böhme’s (2013) atmosphere generators with Halliday’s (1978, 2004) metafunctional theory and Barthes’s (1972 [1957]) semiotics has provided a robust and adaptable framework for decoding the film’s complex spatial language, effectively bridging the gap between experiential aesthetics and linguistic analysis.

An original contribution of this research was the identification of a significant correlation between data collection and evaluation phases and the manifestation of Böhme’s (2013) categories. Specifically, ideational sketches served as the primary medium for representing “things,” “non-things,” and “bodies,” while the more nuanced categories of “movements” and a newly proposed construct, perception of space and control, were predominantly articulated through verbal expressions during the interpersonal phase. Keywords such as “oppression,” “surveillance,” “fear,” “control,” “resistance,” “eternal repetition/loops,” and “darkness,” repeatedly identified in both ideational and interpersonal data and clearly revealed in the newly proposed atmosphere generators, time and narration, significantly contribute to the understanding of the film’s atmospheric language through the (con) textual metafunction in Halliday’s (2004) sense. This contribution is further strengthened by the film’s architectural design, which visually reinforces these thematic elements.

Furthermore, when viewed through Barthes’s (1972 [1957]) two-tiered semiotic framework, the distribution of data across the two collection phases reveals a meaningful denotative–connotative dynamic. The predominantly visual data from the ideational phase (sketches) tended to operate on a denotative level, capturing directly perceivable spatial and architectural elements as identified in Böhme’s (2013) categories (“things,” “non-things,” “bodies,” and “movements”) as well as the temporal construct of time. In contrast, the verbal data from the ideational and mainly interpersonal phases (annotations and descriptions) more frequently engaged with connotative meanings, articulating abstract concepts such as perception of space and control and the narrative dimension, where architecture becomes a metaphor for ideological and psychological forces. In this respect, students’ sketches communicated denotative layers through depictions of “things,” “bodies,” and “movements”—often enriched by light and color (“nonthings”)—whereas the narration of the story and the articulation of the perceived message predominantly emerged through verbal or written accounts at the connotative level. This pattern suggests that denotative categories serve as the generative basis for connotative interpretations, with visual observations informing and shaping verbal articulations.

On the other hand, the near absence of sound-related (“non-things”) visual data in the ideational phase, contrasted with its emergence in verbal descriptions, highlights the modality-specific nature of atmospheric perception and supports the distinction between visual denotation and verbally articulated connotation. Rather than undermining the denotative–connotative sequence, this asymmetry clarifies its limits: while visual denotative elements often function as the generative basis for connotative interpretations, auditory atmosphere tends to bypass visual denotation altogether and becomes meaningful primarily through affective and verbal articulation. Thus, the audience’s meaning-making process in *Dark City* mirrors Barthes’s (1972 [1957]) model not as a rigid linear progression, but as a layered and modality-sensitive semiotic process, in which different sensory channels contribute to ideological meaning through distinct representational pathways.

The audience’s interpretations, as evidenced by their sketches and verbal descriptions, have not only validated the film’s ability to evoke specific emotional responses through its atmospheric design but have also illuminated the active role of the viewer in constructing meaning within the cinematic space. This interactive process, wherein the audience becomes a co-creator of the film’s atmosphere, underscores the dynamic interplay between the film’s intended message and its perceived impact. This research not only enhances our understanding of *Dark City* but also offers a perspective on the broader role of atmosphere in dystopian cinema and its power to shape our perceptions of reality, revealing how carefully orchestrated sensory experiences can serve as vehicles for profound social and psychological commentary.

Future studies could delve deeper into the cross-cultural dimensions of this atmospheric language, exploring how varying cultural contexts and individual backgrounds influence the interpretation of dystopian spaces. Such investigations could illuminate the universal and culturally specific aspects of cinematic atmosphere, broadening our understanding of its communicative potential. Future research could also further explore auditory atmosphere and soundscape as a distinct modality of dystopian spatial experience, examining how silence, ambient sound, and acoustic effects operate as atmospheric generators alongside architectural and visual codes. Moreover, the evolving role of technology in shaping cinematic atmospheres presents another fertile avenue for research. As virtual reality, augmented reality, and other immersive technologies become increasingly integrated into film production and consumption, it is crucial to examine how these innovations alter the creation and perception of cinematic atmospheres. Investigating

how these technologies can manipulate and enhance the sensory experience could reveal new dimensions of film as a complex and multifaceted communication medium. Additionally, exploring the application of these analytic methods to other genres, beyond dystopian cinema, could reveal how atmosphere functions as a fundamental element of filmic language across diverse narrative styles. By continuing to explore the intricate relationship between atmosphere and cinema, we can further appreciate the profound impact of film on our understanding of the world and ourselves.

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