

Theories of the Urban

Seminar Series

Course Dossier

IAAC MUPD

INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED ARCHITECTURE OF CATALONIA
MASTER IN ADVANCED URBAN PLANNING AND DATA ANALYTICS
THEORIES OF THE URBAN SEMINAR

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cover image: student Azucena Ospina (TotU 2023/24)

IAAC's Master in Advanced Urban Planning and Data Analytics aims to redefine the future of the urban environment through innovative, evidence-based and experimental approaches. The program combines the latest tools for data analysis, computational design, parametric mapping, artificial intelligence (AI) and more, in order to understand, plan and design future-proof urban and peri-urban environments.

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Running throughout the first year of IAAC's MAUP, the *Theories of the Urban* seminar unfolds as a three-part inquiry into the political-economic and techno-ecological dimensions of the contemporary urban world.

Volume I establishes the methodological ground of the course, introducing the concept of 'hyper-reading' as a multimodal lens through which to decode the manifold—both theoretical and practical—layers constitutive of 21st-century urbanization. Volume II interrogates the spatial logics of financial capitalism, drawing on film and literature to examine how cyber-capital reshapes subjects, cityscapes, and urban imaginaries. Volume III continues this trajectory, turning to science fiction as a critical-speculative discourse through which to explore possible urban futures under conditions of climate crisis, synthetic cognition, and cyborg urbanization.

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Precis

The *Theories of the Urban Seminar* is a triptych course running through the full span of IAAC's Master in Advanced Urban Planning & Data Analytics, critically and speculatively mobilizing a range of epistemological lenses and media formats to (close- and hyper-) read and decode the increasingly synthetic landscapes and ecologies of the contemporary urban world.

Content

The seminar mobilizes different theoretical lenses across a multidisciplinary gradient of critical discourses (design, critical urban theory, literary studies, political ecology) in order to unravel and make sense of the manifold layers of planetary urbanization, understood as a socio-spatial process operating across multiple, interwoven scales: from that of the body to that of the building, from that of the city to that of the territory and—ultimately—the planet itself.

Method

At a more procedural level, the course deploys the concept of 'hyper-reading' alongside the more conventional but equally fundamental 'close-reading', paying simultaneous attention to the very process and dynamics of reading in the age of artificial cognition and Large Language Models, as well as to experimentation with film and literature as lens through which to cultivate new "ways of seeing" and denaturalize, via estrangement, the increasingly synthetic layers weaving and composing the urban landscapes of the Anthropocene—the aim being to render visible and intelligible the entangled political-economic, technological, and ecological forces shaping their unevenly developed morphologies.

Structure

Designed as a series of three distinct volumes, each containing four lectures and a specific assignment, the seminar moves from a set of foundational theoretical concepts about urbanization (Vol. I), through an interrogation of the relationship between the urban and finance under late capitalism (Vol. II), to finally a more speculative foray into the entanglements between the urban and the environmental question under conditions of anthropogenic climate crisis (Vol. III).

AI in the classroom

Acknowledging the growing presence of (so-called) artificial intelligence in both academic and everyday contexts, the seminar incorporates AI chatbots as collaborative agents in the learning process. Students are asked to sustain a critical engagement with AI—exploring new forms of textual analysis, conceptual brainstorming, and hybrid modes of writing, culminating in the production of a collection of multi-format *micro-essays* and an extended class *glossary*. In parallel to these open-ended explorations, they are tasked with articulating *methodological notes* to post-rationalize their workflows, evaluate their potential, and construct novel writing protocols. This approach seeks to cultivate critical awareness of AI's accelerating affordances and embedded ideological constraints, seeking to open up new pedagogical vistas and avenues of/ for critical thought.

Multimodality

The seminar's pedagogical approach emphasizes active, *multimodal* engagement with course materials, extending well beyond conventional textual analysis. Students are invited to critically and synthetically "read" not only texts but also built environments, building forms, and (new/emergent) urban subjectivities, treating these as transcalar modalities constitutive of planetary-scale urbanization. A distinctive feature of this methodology is the integration of two distinct lenses: that of finance (via critical discourses on neoliberal urbanization) and that of climate crisis (via science fiction discourse), in the form of both literary and cinematic vignettes used as vectors of episodic inquiry into the urban space logic of 21st century capitalism.

Metacommentary

Nine Propositions for Reading (the Urban) in the 21st Century

01. 21st century POSTPRINT era marks a significant rupture in the genealogy of textual media, representing a shift towards different material/cognitive instantiations of text(s).

02. COMPUTATIONAL MEDIA, such as emergent AI and digital platforms, have transformed both the production and interpretation of texts, creating new modes of cognition that extend beyond the boundaries of the human.

03. COGNITION is broader than consciousness and includes nonconscious, embodied, and external processes that are fundamental to both human and machine interactions with information.

04. The MATERIAL SUBSTRATE of cognition—whether organic or computational—is central to understanding how information is processed, interpreted, and made meaningful within different contexts.

05. The rise of artificial cognition challenges traditional notions of agency and creativity, requiring a reconceptualization of the HUMAN-MACHINE NEXUS in knowledge production.

06. The integration of human cognition with computational systems forms COGNITIVE ASSEMBLAGES, dynamic networks of human and nonhuman agents collaborating in meaning-making.

07. NEW FORMATS for writing and reading illustrate an ontological rupture from print media, altering the media ecology of reading by embedding cognitive capabilities within technological devices.

08. THE FUTURE OF READING AND WRITING must then be understood within a framework of distributed cognition and agency, where human and machine intelligences are interdependent in shaping scholarly (and everyday!) practices.

09. These socio-technological mutations are part of a larger shift toward the BECOMING COMPUTATIONAL of the human and the planet as such, as cognitive assemblages mediate social life and are integral to contemporary URBAN SYSTEMS, which increasingly rely on extended computational processes to operate.

Techniques

Close, Hyper, Machine

The methodology of the course is anchored in the articulation of three layers: close-reading, hyper-reading, and machine-reading techniques, all of which align with the concept of *distributed or extended cognition* (as per Katherine Hayles). By moving across these registers, the reader can scale up and down between the fragment and the idea of text as *totality*, allowing for both detailed, sentence-level attention and broader contextual/historical analysis (as per Fredric Jameson).

In weekly exercises, students will engage in a two-step reading process, each involving a specific technique: First, they will read, highlight, and annotate the assigned text using a three-color system to identify general, contextual, and fundamental information. Following this, students will interact with a chatbot to further unpack and synthesize the text, iterating between their own annotations and AI-assisted prompts.

The final output will be a 250-word HYBRID MICRO-ESSAY, capturing key insights and takes on the reading under examination, and an additive GLOSSARY, defining selected keywords to unpack fundamental concepts.

TECHNIQUE: HIGHLIGHTING

A gradient of color/highlights allow students to focus across different layers of the text: **Yellow (General Information)**: Signals general content—words, phrases, or passages useful for basic comprehension. This is about grounding the understanding of the text's overall argument or scope. **Orange (Contextual Information)**: Signals specifics such as examples, historical facts, names, dates, or case studies, connecting these to the larger constellation of narratives within the text. **Red (Fundamental Passages)**: These are the most critical parts of the text—ideas or passages without which the core argument would be lost. Both the form and the content of these passages matter a great deal.

TECHNIQUE: ANNOTATING

This technique deepens engagement by requiring students to not only note key ideas but to also reflect on them in writing—this should be open and flexible, allowing the deployment of different interpretive strategies. Four types of annotations are suggested:

Paraphrasing: This procedure helps internalize key passages, rephrasing them in your own voice.

Keyword definition: This procedure helps to distill complex ideas and contributes to a broader glossary of important terms.

Critical questions: This kind of self-reflective questioning helps to keep track of areas of ambiguity or inquiry that can later be revisited.

Cross-references: This procedure connects ideas across readings or with other authors, introducing an intertextual dimension, helping to situate the current text within larger discursive debates.

Structure

TotU I: ON READING (URBANIZATION)

- 01. METHODS & FORMATS
- 02. WHAT IS READING?
- 03. WHAT IS URBANIZATION?
- 04. SELECTED URBAN PROBLEMATIQUES

Assignment: CLASS MICRO-ESSAYS

TotU II: FICTITIOUS CAPITAL & THE CITY

- 05. A NEOLIBERAL (URBAN) WORLD
- 06. SKYSCRAPER: MACHINE FOR LIVING SEPARATELY
- 07. THE FINANCIAL CITY & ITS SUBJECTS
- 08. DYSTOPIAS NOW

Assignment: FINAL HYPER-ESSAY

TotU III: ANTHROPOCENE FUTURES

- 09. CITY-AUTOMATISMS
- 10. END OF LINE
- 11. A STORM IS COMING
- 12. THE PLANETARY (GRID)

Assignment: FINAL SET OF MEDIA POSTCARDS

Volumes I-II-III
contents & methods

CONCEPTUAL BASIS

- COURSE'S RATIONAL & ARCHITECTURE
- COURSE'S METHODOLOGY
- COURSE'S THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS
- COURSE'S SUBJECT[S]

LENS: THE FINANCIAL NOVEL/FILM

- A(N URBAN) READING OF *THE WOLF OF WALL STREET*
- A(N URBAN) READING OF *HIGH-RISE*
- A(N URBAN) READING OF *COSMOPOLIS*
- A(N URBAN) READING OF *PARASITE*

LENS: THE SCIENCE-FICTIONAL NOVEL/ FILM

- A(N URBAN) READING OF *MINORITY REPORT*
- A(N URBAN) READING OF *CHILDREN OF MEN*
- A(N URBAN) READING OF *BLADE RUNNER 2049*
- A(N URBAN) READING OF *LEAVE THE WORLD BEHIND*

Volumes I-II-III
sequence of lectures

VOLUME I ON (READING) URBANIZATION	METHOD & FORMATS	WHAT IS READING?	WHAT IS URBANIZATION?	EXCURSUS: SELECTED URBAN PROBLEMATIQUES
	01	02	03	04
VOLUME II FICTITIOUS CAPITAL & THE CITY	A NEOLIBERAL (URBAN) WORLD	SKYSCRAPER: A MACHINE FOR LIVING SEPARATELY	CYBERCAPITAL & THE CITY	DYSTOPIAS NOW
	05	06	07	08
VOLUME III ANTHROPOCENE FUTURES	CITY- AUTOMATISMS	END OF LINE	A STORM IS COMING	THE PLANETARY (GRID)
	09	10	11	12

VOLUME I
VOLUME II
VOLUME III

discourses: media studies, urban theory / media form: academic texts
discourses: architectural theory, literary theory / media forms: academic texts, the financial novel/film
discourses: urban political ecology, science fiction / media forms: academic texts, the SF novel/film

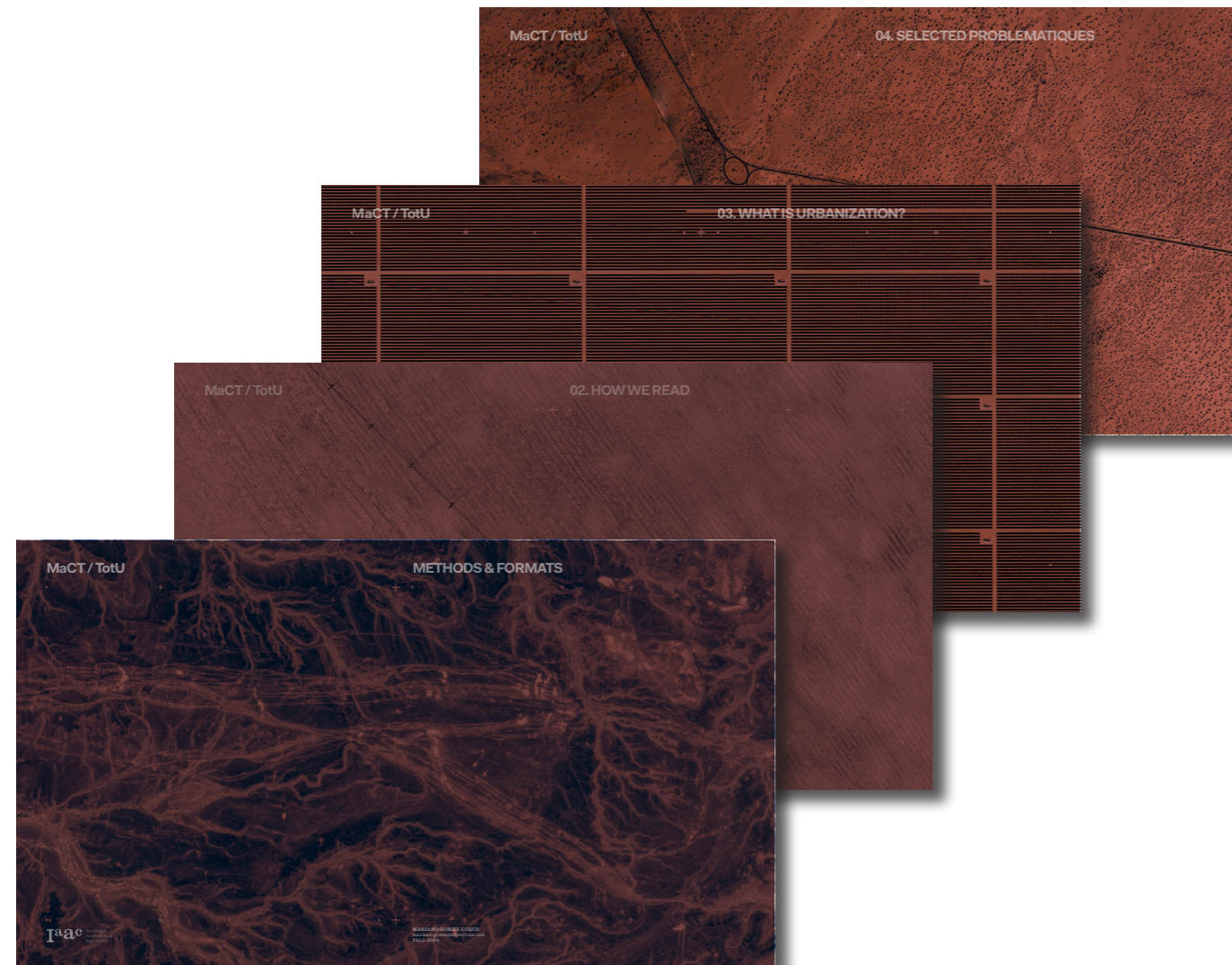


image: student Vasiliki Bakomichali (TotU 2023/24)

“Within urban space, elsewhere is everywhere and nowhere.”

—HENRI LEFEBVRE

- 01 As we turn towards the second quarter of the 21st century, when megalopolises and their associated (and often ‘unseen’) *operational landscapes* have become the dominant logic of spatial production and material organization of the world, our ability to “read” such pervasive urban condition—both within and beyond the fetishized image of ‘the city’ as the icon of urbanity—has never been more crucial.
- 02 The introductory installment of this three-part seminar explores ‘reading’ on two levels: *methodologically*, by addressing the challenges and potentials of reading and writing scholarly texts in light of the emergence of large language models (LLMs); and *epistemologically*, by interrogating the layers, systems, and forms that codify urban processes.
- 03 Building on these twin layers, this research seminar will mobilize the theory of planetary urbanization as a critical lens through which to re-read the conceptual contours and potential of the design disciplines (architecture, landscape, urbanism) in the age of the Anthropocene.



00

Hayles, N. Katherine. "How We Read." *ADE Bulletin*, no. 150 (2010): 62–79

session 01

Brenner, Neil. "What Is Critical Urban Theory?" *City* 13, nos. 2–3 (2009): 198–207

Roy, Ananya. "What Is Urban About Critical Urban Theory?" *Urban Geography* 37, no. 6 (2016): 810–823

session 02

Brenner, Neil. "What Is Critical Urban Theory?" *City* 13, nos. 2–3 (2009): 198–207

Roy, Ananya. "What Is Urban About Critical Urban Theory?" *Urban Geography* 37, no. 6 (2016): 810–823

session 03

Harvey, David. "Cities or Urbanization?" *City* 1, nos. 1–2 (1995): 38–61

Brenner, N., Schmid, Christian. "Planetary Urbanization." In *Implosions/Explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization*, 2014

session 04 (TotU 2024; TotU 2025)

(lens: urban subjectivity) Simmel, Georg. "The Metropolis and Mental Life." In *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, edited by Kurt H. Wolff, Free Press, 1950, pp. 409–424 (originally published in 1903)

(lens: urban growth) Kaika, Maria. "Urbanizing Degrowth: Five Steps Towards a Radical Spatial Degrowth Agenda for Future Cities." *Urban Studies*, vol. 60, no. 7, 2023, pp. 1191–1211

(lens: urban climates) Fraser, Nancy. "Climates of Capital." *New Left Review*, no. 127, Jan.–Feb. 2021, pp. 94–127

(lens: urban media) Haraway, Donna J. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." In *Manifestly Haraway*, University of Minnesota Press, 2016

(lens: urban technologies) Laboria Cuboniks. *The Xenofeminist Manifesto: A Politics for Alienation*. Verso Books, 2018

(lens: urban aesthetics) Goonewardena, Kanishka. "The Urban Sensorium: Space, Ideology and the Aestheticization of Politics." *Antipode*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2005, pp. 46–71

(lens: urban resilience) Goh, Kian. "Climate Justice and Urban Futures." Introduction to *Form and Flow*, MIT Press, 2021

(lens: urban intelligence) Bratton, Benjamin H. "Planetary Sapience." *Noema Magazine*, 2021

(lens: urban natures) Wark, McKenzie. "Adventures in Third Nature." In *New Geographies 09: Posthuman*, edited by Mariano Gomez-Luque and Ghazal Jafari, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2017, pp. 142–153

“We don’t create shit, we don’t build anything.”

—Mark Hanna, in *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Martin Scorsese, 2013)

- 01 The second volume of the *Theory of the Urban Seminar* deepens the practice and method of reading urbanization by turning to the entangled relationship between financialization, the city, building forms, and urban subjects; only this time around the source materials for the course are expanded beyond scholarly literatures to incorporate film as critical media.
- 02 Over four sessions, we will engage with a curated set of movies and texts that dramatize how financial logic shapes subjectivities, reconfigures urban life, and produces a world after its own abstract image. From the high-octane frenzy of (urban) speculation to the slow violence of enclosure, dispossession, and expulsion, each class juxtaposes cinematic narrative with theoretical discourse, illuminating how seemingly disembodied flows of capital materialize in the general form of the built environment as such.
- 03 In doing so, Volume II of TotU extends the methodological grounding established in the introductory installment of the course—now inviting close- and hyper- readings of textual and visual forms alike to unravel the financial-urban nexus underpinning the production of 21st century-space.



session 05

film: *The Wolf of Wall Street* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 2013)
 Spencer, Douglas. "Architecture, Neoliberalism and the Game of Truth." *The Architecture of Neoliberalism*, 1–22, 2016
 Martin, Reinhold. "Financial Imaginaries." In *The Urban Apparatus: Mediapolitics and the City*, 91–108, 2016
 Sassen, Saskia. "The Savage Sorting." In *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*, 111–138, 2014

session 06

film: *High-Rise* (dir. Ben Wheatley, 2016)
 Ballard, J. G. *High-Rise: A Novel*, 1975 (excerpt)
 Sebregondi, Francesco. "A Future Now Exhausted: Notes on High-Rise." *The Avery Review*, no. 17, October 2016

session 07

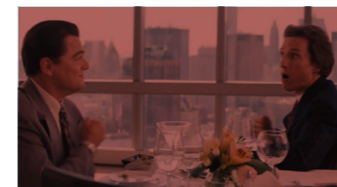
film: *Cosmopolis* (dir. David Cronenberg, 2012)
 DeLillo, Don. *Cosmopolis: A Novel*, 2003 (excerpt)
 Kaika, Maria. "Autistic Architecture: The Fall of the Icon and the Rise of the Serial Object of Architecture." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 6 (2011): 968–992
 Shonkwiler, Alison. "Financial Sublime: Virtual Capitalism in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*." In *The Financial Imaginary: Economic Mystification and the Limits of Realist Fiction*, 101–123, 2017

session 08

film: *Parasite* (dir. Bong Joon Ho, 2019)
 Robinson, Kim Stanley. "Dystopias Now." *Commune Magazine*, 2018 ([LINK](#))

Class 05

The Wolf of Wall Street
(2013)



Class 06

High-Rise
(2015)



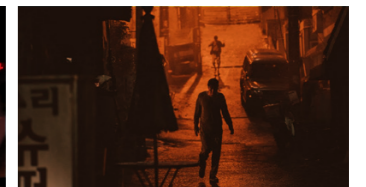
Class 07

Cosmopolis
(2012)



Class 08

Parasite
(2019)



“More human than human, that’s our motto.”

—Tyrell Corp, in *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982)

- 01 The third and last volume of the *Theories of the Urban Seminar* turns to science fiction as both a critical-speculative discourse and a distinct mode of spatial representation, interrogating the urban imaginaries of the Anthropocene through theoretical and cinematic lenses. If the previous installments established a rigorous practice of reading urbanization—first as a historical and conceptual problem (Vol. I), then through the prism of finance capital (Vol. II)—this final iteration extends the inquiry into the possible futures of the urban world in the age of artificial cognition and ecological crisis.
- 02 Across four sessions, we will engage with a carefully curated selection of films and texts that illuminate different scenarios for the years and decades to come: from algorithmic urban governance and predictive control to socio-environmental collapse, and from the spatialities of resilient urbanism to the (geo)politics of planetary-scale computation, each class will juxtapose speculative fiction with critical urban theory, mobilizing science fiction as a form of ecological critique.
- 03 In so doing, *Anthropocene Futures* expands the seminar’s methodological commitment to close and hyper-readings—now attuned to the aesthetic and epistemic stakes constitutive of the Anthropocene.



session 09

film: *Minority Report* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2003)
Dick, Philip K. *The Minority Report*, 1956 (excerpt)
Morozov, Evgeny. "The AI We Deserve." *Boston Review*, December 2024

session 10

film: *Children of Men* (dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 2006)
Canavan, Gerry. "If This Goes On." In *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction*, edited by Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson, 121–139, 2014
Fisher, Mark. "Coffee Bars and Internment Camps." In *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher* (2004–2016), edited by Darren Ambrose, 213–216, 2018

session 11

film: *Blade Runner 2049* (dir. Denis Villeneuve, 2017)
Wakefield, Stephanie. "Critical Urban Theory in the Anthropocene." *Urban Studies*, 2022
Wakefield, Stephanie. "Dreaming the Back Loop." *Affidavit*, November 2017 ([LINK](#))

session 12

film: *Leave The World Behind* (dir. Sam Esmail, 2023)
Gomez-Luque, Mariano, and Daou, Daniel. "Wilderness & Utopia: On Post-Capitalist Urbanization and the Extraterrestrial Imaginary." In *New Geographies 11: Extraterrestrial*, edited by Jeffrey Nesbit and Guy Trangos, 130–147, 2021

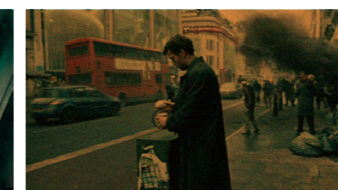
Class 09

Minority Report
(2002)



Class 10

Children of Men
(2006)



Class 11

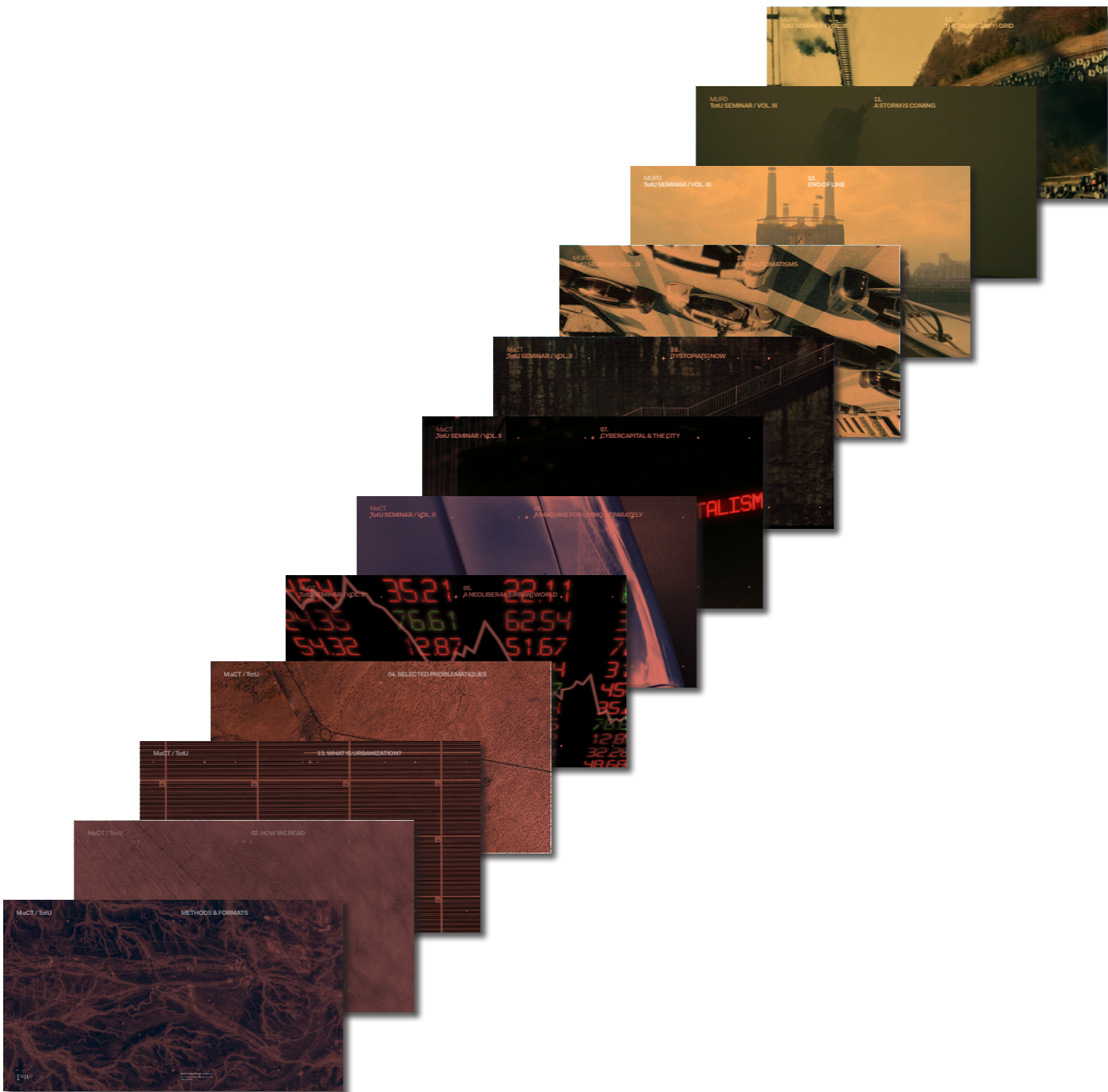
Blade Runner 2049
(2017)



Class 12

Leave the World Behind
(2023)





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 Canavan, Gerry, and Kim Stanley Robinson, editors. *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction*. Wesleyan University Press, 2014.
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 Ballard, J. G. *The Drowned World*. Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1962.
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Image: student Hilaria Canatra (TotU 2023/24)

Assignment Volumes I-II Template

01

TITLE (one line)
Subtitle (one line)

CRITICAL QUESTION:

How does Hayles articulate the relation between close/hyper reading and monoloal/multiloal context, and why is this important?

ESSAY PRECIS:

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Quisque nisi nulla, dapibus quis felis at, iaculis sollicitudin eros. Curabitur vitae aliquet justo. Quisque nisi nulla, dapibus quis at, sollicitudin eros. (MAX. 30 words)

FINAL ESSAY / TotU II
Texts engaged with:
Katherine Hayles, 'How We Read', ADE Bulletin 150 (2010), pp. 62-79.

XX
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01 Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Sed in lacinia mauris. Suspendisse diam est, ullamcorper sed diam a, mattis volutpat enim. Nunc est neque, sodales vitae mollis dapibus, gravida sed lacus. Fusce eget iaculis erat, ac commodo mauris. Sed nec mi aliquet, scelerisque est quis, rutrum elit. Nunc elementum mauris et posuere lobortis. Sed ut magna eu neque feugiat euismod. Quisque ligula sem, scelerisque non congue vitae, lacinia non nulla. Vivamus pulvinar dictum dolor. Nunc eget auctor ex, vel dapibus turpis. Ut imperdiet in sapien id sodales. Proin vitae diam neque.

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INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED ARCHITECTURE OF CALIFORNIA
MUCT THEORIES OF THE URBAN II SEMINAR
INSTRUCTORS MARIANO GOMEZ-LUQUE / NESLI GÖLHAR
STUDENT JUAN DÍAZ

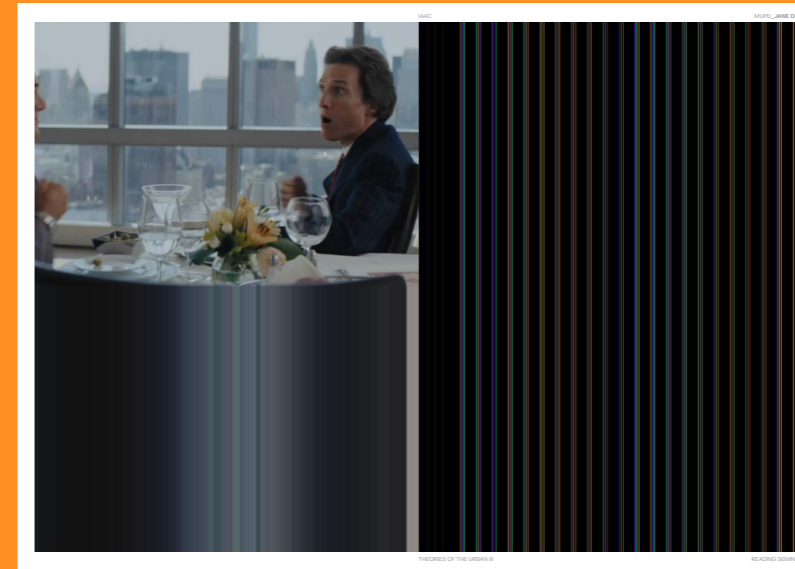
- 01. title, abstract, citations
02. textual blocks
03. glossary
04. methodological note

03

04

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE
Or, How I used AI in the writing of this essay
(Or, Why I did not use it)
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[NO AI ALLOWED IN THE WRITING OF THIS NOTE]

01



- 01. synthetic statement
02. scene hyperlink
03. note to reader
04. glossary
05. methodological note

02

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suggested reading procedure

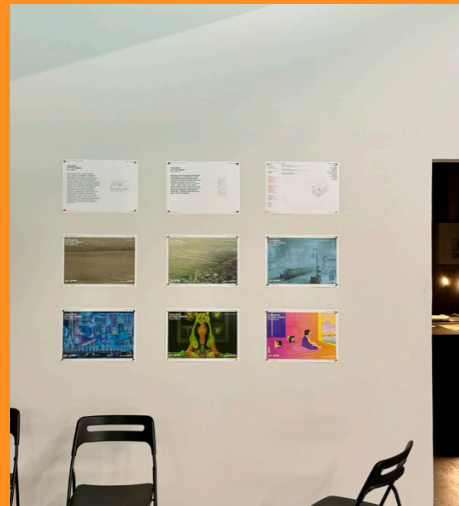
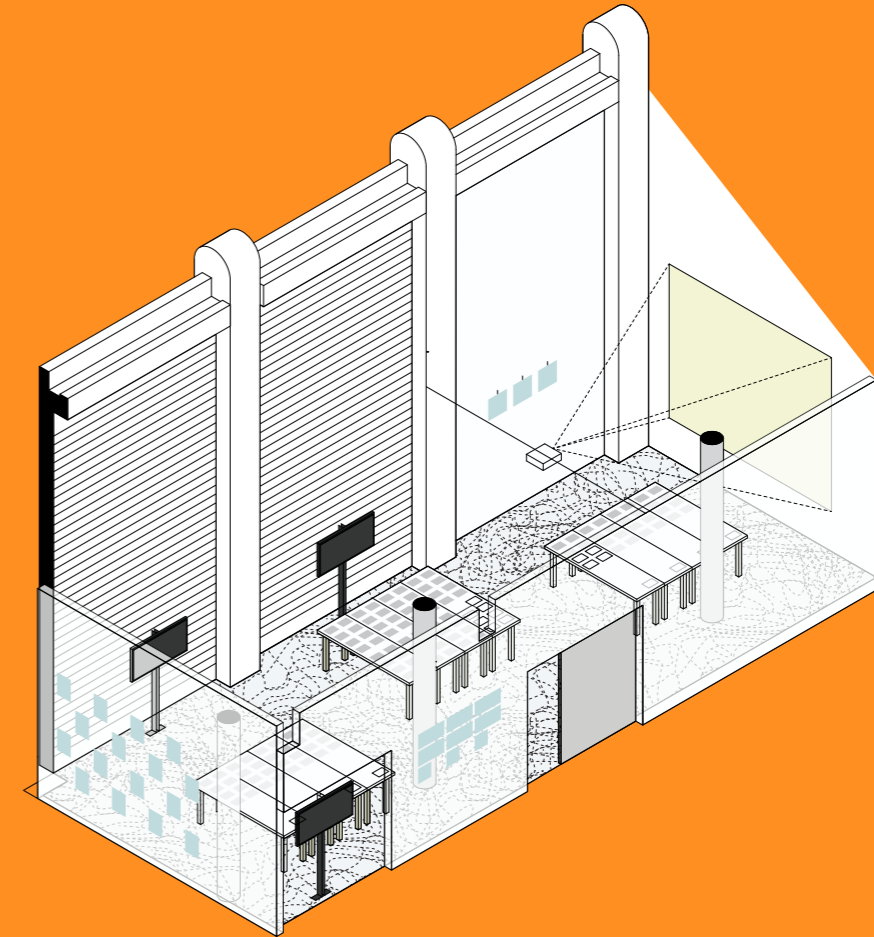
- > read the full text, highlighting and annotating
> feed PDF with highlights and annotations to chatbot
> write within the AI platform
> iterate as needed
> turn to TEMPLATE as medium for refinement
> come up with a final synthetic MICRO-ESSAY
> select, extract, and define KEYWORDS

modalities of reading

CLOSE-READING: focuses on the form of the text, down to the structure of individual sentences. HYPER-READING: encourages nonlinear, networked exploration of the text's interconnections. MACHINE-READING: (enabled through interactions with AI tools, it) adds a computational layer that extends beyond human cognition, enabling new ways of synthesizing content.

NB: photos from TotU 2023/24 exhibition review; drawings for this year's final review.

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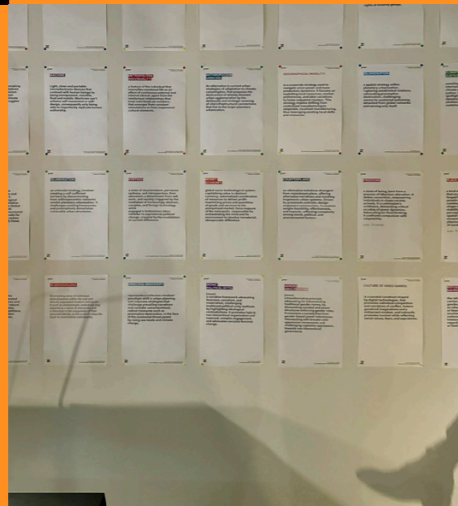
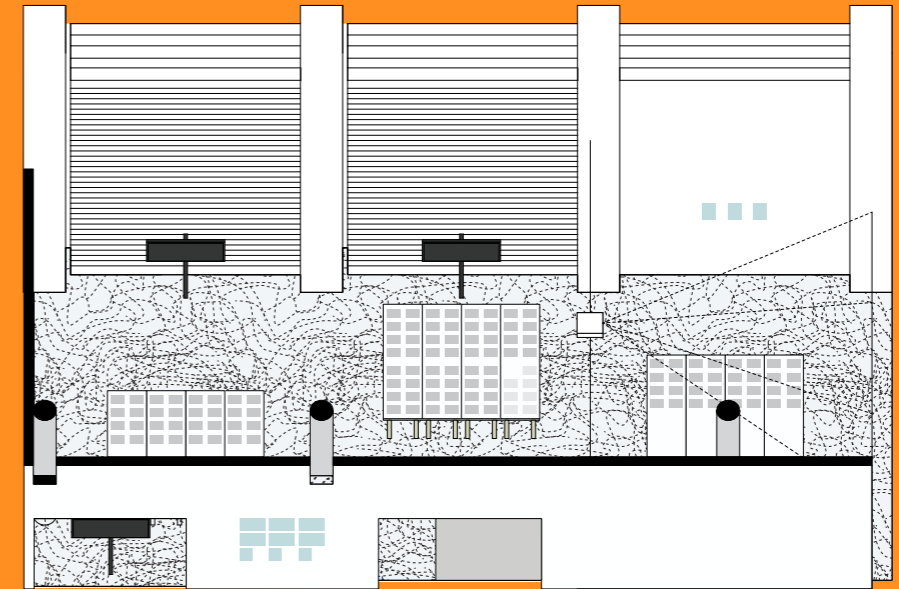
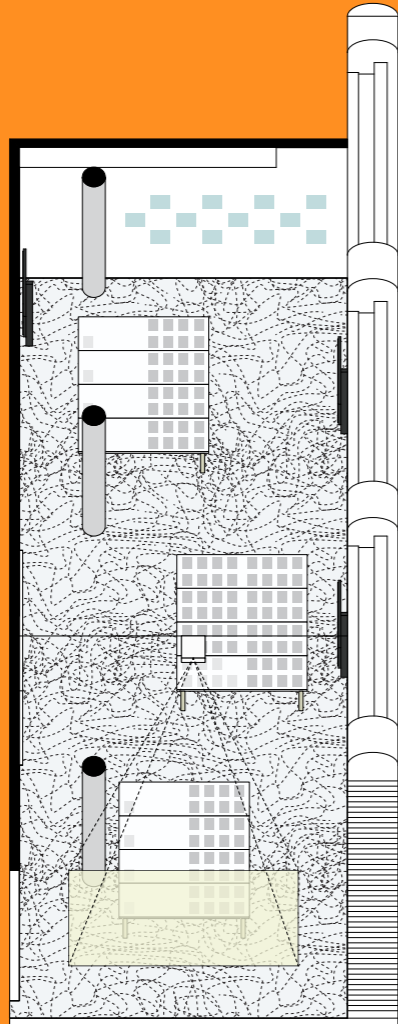
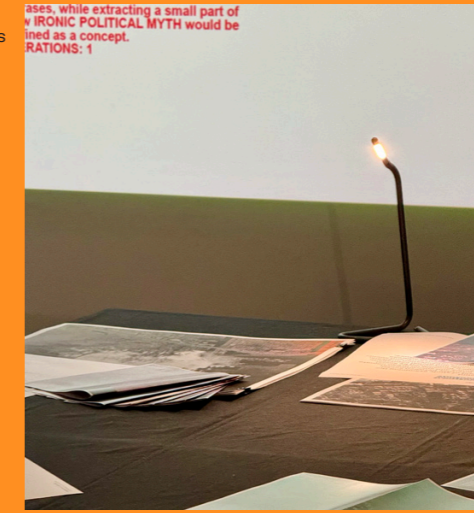
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TotU 2025

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The Institute for Advanced Architecture of Catalonia is a Center of Education, Research, and Innovation that envisions, designs, and prototypes the future—from Barcelona to the world.

MARIANO GOMEZ-LUQUE is the Head of Curatorial Projects and Professor of Urban Theory & Design at the Institute for Advanced Architecture of Catalonia (IAAC) in Barcelona, and an affiliated researcher at the University of Chicago's Urban Theory Lab, whose work explores the intersections between the design disciplines and urban theory under conditions of planetary urbanization. He holds a Doctor of Design (2019) and a Master of Architecture (2013, honors) from Harvard Graduate School of Design.

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