

RESEARCH ARTICLES

The Bubble Metropolis: Manhattan Island Crises in Contemporary Science Fiction

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As “the island at the center of the world,” Manhattan has inspired countless writers and has served as a spatial archetype in science fiction’s world-building. From the interdisciplinary perspective of literature and economics, this article discusses the crisis imagination of the “bubble metropolis” in five contemporary Manhattan-related science fiction novels including *Cities in Flight* (1970), *The Blister* (1975), *Terminal World* (2010), *Zone One* (2011), and *New York 2140* (2017). The spatial variety of Manhattan Island in these science fiction novels is closely combined with its economic condition. The characters, plots, and spatial imagery of these novels gather to reflect the different stages of the operation of a bubble economy, illustrating a historical cycle of capitalism that can never be escaped. Manhattan Island has long been the symbol of the world’s rush for wealth. The fear of economic recession, environmental degradation, and class conflict have formed the special geographical features of the island in the future. The crisis imagination of the “bubble metropolis” also seeks to stimulate critical thinking on economic ethics, urban design, and high technology, calling for social justice and public welfare.

When we speak of Manhattan as “the island at the center of the world,” we are referring less to its geographic location and more to its place in the global economy. With the establishment of U.S. hegemony as the world’s only superpower, the most influential urban island in human history has risen on the economic map, and the skyscrapers and neon lights of its physical space are the hegemon’s shadow.

In 1904, the US economy was booming due to the Second Industrial Revolution, and the legendary publisher Hugo Gernsback, who would later have a profound impact on global science fiction literature, arrived in New York. The city was the center of the country’s publishing industry, and editors readily favored science fiction works based in New York. Those works consequently became commercially valuable. As a result of those commercially successful operations, the center of science fiction literature had shifted from Europe to the United States by the 1930s. The image of New York has since then persisted as a typical representation of the “mega-city”

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in science fiction (Abbott, 2016). No previous monographs have focused on science fiction set on Manhattan Island and there are fewer papers on the subject, but I have cited relevant literature in the paper.

Around the same time, Hollywood brought the most successful monster in the history of cinema, King Kong, to the big screen in 1933. The Empire State Building, which had just been completed in 1931, appeared at the end of the film, which became an instant success and created the basic visual image of Manhattan. The soaring skyscraper represents not only the height of human intelligence and civilization but also the potential crisis that is capitalist greed. When the economic bubbles of the Roaring Twenties burst and the Great Depression began, New York City still enjoyed its towering skyscrapers and busy traffic. King Kong provided a metaphor for Manhattan's endurance as an economic center, even if it was a part of the economic bubble. This metaphor draws on the island's special geographic characteristics, and people remained willing to trust Manhattan even when financial markets were in disarray. People imagine that Manhattan has the vast sea to protect it from the constraints of economic laws. It is an island of exceptionalism or a huge "bubble metropolis." This interesting correlation is the result of the deep interaction between economy, literature, and geography.

The first financial bubble crisis in history was the result of the Dutch obsession with tulips and their wealth from the colonies. The word "bubble" entered the economic narrative as a literary metaphor after the British Parliament enacted the iconic Bubble Act in 1720. When the Duke of York took over the coastal colony from the Dutch, the British government expanded its financial empire on the new continent. Greed inflamed by the expectation of huge profits can conjure an illusion without the support of real value, and this growing bubble is on the verge of collapse at any time.

As one of the world's most influential financial centers, Manhattan is the bubble-blowing machine where the United States thrives as a superpower. A clue to this can be found in classic novels in which Manhattan figures prominently, such as *The Great Gatsby* (1924) and *Manhattan Transfer* (1925): from "the creation of a bubble" to "the burst of a bubble," and finally "the cycle of fate." Everyone comes to this dazzling island metropolis with a dream of wealth and fame, a dream which often ends in disillusionment. Limited by the historical background and time scale, traditional, realistic novels cannot often show the loop of bubble formation. Science fiction, however, is free from such restraints, and can exhibit the extreme conditions of the morbid cycle of economy and humanity, in which "bubble" functions as both an economic and a literary metaphor. Most science fiction novels that feature Manhattan Island usually pay more attention to the metaphorical concepts than a completely convincing world-building (Vint, 2019). From the perspective of economic criticism, this article is going to examine the "bubble metropolis" depictions of Manhattan Island in contemporary science fiction, arguing that "bubble" is not just a spatial metaphor, but an accurate visual of the relentless cycle of the economy. From a dome that envelops the

island, to the countless tiny chambers that add up to one huge skyscraper, and the sea tides that inundate the whole city, these fictional images will show that humans create bubble economies, live in bubble metropolises, and are held hostage to bubbles for life.

The dome and the skyscraper: building a “Big Dumb Bubble”

One of most popular science fiction traditions is the BDO (Big Dumb Object), a distinct kind of spatial landscape which includes the island and the mega-city (Suvin, 1979). In science fiction stories about Manhattan, the two spatial images of the island and the metropolis are further merged. Unlike the porous boundaries between a normal continental city and its suburbs, islands are clearly separated by surrounding waters, making it easier to form isolated cities. Science fiction writers are therefore more likely to portray the BDO features of an island city. “The beneficial aspects of island spatiality (including territoriality, defense and transport) make islands favourable sites for establishing certain kinds of settlements and land scarcity associated with island spatiality contributes to island settlements developing into cities” (Grydehøj, 2015, p. 429). From “surrounded by water,” to “surrounded by everything even air,” the island’s self-isolation provides the spatial basis for the construction of the “bubble metropolis” image in science fiction featuring Manhattan Island.

In Frederik Pohl’s novella *The Blister* (1975), two large domes connected by a smaller bridge dome fully cover the island like “two humps on a camel. The tall igloo one down around lower Manhattan, the lower connecting bridge from Canal Street to the twenties, the big elongated one covering midtown and Central Park” (p. 177). This giant bubble can provide a habitable internal climate, necessary ecological resources, and waste disposal, creating a self-sufficient metabolic system. The bubble is also a defense dome, capable of blocking anything from a solar storm to a nuclear explosion. Manhattan becomes a metropolis in a bubble, and the island’s survival depends entirely on the bubble.

The story does not explain why a dome would be built to envelop Manhattan. According to Dr. Carl Abbott, Pohl might have referred to the architect Buckminster Fuller’s “Manhattan Dome” proposal (Abbott, 2016). Fuller was referred to as “a technocrat for the counterculture” by Fred Turner, author of *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* (Chu & Trujillo, 2009). Fuller often pondered the challenge of human survival in a future of environmental or economic crisis, and one of his answers was a lightweight sphere designed with a structural system called tensegrity. Pohl may have been influenced by Fuller’s idea of “dymaxion,” a term derived from the words dynamic, maximum, and ion to denote a technological strategy to provide maximum and dynamic use of energy in a minimal structure (Abbott, 2016).

In addition to visually creating the spatial feature of a bubble metropolis, the construction of the giant domes in *The Blister* is also an economic metaphor. Giant domes are deceptive, because their stability lies only in the beautiful blueprint. Unlike traditional buildings, which can be supported

independently by the framework of columns, the bubble dome is extremely fragile during the construction process and highly dependent on the integrity of the grid structure. Failure on a single steel frame or panel could threaten an entire dome with collapse. In addition, the return on investment (ROI) of landmark mega-buildings is usually unsatisfactory, which implies that in the world of *The Blister*, New York's economy has reached the peak of a cycle, presaging future economic collapse. In the story, the construction of the domes synchronizes with the cycle of the bubble economy. Everyone is seduced by a grand vision of becoming a proud, carefree citizen "under the dome," and has gambled his/her life on its construction, but no one knows that it is only a Ponzi scheme. The bigger the dome, the harder it is to complete, for high-level uncertainty is the fuel to mass greed and madness. Similarly, a bubble economy can sustain a social boom for a certain period, but in the future, the bubble is bound to burst (Einarsson & Marquis, 2001).

In contrast to the grandiose dome project, the story's hero is an ordinary construction worker on the installation team. For his job, he is suspended in midair by shoddy ropes, and faces mortal danger and economic hardship, along with his fellow workers. Ironically, the underclass builders risk their lives to build not a shelter that can protect them, but a bubble illusion created in capital's endless pursuit of profit. Compared to the workers with huge risk exposure, the capitalists are protected by a sophisticated investment structure, top-notch security guards, and legal teams. Even if the bubble collapses both physically and economically, the government would bail them out. The worst thing that could happen would be bankruptcy, so bankers have a license to gamble without risk in any sense, since there is always a good chance that they will survive. *The Blister* is the third installment of Pohl's series "The Years of The City," which imagine the future development of New York. Pohl may have been inspired by his conversation with former New York City mayor John Lindsay in 1974, when they talked about challenges in the governance of the city, such as "labor union power and racketeering, political corruption, and changing legal systems" (Abbott, 2016, p. 71).

In addition to the giant bubbles that enclose the whole island, the metaphor of a "bubble metropolis" in Manhattan-related science fiction is also embodied in the new interpretation of skyscrapers. In novels of all kinds, including science fiction, skyscrapers are the most frequently used spatial image when depicting Manhattan Island. At the economic level, the spatial features of an island represent a centripetal force, leading to the concentration of economic power: "Land scarcity caused by island spatiality subsequently leads to urban densification and powerful agglomeration economies, resulting in the formation and growth of island cities" (Grydehøj, 2015, p. 429). The spatial concentration of economic factors can greatly improve the efficiency of economic operations. However, on a limited land area such as Manhattan Island, the accumulation of economic factors can only go upwards into the sky. In some science fiction, the skyscraper is reimagined as a collection of

tiny, bubble-like cells whose inhabitants are described as similar to highly disciplined, homogenous swarms of bees or ants, symbolizing the overdevelopment of certain industries.

In contrast to skyscrapers in the real world, skyscrapers in science fiction can break away from the constraints of building materials and logistics, whose internal and external features symbolize the economic situation in the story. In *Terminal World* (2010), Alastair Reynolds creates a world thousands of years from now, with stars floating in the interstellar realm of civilization like islands in the sea. A futuristic city modeled after New York has been built as a towering skyscraper, Spearpoint, and occupies an entire planet, tapering upward into a cone shape and housing 30 million people. The planet-sized skyscraper is composed of floating, closed bubbles with varying functions. The essential design of a skyscraper is to transform a flat metropolis into a vertical one. A city is a skyscraper of numerous bubble regions, and a skyscraper is a city in itself. In this novel's huge skyscraper, the bubbles are the embodiment of social hierarchy with different limits for the available technology. High up on Spearpoint live the "angels," who have access to the most advanced technology. They are delicate creatures free from any labor or risk, and their lives never intersect with those of "lower" people. Lower down in Spearpoint are bubble regions limited to the technological level of electricity, and then lower to steam, and finally to horse power. There are also bubbles in which no life at all can exist. There are also wandering criminal gangs of drug-crazed killers, the "Skullboys," who would never be accepted by other civilized bubbles.

The status of the angels' bubble zone in the novel echoes de Certeau's analysis of New York's Twin Towers. The Twin Towers were once the tallest skyscrapers in the world. Standing atop the World Trade Center, one could enjoy a superb panorama of Manhattan Island. It was an irresistible feeling of transcendence, as de Certeau writes: "to be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp" (De Certeau, 1984, p. 92). In Spearpoint, peoples' power relations are determined by the physical location of the bubble in which they live. The bubble's location, size and spatial form replace a person's name, occupation, and personality as his/her social identity in this future Manhattan.

Spearpoint, the enormous pyramid that appears to be stable and indestructible, is soon destroyed in a sudden zone shift. Due to the violent impact on the lower bubbles, the highest bubble seems at first to escape any danger, but soon shakes and falls. The hero of the novel, Doctor Quillon, was an angel who lived in the highest bubble. Quillon's life is upended in the disaster, and he struggles to survive in the lower zone as he tries to rebuild the devastated Spearpoint. As an angel, he used to be strong and powerful in his own zone, but when he enters the lower bubbles, he became too weak and grotesque to help others. The destruction of Spearpoint city represents the unbalanced growth between different sectors of the economy. In 1967, the American economist William Baumol summed up this problem

as “Baumol’s cost disease” (Baumol & Bowen, 1966, p. 27). When the rapid growth of labor productivity puts the “progressive” sector at the top of the economic pyramid, and the “non-progressive” sector at the bottom cannot share the dividends of growth, the rising costs of the non-progressive sector will eventually drag down the entire economy, posing a great threat to the stability of the system (Baumol, 1967).

Whether it is a single huge bubble dome or a giant skyscraper with numerous bubble zones, the recurrence of the “Big Dumb Bubble” in Manhattan-related science fiction reflects the writers’ lasting concerns on the high concentration of economic power. In the real world, there are always alarmed whistleblowers before every financial crisis, but the people still take chances and continue to pursue profits at great risk. Science fiction is also whistling when everything seems safe and prosperous, warning readers that sooner or later, the bubble is bound to burst.

The flooded and flying metropolis: the bursting of bubbles

Ocean and climate crises are recurring themes in island-related science fiction: “Closely related to territorial benefits (internal control) are the defense benefits (protection from external forces) that small islands historically offered political and economic elites” (Grydehøj, 2015, p. 429). Surrounded as they are by water, islands can avoid geographic threats, but if the water itself becomes a threat, an island’s security is as fragile as a bubble. Estuarine islands like Manhattan, which connect the mainland to the ocean, are well suited to science fiction’s fears of ocean change. In 2017, Kim Stanley Robinson published *New York 2140*, which has the backstory of a maritime crisis. The novel depicts a near-future world in which an island’s defenses have been breached by the rising ocean. As temperatures rise, the collapse of the Greenland ice sheet creates first and second “pulses” of sudden and violent icy waves that flood coastal cities around the globe. Manhattan has survived by turning itself into “Venice on the Hudson,” where every skyscraper becomes an isolated micro-island. The canals and skybridges that connect the skyscraper-islands are now protected from corrosion by a diamond film coating. If Manhattan was once a giant safety bubble at the edge of the ocean, it is now dispersed like foam on the spreading water, with some of the high-altitude areas as new islands. Unlike traditional science fiction that warns us of an impending environmental crisis, Robinson argues that climate change and sea level rise are the inevitable future that we all need to face. People must make plans and changes in response to the imminent new order of society.

Beneath the surface of ocean change, the novel also delves into its backstory of how inequality of resources exacerbated human suffering after the burst of a financial bubble. Robinson writes about the stock market in the year 2140, and real estate evaluation after the novel’s flood. There is a term, “increase liquidity,” suggesting the image of rising sea waves, in the economic narrative, which refers to creating money and the expansion of credit (Jameson, 1991). In the story, two homogenous bubbles are created, with a rise in benchmark

interest rates, and the rising sea levels, but they each have very different effects on different classes. Because living space has become so precious, only the richest elites can live in new towers on the dry higher grounds in the south, which still stand out as large islands. The towers have hundreds of stories, using the most advanced carbon nanomaterials originally invented for the army's space elevator. Technological progress is first used to create a comfortable life for the privileged one percent in the changed world, rather than improving lives of the public. The middle class, however, have crowded in half-submerged apartment buildings of the "intertidal zone," and they also try to convert offices into habitable areas. The marginalized people struggle to survive in ramshackle, flooded, old walk-up apartments. While some citizens are trapped in poverty and limited opportunities by paying off their debts, some gain freedom in this post-apocalyptic Manhattan merely by having abundant capital. The destructive wave has no impact on their lives, and even brings new wealth opportunities to many of them.

Throughout his career, Robinson has focused on the limitations of capitalism. In this novel he discusses financial risk in contemporary society, in particular, the 2008 financial crisis through the collapsed financial market of 2140. The different post-collapse lifestyles represent the impact of the Great Inflation on people of different assets and credit ratings. High-net-worth individuals often enjoy the largest asset increase due to their strong capital, and the middle class would have seen their wealth seriously diluted by inflation. Symbolically, the group most affected by the rising sea in the story are the intertidal residents, for the structural integrity of the intertidal zone is most damaged by the forces of the daily sea tide. When the raging sea floods the island, rich owners have written off their real estate, leaving the tenants alone in the drowned buildings. The residents have adapted every possible method to save their home, including applying waterproof materials, converting lower floors to boathouses, and building skybridges between neighbor skyscrapers. Now Charlotte, the president of the "intertidal cooperative," suspects that wealthy investors are trying to make a hostile bid for intertidal buildings. When waves wash over Lower Manhattan, the financiers abandon the locals. Soon, greedy bankers and hedge-fund managers have devised an index model of intertidal real estate price trends, but the index is not designed to track the health of the city's economy in order to improve the residents' life, but to analyze the intertidal real estate price trends, hoping to profit after residents have salvaged their homes.

The novel is deeply concerned with the consequences of financial speculation and debt culture, suggesting that it is still possible to alter the damage caused by the structure of the debt-credit economy. Financial capitalism in 2140 develops much as it did in the early 2000s, but natural and financial bubbles implode at the same time. Robinson uses the whole story to find a solution to the bursting of the financial bubble, and to demonstrate the side effects of financial services. On the post-collapse island of Manhattan, government helps the parasitic bankers instead of the citizens

who contribute their lives to keep the city operating. Rescuing finance from itself is much more expensive and difficult than rescuing land and social programs. Robinson's ending of an optimistic fantasy shows that he was still looking for the ultimate answer of the devastating 2008 crisis.

With the protections of the Bretton Woods system, the American economy became the world's largest after the Second World War. Even at that time, science fiction writers warned readers of a future financial collapse and its radical remaking of New York. Science fiction master James Blish published *Cities in Flight*, a four-volume series of novels and short stories, between 1955 and 1962 (reprinted in one volume, 1970), which depict a bleak future world where New York becomes a city that is forever flying like a bubble:

“Manhattan is on the move ... throughout the galaxy. The invention of the ‘spindizzy’, a real doozy of an antigravity device named for tricks with electron rotation, has allowed entire cities to cut themselves loose from planetary surfaces and zip through space at super-light speeds.” (Blish, 1970, p. 3)

However, Manhattan keeps flying because the outbreak of a financial crisis has caused chaos and a worldwide shortage of resources. The whole city is looking for work, economic recovery, and the existence of possible colonies in the galaxy, “Like refugees from the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, they roam the stars looking for worlds where they can trade scientific or industrial expertise for resources like petroleum, germanium, and food.” (Blish, 1970, p. 18)

In this series of novels, Blish predicted that after a major financial crisis, all of Manhattan's residents would be left with nothing to live on, in a lonely bubble. They can only live like the migrant workers whom they once despised, chased by a galactic police force. The citizens have been suffering from drastic cultural change and a sense of loss for hundreds of years. And it is not just Manhattan that has become a migratory metropolis in the cosmos. When the financial crisis sweeps across the galaxy, countless metropolises become the new hobos, akin to those of the Depression Era. “Every Earth city has gathered up its bedrock and buildings and atmosphere in a force field bubble to go flying off in search of work and adventures” (Blish, 1970, p. 23).

The concept of “a city” involves spatial stability. Although in history a city may experience destruction and reconstruction, its physical location normally remains within a certain range. Blish puts forward the concept of cities cruising throughout the galaxy, which can be regarded as an extension of the spatial image of oceangoing vessels in marine culture. Although most of the bubble or airship designs in science fiction are high-tech, they generally fall within a narrative tradition of colonial plunder. These flying bubble metropolises are larger and more advanced, the means of looting are more subtle, and their target is not limited to wealth or slaves in colonial times, but has expanded to all kinds of economic factors, which is full of post-colonial traits (Sheng, 2009).

One opinion is that Manhattan got its name from a colonial blackmail of the Native Americans (Goddard, 2010). In the centuries that followed, the tradition of deception was preserved. After the physical wall of Wall Street was torn down, Manhattan built a larger and more efficient system of predation, the so-called “circulation of the dollar.” Such fantasies have been brought to new life, as offshore finance and massive derivatives trading have made Manhattan a “flying city” in the financial space, where advanced financial technology allows bankers to harvest the world’s wealth from their desktops. But at this point, science fiction keeps whistling for the development model. Whether it is an overheated economy or a Ponzi scheme in finance, bubbles cannot expand forever (Tobin, 1958). Just like a soap bubble a child plays with, the surface gets thinner and thinner as the bubble expands. When it breaks at the critical point, the bubble turns into droplets that float away in the wind.

Since the 1980s, the United States economy has been in the era of the so-called “Great Moderation,” in which the business cycle shifted from the past pattern of sharp peaks and valleys to smooth peaks and valleys (Stephen, 2018). The flattening and lengthening of the economic cycle not only obscured the buildup of systemic risk, but also created an unprecedented illusion of prosperity. Low inflation, high growth, and rising asset prices have undermined the requirement for risk compensation, and increased people’s appetite for risk and higher leverage. While mainstream pundits were preoccupied with providing sound economic explanations for the golden times of the Great Moderation, a global financial crisis shattered those optimistic expectations (Mian & Verner, 2017). From financial elites to wandering vagabonds, from the exploiters of the world’s wealth to the victims of savage star nomads, status change may be in the blink of an eye. According to Blish, the *Cities in Flight* series was partly inspired by Oscar Spengler’s *Decline of the West* (1918). In Blish’s tale, the flying Manhattan is bound to the Greater Magellanic Cloud, which seems to echo a pattern of development that has reached a dead end: “the impending destruction of time itself” (Blish, 1970, p. 86).

Zombies: endless bubble cycle

Robert J. Shiller, Nobel laureate in Economics, writes in *Narrative Economics: How Stories Go Viral and Drive Major Economic Events* (2020), that there is a “strong interplay” between economic cycles and literary narratives (Shiller, 2020, p. 27). In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, another iconic science fiction novel set in a disaster-stricken Manhattan was *Zone One* (2011) by New York writer Colson Whitehead. Whitehead creates a dystopian zombie story, but it is not about the disaster itself, rather it is about post-collapse reconstruction. The author tried to go beyond the popular culture of zombies, and explore the link between a monster’s fantasy and the problem of contemporary society. The novel’s protagonist, Mark Spitz, once an ordinary IT salesman, is now a street sweeper. His team needs to clear the streets of Manhattan to take back the city from the zombies, one zone

at a time. The story explores how people of Manhattan, the representative of surviving human civilization, would muddle through to remake a devastated society. The process symbolizes both the rebuilding of the economy and the restarting of the bubble cycle.

Whitehead's zombies fall into two categories: traditional zombies called "skels," who roam the streets in droves, grabbing and eating people, and "stragglers" who walk alone. A straggler remains in a certain place and repeats actions that were important to them before death. The stragglers may stand endlessly in front of an office copier, or circle the remnants of a favorite store, or sit in a cubicle in a former office. Many critics have viewed the two types of zombies as the author's critique of racism. In fact, there are deep-seated differences in economic factors that lie beneath the surface of racism. These two types of zombies can be seen as a metaphor for the proletariat and the middle class. After the financial bubble collapse, the proletariat became the heroes of street politics, and they came together to attack the old system. The middle class, however, will not be so determined. They cannot give up their former assets, even if there is no longer any value; invisible wealth still functions like a shackle.

Whitehead has a keen grasp of the economic symbols behind such power relations. "Zombie" is often used as a metaphor in economics for a special kind of enterprise, which has no benefit because of poor management, but still uses essential resources like land and capital. These kinds of zombies hinder the growth of new technologies and industries (Shiller, 2020). Zombie firms rely mainly on government subsidies and bank loans to survive and operate, like a black hole devouring money, goods, and human labor. Just as contagious zombies in fiction can turn a healthy person into a new zombie, zombie financial firms will drag down a healthy enterprise to its death after it is merged and restructured. The healthy enterprise also then becomes a "zombie firm" (Sadok & Fu, 2021, p. 50). When a bank continues to give blood to zombie companies, it will eventually become a "zombie bank." If a local government continues to subsidize zombie firms, eventually its economy will turn into a "zombie economy." This procedure is named "zombification" in the economic narrative. Therefore, zombie firms must be removed from the economic environment as completely as possible. Whitehead's novel embodies the abstract concepts of "non-performing assets," "debt restructuring," and "deleveraging" created by the financial elite into zombies, a clean-up movement, investigation teams, and so on. The decision to rebuild the city's economy ultimately requires the sweeper's teams to clear out all the zombies they can find on the deserted streets of Manhattan.

"Zone One" in the novel refers to a recent government reconstruction project where refugee camps and safe zones named "Bubbling Brooks" and "Happy Acres" are commercially advertised as ordinary pre-apocalyptic suburban communities. The survivors of the zombie disaster, known as the "American Phoenix," have already forgotten the sadness, as if they were reborn like phoenixes. They believe that out of the ashes of the economic

shambles, a phoenix of recovery can arise again. Without any “window period” or reflection on the disaster, they simply repeat the cycles of construction and collapse, and just as no one really solves the root causes of the problem after every economic crisis, the companies that have luckily survived will start brewing a new bubble.

They would hire the best lawyers and accountants to pick out the good assets that were still undervalued in the foams, removing non-performing assets from the balance sheet. People rebuild walls to create an “island within islands” at great expense, but the enclosed soil would only nurture the new bubble. In the end of the novel, the distinction between human survivors, skels, and stragglers becomes blurred. Humans seem to kill the zombies that hinder the rebuilding of Manhattan, but zombies are in fact kidnapping humans, trapping them in an endless cycle of “bubble metropolis.” As the protagonist Mark Spitz concludes, “intellect and ingenuity and talent [are] as equally meaningless as stubbornness, cowardice, and stupidity” (Whitehead, 2011, p. 40). Human’s struggle seems pointless for they will eventually witness the re-collapse of their new economy and civilization. It is a snarky satire on both the economic development in modern society, and the greed of humanity. As Whitehead writes, “Manhattan has become the city that never dies” (Whitehead, 2011, p. 57). No matter who is the owner of the city, zombies or humans, Manhattan will forever stay in a cycle of building bubbles.

The different stages of the economy create different “structures of feeling,” which affected science fiction writers’ thinking and their characters’ behavior. After World War II, the United States retained a good production system, and the Bretton Woods system established the gold standard to limit the global money supply. Under that system, US commodities quickly came to dominate European and Japanese markets, and the US economy boomed. During this period, the United States greatly expanded its overseas influence and became a global political, economic, military, and diplomatic superpower. After the Marshall Plan began, European countries and Japan sharply devalued their currencies and had the ability to export more to the United States. Subsequently, there was a stagnation crisis in the United States and overinvestment in US commodities. Europe and Japan, which relied on the US market, followed the United States into an economic crisis. Science fiction writers in the 1960s thus tended to emphasize the dualistic rivalry for wealth between the local community and the “other.” For example, *Cities in Flight* featured battles between flying terrestrial cities from Earth, particularly New York, and alien pirates searching for resources in the galaxy.

The first oil crisis of the early 1970s was a typical dollar liquidity crisis. As a result of the Vietnam War and the failure of the gold standard system in 1971, the United States implemented monetary easing. Amid high fiscal deficits and the CPI index reaching six per cent, the depreciation of the dollar sharply increased commodity prices. When the Fourth Arab-Israeli War broke out in October 1973, the price of oil quadrupled. The crisis

exacerbated inflation and inequality between the rich and the poor. Middle-income people in the 1970s still happily remembered the golden age, and they suddenly faced a revolutionary era. The psychological disorientation brought about a transformation in the structure of feeling. The confusion and loss they experienced were the undercurrent of this era. Science fiction writers in the 1970s turned to the confrontation between the domestic working class and capitalists. For example, in *The Blister*, a giant dome is a metaphor for inflation, and the workers and capitalists bear completely different risks in the construction of the dome.

The Great Moderation resulting from the prosperity brought about by the Internet industry preceded the 2008 subprime mortgage crisis. A new affluent class arose, and commercial capital increasingly controlled public spaces and social life. Residential spaces shape people's identities: different types of residences correspond to different economic statuses and different social interactions. People can differ in terms of appearance, demeanor and habits due to differences in their home environments. In *Terminal World*, people from one bubble zone have different appearances and abilities from and cannot understand people from other bubble zones. *Zone One* separates safe from non-safe zones, and the humans' fear and hatred of zombies cannot be resolved by isolating themselves in safe zones. Films inspired by Manhattan have illustrated the problem of social isolation. For example, in *Escape from New York* (1981), a sci-fi thriller directed by New York director John Carpenter, the island of Manhattan as a whole is transformed into a "non-safe zone," a giant prison.

The 2008 subprime mortgage crisis, the biggest financial crisis thus far in the 21st century, saw a run on the money markets within days. Almost all of the core financing markets that provided credit to financial and non-financial corporations were in trouble, and the global economy contracted severely. However, the subprime mortgage crisis did not evolve into a depression as bad as that of the 1930s, primarily because the US government underwrote all of the losses the banks caused by over-issuing loans. The American people paid for Wall Street's greed. That bail-out inspired the most prominent contradiction in *New York 2140*: the people at the bottom are designed by capital to supply blood even in the midst of their plight to bankers. The floating city seems to be a financial castle detached from the real economy, and shameless looting's consistency with the rules of market transactions and absolute liberalization reveals the maladies of late capitalism.

Conclusion

As "the island at the center of the world," Manhattan has inspired countless writers and has served as a spatial archetype in many of science fiction's worlds. As one of the most influential economic and financial centers in the world, the spatial image of Manhattan Island in science fiction is closely combined with its economic condition, representing the features of a "bubble metropolis." In addition to Manhattan's specific spatial form, science fiction

writers have depicted the island city via the characters, plot, imagery, and themes. These aspects gather to reflect the different stages of the operation of a bubble economy, illustrating a historical cycle of capitalism that can never be escaped.

The five science fiction novels discussed in this paper were all published around the time of a US economic crisis. The *Cities in Flight* series was written in the 1960s as a literary reaction to the collapse of the Bretton Woods system and the failure of the dollar as the anchor currency. *The Blister* was published in the shadow of the high fiscal deficits and increased inflation of the first oil crisis. *Terminal World*, *Zone One* and *New York 2140* were responses to class injustices during the subprime mortgage crisis, during which the government subsidized banks with tax money at the expense of ordinary people. There have been six major economic crises since World War II, including the dollar crisis in the late 1950s, the first oil crisis in the early 1970s, the second oil crisis in the early 1980s, the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s and the subprime mortgage crisis in 2008. It can be said that a bubble economy forms and collapses roughly every decade. In their works, science fiction writers not only review the consequences of previous crises but also warn of the signs of crises that gradually take shape.

Humans create a bubble economy, live in a bubble city, and are held hostage to bubbles for their whole lives. The depictions of Manhattan Island in crisis as a “bubble metropolis” in science fiction is also a warning to humans that they cannot make economic strategies that incentivize degradation for the pursuit of immediate benefits. Such a narrative also seeks to stimulate critical thinking on the urban design and high technology that could easily reshape our relationship with the environment, calling for social justice and public welfare. The time has come to ask that if we do not start taking action now, what will Manhattan and other island cities look like, and what will the human condition be in the future? In this sense, science fiction, like any form of art, can and should be a powerful engine of social change.

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