

Technocratic Anxiety and the Representation of Smart Cities in Contemporary British Urban Gothic Literature

U. Christopher David¹

¹Assistant professor, Department of English, Mother Theresa Arts and Science (affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University), Sindalai Cherry, Theni, Tamil Nadu, India. E-mail: davidchrish123@gmail.com

Abstract: The paper examines the representation of smart cities and the concerns raised about technology and surveillance in the existing British urban gothic literature. More specifically, the researcher draws upon the prominent works written by J.G. Ballard and China Miéville to analyze how technology affects psychological and social aspects of people's lives and takes control over many areas through physical surveillance and automation of cities. In particular, the researcher highlights surveillance, loss of autonomy, alienation, and loss of human agency as some of the most important themes that are explored through the depiction of smart cities. Employing the approach of examining the aforementioned literary works, the paper presents a critique of technological developments through the lens of dystopia. That is to say that even though the term of a smart city is associated with efficient and sustainable development, it represents a future in which people are deprived of their freedom by surveillance and control technologies. Moreover, the paper reflects upon the relevance of these topics in the contemporary world, where the advent of smart cities is progressively posing questions regarding privacy, autonomy, and the ethics of technology governance. As the application of surveillance technologies becomes more widespread in urban settings, there are ethical concerns and social implications of living in such cities. Ultimately, the paper recommends that one must revisit the cost-benefit analysis of technology development and human autonomy seriously, and smart city design should never compromise individual liberties and privacy.

Key Words: urban gothic, smart cities, technocratic anxiety, surveillance, human agency, technological control, dystopian literature

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Introduction

Smart cities refer to urban environments where technological solutions such as sensors, data processing, and interconnected infrastructure are utilized to make them more efficient, sustainable, and livable (Bina et al., 2020; Datta & Odendaal, 2019). However, the development of technologically advanced urban areas has led to fears, in particular, regarding privacy invasion, surveillance, and dehumanization of urban spaces. In other words, technocratic anxiety refers to the belief that sophisticated technological structures will take control of people, and the latter will transform into mere numbers for some machine of urban management.

Modern British urban Gothic literature represents a form of narration related to the conflict between human lives and technology (Wasson, 2013). As an urban literature type that portrays city settings as alienating, oppressive, and deteriorating, gothic fiction offers an excellent tool with which one can understand the negative aspect of the smart city phenomenon (Blake & Monnet, 2017). By merging gothic elements, such as horror, solitude, and monstrosity, with technological domination themes, British urban gothic literature critically assesses the phenomena of smart cities, offering literary representation and

interpretation of technological control in urban settings (Wilson & Wyly, 2023; Casanova-Vizcaíno & Ordiz, 2017).

This study is highly important in the context of modern technological advancements and the discussion about smart cities. With digitalization and data-drivenness becoming more prevalent among cities throughout the world, concerns about privacy, control, and liberties become highly relevant. Gothic traits peculiar to urban literature and its emphasis on dystopian visions and the consequences of unrestrained use of technological power and authority provide some insight into potential dangers associated with the development of smart cities (Usher, 2023; Foster, 2024). The study is intended to help understand better the consequences that technological progress may have for society in terms of ethical, political, and psychological problems.

This paper seeks to discuss the intersection between technocratic anxiety and smart cities in the context of British urban gothic literature. The analysis will be limited to the study of the major texts that incorporate the motifs of smart cities (pervasive surveillance, algorithmic government, and mediation of everyday life by technologies) into their narratives. Such texts, covering the work of authors like J.G. Ballard, China Miéville, and others, will be examined as being the manifestation of technocratic anxieties, particularly the ways in which these cities are the reflections of social and psychological anxieties, as well as the contributors to them. In addition, the study will be concerned with the relationship between the nature of technological and urban development and the identity of individuals and communities.

The structure of the paper is as follows: In section II, the relevant literature is reviewed. Section III looks at how technocratic anxiety is reflected in British urban gothic literature and concentrates on such themes as surveillance and control. Section IV gives the case studies of some of the chosen texts, where the representation of these anxieties is considered. Section V relates these literary portrayals to the wider implications of technology in terms of how people in society are worried about technology. The last section VI is the conclusion of the findings and recommendations on future research.

Literature Review

Technocratic anxiety is the social fear and anxiety that comes about as a result of the growing dependency on technology, information, and automated mechanisms in the management and control of human existence (Cramer, 2016). This fear is based on the fear of loss of personal freedom, privacy, and the increasing influence of impersonal algorithms and mechanisms. This fear is frequently expressed in literature in the form of dystopian stories where the world is not only dominated by technology, but also the physical space, and the mental and emotional condition of the characters in the story. Society Technocratic anxiety has its societal implications, which are important because they point out the conflict between technological advancement and human liberty, and the need to consider the ethical, political, and personal costs of technological developments. The urban gothic literature intensifies these themes through its focus on alienation, surveillance, and oppressive systems of control (South, 2017; Hurley, 2025).

Table 1 enumerates some of the technocratic anxieties as portrayed by authors such as J.G. Ballard and China Miéville, as well as encapsulating some of the literary devices employed to depict these anxieties. It assists in putting into perspective the key themes of surveillance, control, and degradation of human agency discussed in the urban gothic literature.

Smart cities can be described as urban environments that adopt the latest technologies like Internet of Things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI), and big data to streamline urban services and improve the quality

of life (Geoghegan & Cugurullo, 2025). These cities are defined by inter-relationship systems that oversee and control all aspects, including traffic to waste management, usually with the aim of enhancing sustainability and efficiency. Smart cities are commonly described as both utopian and dystopian spaces in fiction, with the positive aspects of technology usage being replaced by the psychological and social downsides (Workman, 2023). Artistic portrayals of intelligent cities are usually based on the issues of surveillance, social control, and loss of personal rights, showing the perils of unrestricted technological control.

Table 1: Key Technocratic Anxieties in British Urban Gothic Literature

Anxiety Theme	Text Example	Literary Devices Used
Surveillance	The City & The City (Miéville) (Schimanski, 2016)	Hidden surveillance, psychological manipulation
Control and Autonomy	The Drowned World (Ballard) (Qudah, 2025)	Isolation, surveillance systems, and environmental collapse
Social Alienation	The City & The City (Miéville) (Schimanski, 2016)	Forced separation, mental boundaries, disconnection
Technological Monstrosity	The Drowned World (Ballard) (Qudah, 2025)	Depiction of nature and technology in conflict

Urban gothic literature is also a subgenre of gothic fiction, focusing on urban settings, where cities are frequently portrayed as corrupting, gloomy locations in which human beings have a miserable existence due to being lonely, alienated, and feeling existential dread (Swain, 2016; Packham, 2019). The genre developed as a reaction to the intensive industrialization and urbanization of the 19th and 20th centuries, which expressed fears about the dehumanizing nature of modern cities. The urban gothic literature in the British setting has also become dynamic in order to capture modern issues, especially with the introduction of new technologies (Sothcott, 2016; Ilott, 2019). The urban environment (and in particular those landscapes of the technological) has been used by authors such as J.G. Ballard and China Miéville to further the feeling of alienation and fear, with the city itself being a character with monstrous traits (Matek, 2020). The surveillance and control theme, alongside the failure of human agency characteristic of the genre, is associated with the technocratic anxiety and dystopian connotations of smart cities.

The research on the crossroads between urban gothic literature, the technocratic anxiety, and smart cities was carried out in previous studies, where the emotional and psychological cost of residing within technocratic-controlled cities was examined. These are satirical works that criticize the advancement in technology and the effects of technology with technocratic anxiety, such as the loss of privacy, autonomy, and dehumanization. The increasing popularity of smart cities in modern fiction is also the focus of research, and many works dwell upon its darker facets. Also, research on British urban gothic literature has followed the development of the genre in adapting to contemporary fears of technology, surveillance, and social control, so that it provides the perfect prism through which to analyze smart cities and technocratic anxieties.

Technocratic Anxiety in British Urban Gothic Literature

Technological Control and Surveillance

Smart cities are commonly depicted in British urban gothic literature as a place where technology and its control and surveillance take on all spheres of life, causing a deep fear of loss of autonomy. These cities are often portrayed as extremely surveilled places where people are being constantly watched by a plethora

of interdependent devices and algorithms. Literature such as J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise* and China Miéville's *The City and The City* discuss how surveillance technologies, although designed to regulate life in the city, produce an atmosphere of claustrophobia and suffocation. The technological efficiency and order promise are replaced by the psychological cost of being constantly monitored in such environments. The privacy and self-determination are lost, and the disturbing fact is that the inhabitants have lost their freedom and turned into cogs in a very controlled, very mechanized machine. This technocratic fear brings out the worst aspect of technological advancement and the implications of the urban setting that is controlled by data and automation.

Table 2: Comparison of Surveillance and Control in Urban Gothic Texts

Novel	Type of Surveillance	Impact on Characters	Technological Systems Involved
The City & The City (Schimanski, 2016)	Spatial division, legal separation	Alienation, social conflict	Legal systems, urban surveillance
The Drowned World (Qudah, 2025)	Environmental monitoring, tracking	Psychological collapse, isolation	Climate change technology, data collection
The Concrete Jungle	Surveillance through building systems	Confinement, paranoia	Security cameras, automated systems

Table 2 is a comparison of the representation of surveillance and control in three major urban gothic books, *The City and The City* by China Miéville, and *The Drowned World* and *The Concrete Jungle* by J.G. Ballard. It provides an overview of the nature of surveillance, its effect on the characters, and the technological system used in each text, and gives a comparative review of the themes in relation to various works.

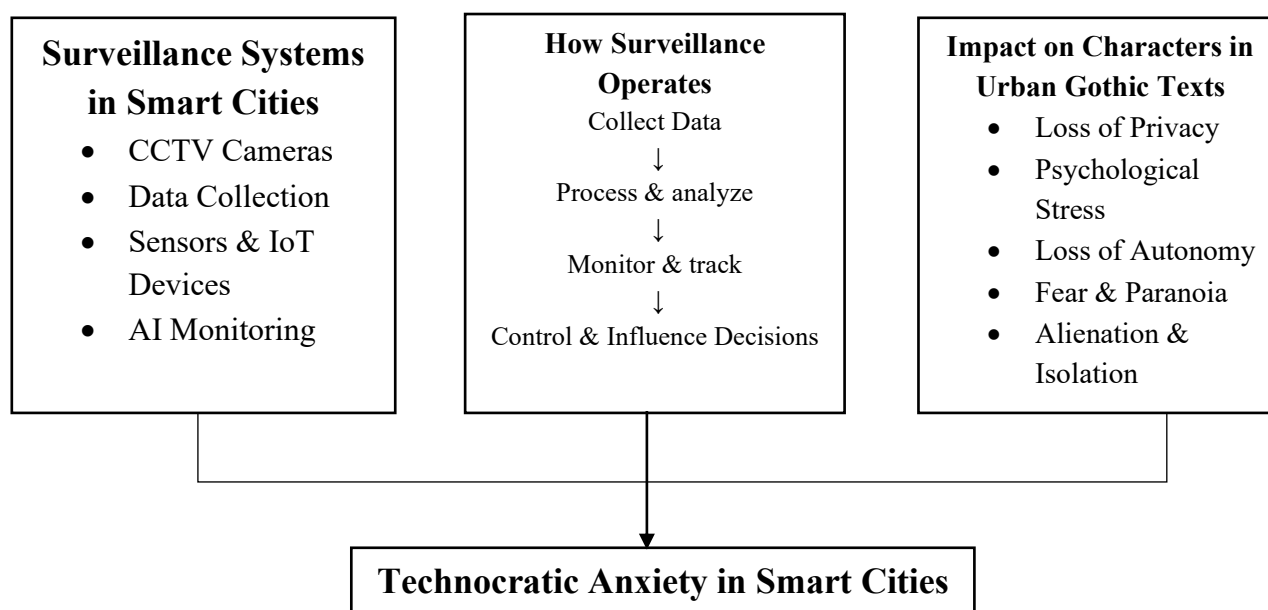


Figure 1: Surveillance Systems in Smart Cities as Depicted in Urban Gothic Texts

Figure 1 shows the representation of surveillance systems in smart cities in the works of urban gothic literature, which focuses on the contribution to the formation of technocratic anxiety. The diagram shows the process starting with Surveillance Systems in Smart Cities, such as CCTV cameras, IoT devices, data collection, and AI monitoring, which gather vast amounts of personal data. This information is processed and analyzed by AI and machine learning algorithms, and one can track, monitor, and predict behaviors. In

the following section, attention is paid to how these systems Control and Influence Decisions, which influence the movements of people and their access to resources. Finally, Impact on the Characters of Urban Gothic Texts shows how this results in the loss of privacy, psychological pressure, loss of freedom, and alienation and isolation of the characters. These effects culminate in Technocratic Anxiety in Smart Cities, which shows how such a domination of the surveillance systems generates dystopian, oppressive conditions, resulting in fear, paranoia, and the loss of personal liberties. The flowchart assists in visualizing the explicit connection between the surveillance systems and the social and psychological effects in urban gothic stories.

Human vs. Machine

One of the main elements in the smart cities of urban gothic is the theme of human agency versus machine dominance. The clash of the natural human spirit with the more and more mechanized and automated urban world is a common theme in these stories. With the increased technological sophistication of cities, the human aspect is usually overshadowed, and people are in conflict with the very systems that are meant to improve their lives. The human desire to be independent is contrasted with the sheer strength of the forces of nature and technology in such a work as *The Drowned World* by J.G. Ballard, in which the main characters are compelled to face their own declining ability to dominate the environment. This motif also spreads to the dehumanization of urban life in which technological systems, like AI-driven government and robotics-controlled surveillance, are the real actors on the field, which determines the behavior of people and makes them the subjects of a huge machine-like city organization. Human-machine tension poses very serious ethical and existential issues regarding free will, control, and the place of human beings in a world that is becoming more automated.

Themes of Alienation and Isolation

The urban gothic story is about alienation and isolation with particular reference to technologically advanced cities. Although connectedness is a promise of smart cities, characters in these works tend to feel very estranged, not only in relation to their surroundings but also in relation to others. Acting as places of alienation, these cities that are meant to be linked and effective tend to become places where human relations are tense or lacking. The result of the growth of surveillance technologies and automated systems is the breakdown of social ties, citizens becoming data points, and losing their connection with the environment. The physical and emotional alienation of the characters in novels like *The Concrete Jungle* by J.G. Ballard reflects the increased distance between people and the technological processes that form their lives. These motifs serve as the worries of contemporary urbanization, where the greater the amount of technology that is incorporated into everyday life, the less significant human relations are. The outcome is a city that is a cold, dehumanizing place, despite having its technological advantages, which only leads to a sense of loneliness and disconnection.

Case Studies

Key Literary Works

British urban gothic literature provides an interesting perspective on technocratic anxieties, such as the writings of authors such as J.G. Ballard and China Miéville. *The Drowned World* sees Ballard fantasize about the future of technology and surveillance systems that continue to dominate the relics of civilization, as nature takes back the city infrastructure. Likewise, in *The City and The City*, Miéville has two cities, Beszel and Ul Qoma, which exist in the same physical location but are separated by a strict regime of surveillance and legal frontiers. This idea of duality emphasizes on technocratic domination and the

estrangement it creates. In addition, the novel *The Concrete Jungle* by Ballard highlights the psychological price that one has to pay when living in a world where everything is watched through technology, and technology controls both physical space and human beings themselves.

In-depth Analysis

Among the most important scenes in *The Drowned World* is the scene where the protagonist goes for a drive in a flooded city, in which the remains of technological artifacts, such as monitoring equipment, continue to be utilized in order to watch over the remaining survivors. In other words, the continuation of monitoring despite the complete destruction of the environment indicates the unavoidable presence of technocratic domination of human life. Also, in *The City and The City*, when Tyador Borlui tries to pass between the two cities, he is caught in the nets of the technological monitoring system, indicating that technology is able to control human perception besides controlling human actions. Similarly, in *The Concrete Jungle*, the inability of the protagonist to make decisions by himself in a tall building without any people around illustrates the overwhelming power of surveillance and control that worries people constantly to indicate to them that they are not free.

Comparison Across Texts

In these narratives, surveillance and control become major themes that manifest technocratic fears. Although Ballard is more inclined towards psychological repression and isolation with the help of technology, Miéville in *The City and the City* employs surveillance to ensure that two cities are physically and socially separated. The two methods are indicative of the fear that technology, although seemingly meant to enhance efficiency and security, may actually create alienation and oppression. Human vs machine is another theme present in all three works, with people finding it difficult to maintain their freedom in a world that is increasingly filled with automated systems and spying technologies. Contrarily, Ballard frequently uses the theme of isolation as a mental phenomenon; Miéville uses it as a literal, spatial separation, but both interpretations emphasize dehumanizing aspects of technological dominance. Taken together, these works all criticize the utopian delights of smart cities, emphasizing the dystopian nature of what arises when technology becomes a means of omnipresent control and surveillance.

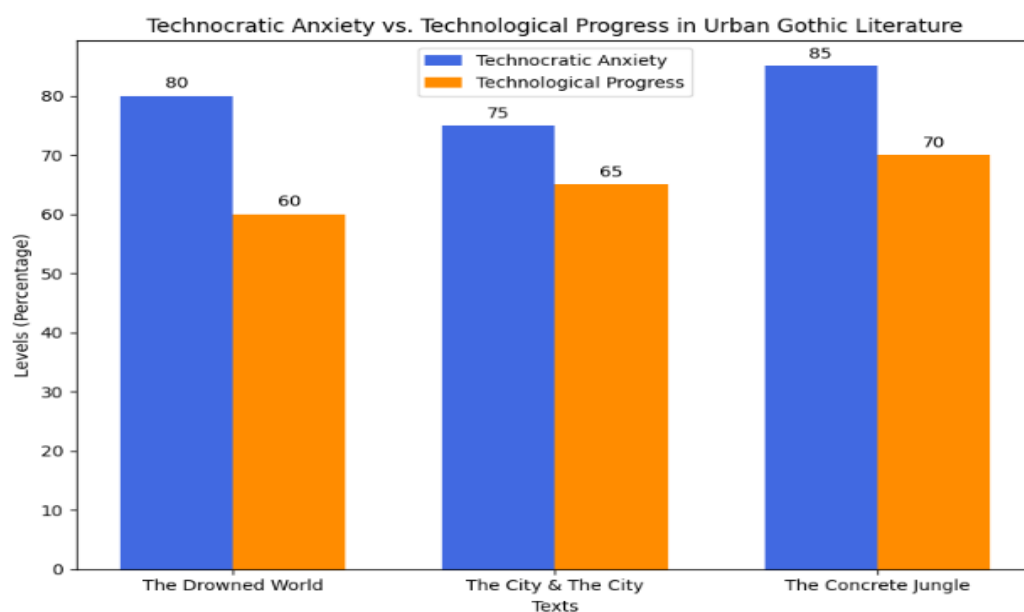


Figure 2: Technocratic Anxiety vs. Technological Progress in Urban Gothic Literature

Figure 2 visually summarizes the comparison between the levels of technocratic anxiety and technological progress in urban gothic texts. It serves to support the argument about how these readings strike a balance between the theme of anxiety and progress and the illustration of the contrast between the hope of technological progress and the anxieties it generates.

Discussion and Implications

Interpretation of Findings

British urban gothic literature of smart cities accentuates modern anxieties concerning the ubiquitous effect of technology, surveillance, and control in urban settings. Cities in these works are depicted as structures of control, with technology acting as an instrument of control over city life, as well as a way of depriving people of their freedoms. In novels such as *The City* and *The Concrete Jungle*, surveillance is an unavoidable element restricting privacy and freedom, and it traps people in a web of technology. Human versus machine dynamic, especially in works of Ballard, focuses on the opposition between human agency and a mechanized, dehumanized city. These narratives are a criticism of the utopian hopes of the smart cities because they depict dystopian landscapes where technological advancement is used to separate, alienate, and even psychologically damage individuals, with a deep fear of how technological advances could dehumanize people.

Broader Implications

The depiction of the smart cities through the urban gothic fiction helps to provide an insight into the broader implications that smart city developments and technocracy may hold for society today. With cities all over the world resorting to smart technology to streamline urban life, the dangers of surveillance, intrusion of personal privacy, and the destruction of personal freedoms become more evident. The works of urban gothic can be viewed as warnings, as they encourage people to think about the moral and psychological price of technological progress. These literary portraits emphasize the possibility of smart cities becoming places of control and oppression in which technology is employed not to the advantage of the individuals but to the consolidation of power of anonymous, impersonal authorities. With the rise of smart cities, these literary criticisms are a reminder of the importance of incorporating a balance between innovation and the importance of individual autonomy and privacy.

Future Research

Further studies can be done on more genres and geographical contexts to understand more about how smart cities and technocratic fears are represented globally. Although the literature of the British urban gothic era can be of great interest, the same themes can be discussed in the non-Western dystopian literature, cyberpunk, posthuman fiction, or dystopian literature. This would enable a more varied discussion of the ways that various societies perceive the relationship between technology, urban settings, and individual liberties. International comparative analysis might help to understand how local political, technological, and cultural factors influence the image of smart city and surveillance. Also, actual examples of smart city applications, like in Singapore or Songdo, might offer a more real-world view of how these literary fears are being applied to real-world urban planning and governance, and open the divide between fiction and reality when discussing technocratic control.

Conclusion

The paper has examined how the idea of smart cities and technocratic anxieties is represented in modern British urban gothic literature. It has explored the impact of technology, surveillance, and control that is widespread in urban settings through the works of writers like J.G. Ballard and China Miéville. The paper also emphasized the role of surveillance mechanisms in intelligent cities, which lead to loss of individual freedom, isolation, and mental health problems. Analyzing the conflicts between the human agency and technological power, it also discovered the most important themes, including the loss of privacy, social isolation, and technocratic control. Urban gothic literature was studied in more depth in this essay, as it allowed gaining a better understanding of the critique of urban promises by smart cities presented in the urban gothic literature. Urban gothic literature addresses some of the most relevant themes in the present time as with the development of smart cities and further technological invasion, the theme of privacy, individual freedom, and social control becomes an important issue to pay attention to. This type of literature offers a glimpse at how it feels to live in a highly technologized world. Urban gothic literature is a cautionary tale that tells people to beware of their greediness and remember that while developing smart cities, one should be extremely careful in terms of ethical aspects, and that human intervention is important here. While making a smart city environment, all the potential costs of doing this should be considered so that the interests of people do not become the last priority.

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