The well-worn modernist narrative depicting a future made better through technologies that offer higher fidelity, greater information access, and increased social connectivity parallels a darker critical history of the cultural oppression those technologies empower.

Liam Young and Tim Maughan’s “Where the City Can’t See” (2016) enters these competing paradigms with a glimpse of the near-future seen through an eerily-resonant surveying (and surveillant) technology: the laser scanner. Laser scanning uses a remote, radar-like scan to rapidly capture shapes of objects, buildings, and landscapes. It is used by architects, landscape architects, and planners for site documentation as well as by movie producers to create visual special effects. Young and Maughan’s fiction film, shot in Detroit, claims to be the first to use only laser scanning technologies. This film not only deploys the self-referential trope of using a surveillant technology to create a film whose protagonists are seeking to escape the “smart city,” it refuses to resolve the effect, shattering the surfaces of buildings and people. The viewer sees through the surface. As we follow the story of young factory workers wearing digital camouflage, the pixelated, dematerialized surfaces serve as an analogical reminder that the scanner’s gaze is omniscient: buildings, cars, trees, and people are all transparent. Their goal is to find an unmapped place in the city—a space that their driverless car cannot locate. In this dystopic landscape, where no space escapes the sentient city’s scrutiny, Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon and Big Brother seem benign.

In Young and Maughan’s film, reality is only that which can be mapped and therefore controlled. The grainy ghost-like buildings and characters are both subject to the totalizing control of technologies, and yet escape its grasp in their dissolved surfaces. This futuristic film shows us the city through the eyes of the technologies that control it today, and asks us to question how contemporary envisioning technologies such as GPS, driverless cars, and urban management systems, are shaping not only our experiences but the city itself. --Ashley Schafer