11.139/11.239: The City in Film
Syllabus and Orientation Notes
Ezra Haber Glenn, Lecturer
Spring 2017

1 Contact Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>name</th>
<th>email</th>
<th>office</th>
<th>office hours</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ezra Glenn</td>
<td><a href="mailto:eglenn@mit.edu">eglenn@mit.edu</a></td>
<td>7-337</td>
<td>Tues. 9–10AM</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Class website:
http://stellar.mit.edu/S/course/11/sp17/11.139

2 Overview

Over the past 150 years, the world has moved from one characterized by rural settlement patterns and provincial lifestyles to one dominated by urbanization, industrialization, immigration, and globalization. Interestingly, the history of this transformation overlaps nearly perfectly with the development of motion pictures, which have served as silent—and then talking—witnesses to our changing lifestyles, changing cities, and changing attitudes about the increasingly urban world we live in. Through the movies—both documentaries and feature films—we are able to see, hear, and share the lived experiences of urban dwellers around the world and across more than twelve decades.

Using film as a lens to explore and interpret various aspects of the urban experience in both the U.S. and abroad, this course presents a survey of important developments in urbanism from 1900 to the present day, including changes in technology, bureaucracy, and industrialization; immigration and national identity; race, class, gender, and economic inequality; politics, conformity, and urban anomic; planning, development, private property, displacement, sprawl, environmental degradation, and suburbanization; and more.

The films shown in the course vary from year to year, but always include a balance of “classics” from the history of film, an occasional experimental/avant-garde film, and a number of more recent, mainstream movies. (See below for this year’s schedule.)
2.1 Objectives

In this course, you will learn:

1. How to critically examine cities, films about cities, and cultural attitudes and perspectives about urban life and urban issues depicted in films;

2. How to use techniques of close-reading and textual-analysis to interpret meaning (both implicit and explicit) in the language of cities and films;

3. How to think about the changing nature of cities over the past 100 years—initially in an American/European context, but with important implications and extensions for other rapidly urbanizing areas; and

4. How to express and discuss your ideas about both films and cities through written and oral arguments, using visual evidence to support your arguments.

2.2 What this class is not

Although this class will include a lot of films, it will not be a course on the history of film or the technical aspects of film-making. For either of these, there are other excellent subjects in the catalog taught by other departments. For our purposes, we will view, analyze, and discuss films, but not to learn what they teach us about film per se; rather, our focus will be to learn what they can teach us about cities—past, present, and future—and the various elements that come together to make, change, and imbue them with meaning.

3 Logistics

3.1 Class

Our class meets twice times per week: a “film screening” on Thursday evening (to watch a film), and a “discussion section” on Tuesday afternoon to talk about the film and the week’s reading assignments, as well as occasional oral presentations, additional film clips, and other material.

3.2 Credits

At the undergraduate-level (11.139), this is a 9 unit class and it meets the Institute requirements for a HASS-H subject. In addition, the course meets MIT’s CI-H requirement and has been approved by the Subcommittee on the Communication Requirement (SOCR).

At the graduate-level (11.239), this is a 9 unit class.
3.3 Office Hours

I’ve posted office hours for the class, and I’m always happy to meet with you if you need to talk about something; if you are planning on coming, please let me know in advance, so I can make sure I’m free. If these times don’t work with your schedule, we can easily arrange some other time to meet outside of class—just email or talk to me in person and we’ll figure something out.

4 Requirements

In order to succeed in this class and learn the material, you must (a) attend all classes and screenings, (b) view all of the semester’s films with a thoughtful, attentive, critical mind, (c) prepare and submit brief comments on said films, and (d) read all of the weekly assignments; (e) complete all of the listed written assignments; and (f) present your work in person to your discussion section at least once. These requirements are described in more detail below.

4.1 Readings

For every week of class we will have few short readings—usually one or two film reviews or essays, plus a chapter or two from the Short Guide to Writing About Film (Corrigan, 2012) and/or an article about cities. (See “Schedule” and “References,” below for additional details.) When indicated, please do these readings before the film date for which they are assigned and come prepared to discuss them. (Typically, reviews can be read after the screening, but background material should be read prior to the film.)

Importantly, we will read film reviews both for their content and to learn from their style and craft. One of the best ways to develop your own writing is to study the writing of others, and to think carefully about both what they observed and how they conveyed and supported it. A film review is not simply a capsule summary or a report about how much someone liked it (“Five stars — a must see . . . fun for the whole family,” etc.): when done right, criticism adds to the experience of film, creating a dialog that connects the ideas of the film-maker with the history of the art and the changing culture at large.

4.2 Films

All films will be shown on Thursday evenings, following brief remarks. (See “Schedule,” below.) Attendance at class screenings is mandatory. If for some reason you are unable to attend a particular date, it is your responsibility to (a) inform the instructor prior to the class, (b) watch the film on DVD prior to the next class meeting, and (c) check in with a classmate to learn what else you

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1 The Coop has the latest edition, but it is pretty expensive for such a short book; you may be able to find used copies of this or other editions, which is fine—anything after the fifth should be pretty similar for our purposes.
missed. All films will be available on reserve at Rotch Library and/or available via MIT’s “Kanopy” website (http://mit.kanopystreaming.com/).

Students are expected to watch films attentively, with an active mind; although all of these films are certainly entertaining, we are viewing them as more than entertainment. To help facilitate this and to generate ideas for papers and class discussion, you are required to prepare brief observations and questions about the films. Since we will be watching films in the dark, you may want to purchase a small book-light for note-taking; laptops, tablets, and other computers cannot be used.

Taken together, these weekly submissions will count for 26% of the final grade for the class; late comments will not be accepted for credit, although students are allowed to skip the comments for one of the 14 films.

4.3 Papers

This course has been designed to meet MIT’s CI-H requirement. Students are required to write three short papers over the course of the class, plus one larger film essay, due at the end of the term. The total writing output of the class, including weekly film comments, will be approximately 25–30 pages. (Grading percentages for papers are shown below under “Grading.”)

Undergraduate students must also revise and resubmit at least one of the first three short papers. When submitting a revised paper, students are asked to attach a copy of the the original graded paper with comments, and a cover sheet indicating the major changes they have made to the paper as a result of the written and oral feedback they received.

4.3.1 Graduate-Level Assignments

As part of the three short papers listed above, students enrolled in 11.239 (graduate-level/9 units) may be assigned additional material to review and discuss; similarly, for the final paper graduate students are expected to write a longer essay integrating and discussing more of the scholarly literature of their field. The total writing output of the class for graduate students, including weekly film comments, will be approximately 30–40 pages.

2 Many are available online in one format or another as well.
3 See the additional handout on “Preparing Film Comments” for additional information about comments and deadlines.
4 Note: MIT’s Writing and Communication Center (WCC) offers free one-on-one professional advice on all types of academic, creative, and professional writing and oral presentations. To register and make appointments, visit https://mit.mywconline.com/. To access the WCC’s many pages of advice about writing and oral presentations, visit http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/
5 Presumably this field will be urban planning or architecture, but let me know if there are other areas you’d like to connect.
4.4 Oral Presentation

Students are required to present their work in class at least once during the semester: this may be related to one of the three short papers, or it may be an opportunity to present initial thoughts on the final paper for comments and feedback. (By the third week in of the semester, we will develop a schedule for these presentations.)

The oral presentation represents 6% of the final grade.

4.5 Grading

Final grades for the class will be based on the following formula:

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<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Formula</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Weekly Film Comments</td>
<td>$13 \times 2$</td>
<td>26%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
<td></td>
<td>16%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Three Short Papers</td>
<td>$3 \times 12$</td>
<td>36%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oral Presentation</td>
<td>$1 \times 6$</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Film Essay</td>
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<td>16%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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Notes:

1. Weekly film comments must be submitted for 13 of the 14 films shown (student’s choice), no later than the start of Tuesday’s class; late comments will not be accepted.

2. For rewritten/resubmitted papers, grades will reflect a 65/35 blend of the two scores, with the revised score counting for more.

5 Schedule

5.1 Screening Dates

The films listed below represent a tentative schedule; the final schedule will be distributed by the first class.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Assignments Due*</th>
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| 2/9  | *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, Walther Ruttman (1927)  
      | *Manhatta*, Sheeler and Strand (1921, short) |                  |
| 2/16 | The Crowd, King Vidor (1928) |                  |
| 2/23 | *Ladri di Biciclette (Bicycle Thieves)*, Vittorio De Sica (1948) | paper due: 2/27 |
| 3/2  | The Naked City, Jules Dassin (1948) |                  |
| 3/9  | Odd Man Out, Carol Reed (1947) |                  |
| 3/16 | *Cléo de 5 à 7 (Cléo from 5 to 7)*, Agnès Varda (1962) |                  |
| 3/30 | Spring Break |                  |
| 4/6  | *Play Time*, Jacques Tati (1967) |                  |
| 5/18 | *TBD/“Viewer’s Choice”* |                  |

*All weeks also include readings (1–2 film reviews/essays, articles, and/or book chapters), plus written comments on films; some weeks also include additional required film screenings.

### 5.2 Weekly Readings and Assignment Due Dates

**Note:** assignments marked with a † should be read **before** the film; all other assignments should be read **prior to the next class meeting after the film.**

2/9  *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, Walther Ruttman (1927)


Read an in-depth critical review of a film you’ve seen, ideally one related to the some of topics we’ll be covering in this course. Good sources include The New York Times and The New Yorker, or something from [Lopate](#).
(2006) (on reserve at the library). Bring a copy of this review to class to discuss.

2/16 *The Crowd*, King Vidor (1928)
† Lewis Mumford. What is a city? *Architectural Record*, 1937
Review the assignment for paper #1 and watch one of the required additional films.

2/23 *Ladri di Biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*), Vittorio De Sica (1948)
† Cesare Zavattini. Some ideas on the cinema. *Sight and Sound*, 23:64–69, 1953
Undergraduate paper #1 due (2/27): “City Symphonies” or “Alone in the Crowd.”

3/2 *The Naked City*, Jules Dassin (1948)
† Weegee. *Naked City*. Essential Books, 1945, selected sections
Bosley Crowther. ‘Naked City,’ Mark Hellinger’s final film, at Capitol—Fitzgerald heads cast. *New York Times*, March 5, 1948

3/9 *Odd Man Out*, Carol Reed (1947)
3/16  *Cléo from 5 to 7*, Agnès Varda (1962)
    Valerie Orpen. *French Film Guides: Cléo de 5 à 7*. University of Illinois Press, 2007, pp. xi, 55–70

    *Undergraduate paper #2 due (3/23): “Lost in the City” — close reading and scene analysis*

3/30 —No Film: Spring Break—

4/6  *Play Time*, Jacques Tati (1967)

4/20  *Roma*, Federico Fellini (1972)

   *Undergraduate paper #3 due (4/23): “One Theme, Three Films”*


   Mike Davis. Beyond *Blade Runner*: Urban control—the ecology of fear. Open Magazine Pamphlet Series, 1992


   Mark A. Reid, editor. *Spike Lee’s Do the Right Thing*. Cambridge University Press, 1997, selected reviews


   *No readings; work on your final paper and presentation.*

5/18  TBD/"Viewer’s Choice"

   *No readings — review previous weeks and finish your paper.*

   *Final paper due (5/18), last week for presentations.*

6  Additional Notes

6.1  Feedback

   Somewhere in here I wanted to be sure to mention that I really do care about your ideas and feedback on the course, and ideally would want it during the semester so I can be aware of problems (or opportunities) and make changes as necessary. *Please* feel free to contact me with issues as they arise, either in person or through email (or even anonymous notes).

6.2  Some Other Required Elements

   Although all of this should go without saying, the Institute requires us to say the following:
6.2.1 Accommodation for Disabilities

If you have a documented disability, or any other problem you think may affect your ability to perform in class, please see me early in the semester so that arrangements may be made to accommodate you.

6.2.2 Academic Misconduct

Plagiarism and cheating are both academic crimes. Never (1) turn in an assignment that you did not write yourself, (2) turn in an assignment for this class that you previously turned in for another class, or (3) cheat on an exam. If you do so, it may result in a failing grade for the class, and possibly even suspension from the college. Please see me if you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism. Anyone caught cheating on an exam will be reported to the provost in line with recognized university procedures.

7 Any Questions?

7.1 Late Papers

Q: What if I can’t get the paper in on the deadline?
A: Get it in earlier.

Q: Cute, but really: can I hand it in late?
A: Only if you have an extension. If you don’t, I’ll accept it, but you’ll get graded off for being late.

Q: OK, that sounds fair. How do I get an extension?
A: That’s easy. Ask for one (a) no less than one week before the due date and (b) no more than once per semester. I don’t even need to know why you need it — I know you guys are busy.

Q: Is there any way to get an extension less than a week before the due date?
A: You mean you want an extension on asking for the extension?

Q: Yes, I guess so. But when you put it that way, it sounds like the answer is probably “no.”
A: I think I agree — things would get crazy if we started down that path.

References


