

# 11.139: The City in Film

## Syllabus and Orientation Notes

Ezra Haber Glenn, Lecturer

Spring 2015

### 1 Contact Information

name	email	office	office hours
Ezra Glenn	<a href="mailto:eglenn@mit.edu">eglenn@mit.edu</a>	7-337	Tues. 9–11AM

Class website:

<http://stellar.mit.edu/S/course/11/sp15/11.139>

### 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 anomie; 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 three times per week: a “lecture section” on Wednesday afternoon to set the context for the week’s film; a “film screening” on Thursday evening; and a smaller “discussion section” early the following week, when we talk about the film and the week’s reading assignment. (Discussion sections will also be used for student presentations, writing clinics, review of key scenes or clips from additional films, and other things best done in small groups.)

### 3.2 Credits

At the undergraduate-level, this is a 12 unit class (3-3-6), and is intended to meet the Institute requirements for a CI-H and HASS-H subject.

### 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) take and submit notes 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)<sup>1</sup> 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 and (b) watch the film on DVD *prior to the next class meeting*. All films will be available on reserve at Rotch Library.

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<sup>1</sup>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.

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 and submit notes no later than midnight Sunday following each film.<sup>2</sup> *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 notes will count for 24% of the final grade for the class; late submissions will not be accepted for credit, although students are allowed to skip the notes for *one* of the 13 films. (For more on how to take film notes, see Corrigan, 2012, chapter 2 and the handout on “Film Notes.”)

### 4.3 Papers

This course has been designed to meet MIT’s CI-H requirement. In addition to the weekly film notes described above, 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 notes, will be 25-30 pages. (Grading percentages for papers are shown below under “Grading.”)

Students must also revise and resubmit at least one of the first two 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.

### 4.4 Oral Presentation

When taken as a full 12-unit subject, students are required to present their work orally to a subset of the class, at least once during the semester: this may be following one of the three short papers (to be assigned in sections), or it may be an opportunity to present initial thoughts on the final paper for comments and feedback. The oral presentation represents 5% of the final grade.

### 4.5 Grading

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

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<sup>2</sup>If you cannot submit them electronically by this deadline, you can submit a hard copy to my office by noon Monday.

Weekly Film Notes	2 x 12 =	24%
Class Participation		20%
Three Short Papers	3 x 10 =	30%
Oral Presentation	1 x 5 =	5%
Final Film Essay		20%
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Subtotal		99%
Completion of Final Film Evaluation Sheet		1%
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Total		100%

Notes:

1. Weekly film notes must be submitted for 12 of the 13 films shown (student's choice), no later than the Sunday evening following each film; no late notes will 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.

Date	Film	Assignments Due*
2/5	<i>Metropolis</i> , Fritz Lang (1926)	
2/12	<i>Berlin: Symphony of a Great City</i> , Walther Ruttmann (1927)	
2/19	<i>The Crowd</i> , King Vidor (1928)	paper due: 2/23
2/26	<i>Modern Times</i> , Charles Chaplin (1936)	
3/5	<i>Ladri di Biciclette (Bicycle Thieves)</i> , Vittorio De Sica (1948)	
3/12	<i>The Naked City</i> , Jules Dassin (1948)	
3/19	<i>West Side Story</i> , Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins (1961)	paper due: 3/20
3/26	Spring Break	
4/2	<i>Play Time</i> , Jacques Tati (1967)	
4/9	<i>Midnight Cowboy</i> , John Schlesinger (1969)	
4/16	<i>Blade Runner</i> , Ridley Scott (1982)	paper due: 4/20
4/23	<i>Do the Right Thing</i> , Spike Lee (1989)	
4/30	<i>London</i> , Patrick Keiller (1992)	
5/7	<i>Night on Earth</i> , Jim Jarmusch (1991)	
5/12	—	final paper due

\*All weeks also include readings (2–3 film reviews/essays and/or book chapters), plus written notes on films.

## 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.*

### 2/5 *Metropolis*, Fritz Lang (1926)

† Kingsley Davis. The urbanization of the human population. *Scientific American*, September 1965. Reprinted in: Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout, editors. *The City Reader*. Routledge, fourth edition, 2007, pp. 17–26

H. G. Wells. Mr. Wells reviews a current film. In Michael Minden and Holger Bachmann, editors, *Fritz Lang's Metropolis: Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*, pages 94–100. Camden House, 2000/1927

Luis Buñel. *Metropolis*. In Michael Minden and Holger Bachmann, editors, *Fritz Lang's Metropolis: Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*, pages 106–108. Camden House, 2000/1927

Timothy Corrigan. *Short Guide to Writing About Film*. Longman, eighth edition, 2012, chapters 1 and 2

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).

### 2/12 *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, Walther Ruttmann (1927)

† Lewis Mumford. What is a city? *Architectural Record*, 1937

Andrew Webber. Symphony of a city: motion pictures and still lives in Weimar Berlin. In Andrew Webber and Emma Wilson, editors, *Cities in Transition: the moving image and the modern metropolis*, chapter 4. Wallflower Press, 2008

Allan B. Jacobs. Looking at cities. *Places*, 1(4), 1984

### 2/19 *The Crowd*, King Vidor (1928)

† Louis Wirth. Urbanism as a way of life. *American Journal of Sociology*, 1938. Reprinted in: Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout, editors. *The City Reader*. Routledge, fourth edition, 2007, pp. 90–97

Timothy Corrigan. *Short Guide to Writing About Film*. Longman, eighth edition, 2012, chapter 3

### 2/23 paper due: observing city scenes

### 2/26 *Modern Times*, Charles Chaplin (1936)

† Frederick W. Taylor. Scientific management. In Frank Fisher and Carmen Sirianni, editors, *Critical Studies in Organization & Bureaucracy*,

chapter 4, pages 90–97. Temple University Press, second edition, 1984

Joan Mellen. *Modern Times*. BFI, 2006, pp. 22–68

Timothy Corrigan. *Short Guide to Writing About Film*. Longman, eighth edition, 2012, chapter 4

**3/5** *Ladri di Biciclette (Bicycle Thieves)*, Vittorio De Sica (1948)

Robert S. C. Gordon. *Bicycle Thieves*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, chapters 5–6 (“Cities” and “Communities”)

Timothy Corrigan. *Short Guide to Writing About Film*. Longman, eighth edition, 2012, chapter 5

**3/12** *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

Brian McDonnell. Film noir and the city. In Geoff Mayer and Brian McDonnell, editors, *Encyclopedia of Film Noir*, pages 47–61. Greenwood Press, 2007

Matthew Farish. Cities in shade: urban geography and the uses of noir. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 23:95–98; 106–110 (excerpt), 2005

**3/19** *West Side Story*, Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins (1961)

† Oscar Lewis. *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York*. Vintage, 1966 (excerpts)

† Ellen Padilla. Race relations: a Puerto Rican view. In Robert K. Yin, editor, *The City in the Seventies*, chapter 3. Peacock, 1972

Stanley Kauffmann. The asphalt Romeo and Juliet. *The New Republic*, 145(17):28–29, October 1961  
Timothy Corrigan. *Short Guide to Writing About Film*. Longman, eighth edition, 2012, chapter 6

**3/20** paper due: close reading, scene analysis

**3/26** —*No Film: Spring Break*—

**4/2** *Play Time*, Jacques Tati (1967)

† Jane Jacobs. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Vintage, 1961, pp. 50–54

Jonathan Rosenbaum. Tati’s democracy. *Film Comment*, pages 366–341, May/June 1973

Laurent Marie. Jacques Tati’s *Play Time* as the New Babylon. In Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice, editors, *Cinema and the City*, pages 257–269. Blackwell, 2001

**4/9** *Midnight Cowboy*, John Schlesinger (1969)

† Stanley Milgram. The experience of living in cities. In Robert K. Yin, editor, *The City in the Seventies*, chapter 36, pages 250–259. Peacock, 1972

† Samuel R. Delany. *Time Square Red, Times Square Blue*. NYU, 1999, pp. xi–xviii and 3–19

James Clapp. Are you talking to me?—New York and the cinema of urban alienation. *Visual Anthropology*, 18:1–18, 2005

**4/16** *Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott (1982)

† Henry Jenkins. Looking at the city in the *Matrix* franchise. In Andrew Webber and Emma Wilson, editors, *Cities in Transition: the moving image and the modern metropolis*, chapter 13. Wallflower Press, 2008

Scott Bukatman. *Blade Runner*. BFI, 1997, pp. 42–63

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

**4/20** paper due: films and themes

**4/23** *Do the Right Thing*, Spike Lee (1989)

† David Sterritt. He cuts heads. In Murray Pomerance, editor, *City that Never Sleeps: New York and the Filmic Imagination*, pages 137–150. Rutgers University Press, 2007

Joe Klein. Spiked? Dinkins and *Do the Right Thing*. *New York Magazine*, June 26 1989

Spike Lee. Say it ain't so, Joe. *New York Magazine*, July 17 1989

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

**4/30** *London*, Patrick Keiller (1992)

Kevin Lynch. *The Image of the City*. MIT Press, 1960, chapters 1–2 (“The Image of the Environment” and “Three Cities”)

Simon Sadler. *The Situationist City*. MIT Press, 1998, chapter 2 (“Formulary for a New Urbanism: Rethinking the City”)

**5/7** *Chacun Cherche Son Chat (When the Cat's Away)*, Cédric Klapisch (1996)

Douglas Muzzio. “Decent people shouldn't live here”: The American city in cinema. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 18(2):189–215, 1996

**5/12** final paper due: independent project

## 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

Scott Bukatman. *Blade Runner*. BFI, 1997.

Luis Buñel. Metropolis. In Michael Minden and Holger Bachmann, editors, *Fritz Lang’s Metropolis: Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*, pages 106–108. Camden House, 2000/1927.

James Clapp. Are you talking to me?—New York and the cinema of urban alienation. *Visual Anthropology*, 18:1–18, 2005.

Timothy Corrigan. *Short Guide to Writing About Film*. Longman, eighth edition, 2012.

Bosley Crowther. ‘Naked City,’ Mark Hellinger’s final film, at Capitol—Fitzgerald heads cast. *New York Times*, March 5, 1948.

Kingsley Davis. The urbanization of the human population. *Scientific American*, September 1965. Reprinted in: Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout, editors. *The City Reader*. Routledge, fourth edition, 2007, pp. 17–26.

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

Samuel R. Delany. *Time Square Red, Times Square Blue*. NYU, 1999.

Matthew Farish. Cities in shade: urban geography and the uses of noir. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 23:95–98; 106–110 (excerpt), 2005.

Robert S. C. Gordon. *Bicycle Thieves*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

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Jane Jacobs. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Vintage, 1961.

Henry Jenkins. Looking at the city in the *Matrix* franchise. In Andrew Webber and Emma Wilson, editors, *Cities in Transition: the moving image and the modern metropolis*, chapter 13. Wallflower Press, 2008.

Stanley Kauffmann. The asphalt Romeo and Juliet. *The New Republic*, 145 (17):28–29, October 1961.

- Joe Klein. Spiked? Dinkins and *Do the Right Thing*. *New York Magazine*, June 26 1989.
- Spike Lee. Say it ain't so, Joe. *New York Magazine*, July 17 1989.
- Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout, editors. *The City Reader*. Routledge, fourth edition, 2007.
- Oscar Lewis. *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York*. Vintage, 1966.
- Phillip Lopate, editor. *American Movie Critics: From the Silents Until Now*. Library of America, 2006.
- Kevin Lynch. *The Image of the City*. MIT Press, 1960.
- Laurent Marie. Jacques Tati's *Play Time* as the New Babylon. In Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice, editors, *Cinema and the City*, pages 257–269. Blackwell, 2001.
- Brian McDonnell. Film noir and the city. In Geoff Mayer and Brian McDonnell, editors, *Encyclopedia of Film Noir*, pages 47–61. Greenwood Press, 2007.
- Joan Mellen. *Modern Times*. BFI, 2006.
- Stanley Milgram. The experience of living in cities. In Robert K. Yin, editor, *The City in the Seventies*, chapter 36, pages 250–259. Peacock, 1972.
- Lewis Mumford. What is a city? *Architectural Record*, 1937.
- Douglas Muzzio. “Decent people shouldn't live here”: The American city in cinema. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 18(2):189–215, 1996.
- Ellen Padilla. Race relations: a Puerto Rican view. In Robert K. Yin, editor, *The City in the Seventies*, chapter 3. Peacock, 1972.
- Mark A. Reid, editor. *Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Jonathan Rosenbaum. Tati's democracy. *Film Comment*, pages 366–341, May/June 1973.
- Simon Sadler. *The Situationist City*. MIT Press, 1998.
- David Sterritt. He cuts heads. In Murray Pomerance, editor, *City that Never Sleeps: New York and the Filmic Imagination*, pages 137–150. Rutgers University Press, 2007.
- Frederick W. Taylor. Scientific management. In Frank Fisher and Carmen Sirianni, editors, *Critical Studies in Organization & Bureaucracy*, chapter 4, pages 90–97. Temple University Press, second edition, 1984.

Andrew Webber. Symphony of a city: motion pictures and still lives in Weimar Berlin. In Andrew Webber and Emma Wilson, editors, *Cities in Transition: the moving image and the modern metropolis*, chapter 4. Wallflower Press, 2008.

Weegee. *Naked City*. Essential Books, 1945.

H. G. Wells. Mr. Wells reviews a current film. In Michael Minden and Holger Bachmann, editors, *Fritz Lang's Metropolis: Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*, pages 94–100. Camden House, 2000/1927.

Louis Wirth. Urbanism as a way of life. *American Journal of Sociology*, 1938. Reprinted in: Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout, editors. *The City Reader*. Routledge, fourth edition, 2007, pp. 90–97.

# 11.139: The City in Film

## Handout: Preparing Film Notes

Ezra Haber Glenn, Lecturer

Spring 2015

### 1 Overview

As noted in the “Syllabus and Orientation Notes” for the class:

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 and submit notes no later than midnight Sunday following each film. (If you cannot submit them electronically by this deadline, you can submit a hard copy to my office by noon Monday.) *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.*

These notes will be graded pass/fail and are required for 12 of the 13 films in class,<sup>1</sup> Taken together, these points will count for 24% of your final grade for the class. Notes should be submitted electronically in **.pdf** format uploaded to the Stellar site. (When hard copies are submitted, please also submit an electronic copy later, as a back-up.) Please pay special attention to the deadlines described above: late notes will be accepted, *but will not be given credit.*

To help you prepare notes, this handout lists a number of questions you *must* answer, as well as some more general questions to just think about.

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<sup>1</sup>You may skip the notes for one film of your choosing.

## 2 Questions

### 2.1 Questions to Answer in Your Notes

For each film, your notes *must* answer the following questions.

1. Who was the Director?
2. (a) What year was the film made?  
(b) What year was it set in?
3. (a) What city was the film set in?  
(b) Where do you think it was shot?
4. Jot down *five adjectives or phrases* to describe the sense of the city portrayed in the film. What kind of place is it? Be as descriptive and specific — and *nuanced* — as possible: there are a lot of rich, descriptive words out there waiting around patiently, just *dying* for their chance to get used. Think about how this city *looks, sounds, feels* — but also how it *behaves*: if the city were a *character* in this film, how would you describe its motivation or personality?
5. Briefly describe *one remarkable scene* — ideally one related to the subject of this course. Be sure to also explain why you choose it, and what you think it tells us about the ideas about cities presented or explored in the film?
6. Pose at least two questions you'd like to think more about or discuss in class.
7. Draw one parallel or contrast between this film and another film you've seen (either in this class or elsewhere), or — alternatively — some sort of real-world place or urban scene you experienced.

### 2.2 Questions to Think About and Maybe Answer in Your Notes

Beyond the items mentioned above, consider the following questions, and add your thoughts to your notes if you want.

1. Could the film have been set somewhere else? How might this have made it a different film?
2. Did the city and the places in this film seem “realistic” to you, or somehow fantastic, mythical, imaginative, or surreal? (Or something else? Or a mix?)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Here you are reminded that not everything that seeks to be “true” needs to be “real,” and vice versa. In the words of Picasso, “Art is the lie that tells the truth.” Think about how films can do this, regardless of whether they are set in real places and shot on location, or are “stagy,” comical, or futuristic. . . .

3. How do the characters get around the city? How do they move through the physical space of the urban environment, and what does that signal to you about city life?
4. How else do the characters interact with the typical elements of urban life — taxis, trains, beat-cops, payphones, lunch-counters, crowds, elevators, pot-holes, muggers, businessmen, plate-glass windows, benches, neon-signs, garbage, glitz, high-society dames, homeless people, and the like?
5. Are there any elements of the city that you found notable *absent* from the film?
6. Looking back at the adjectives you used the previous series of questions (item 4 on the preceding page), do you think the film suggests that these characteristics apply to cities *in general*, or just this city *in particular*?
7. Is there anything else about the film and the ways it depicts the city that you'd like to remember, or to call attention to for you classmates?

### 3 Feedback & Modifications

After you submit notes for the third film on syllabus (*Modern Times*), I'll request your feedback on this form, and we may decide to revise it. Remember, this class is a work-in-progress, and I'm always happy to hear your thoughts and ideas about ways to make it work better. Thanks!

# 11.139: The City in Film

## Written Assignment #1: “Observing City Scenes”

Ezra Haber Glenn, Lecturer

Due: February 23, 2015

### 1 The Assignment

Although this is a class about *films*, our first writing assignment is actually just about *observation*. Film is a wonderfully rich medium because it includes sound and vision in motion through space and time; but if you stop and think for a moment, you realize that actual *real life* features all of these elements as well. So before we analyze The City in Film, we’ll turn our critical eye to The City Around Us.

For this assignment, you are asked to select, observe, and describe a single “scene” from the life of the city around you. Some examples might include:

- a crowd of people lining up at rush hour to get onto the Red Line at Central Square;
- a couple walking along Memorial Drive in the snow;
- a slow pan down a Back Bay alley, exploring garbage, graffiti, back doors, and utility cabinets;
- the view of the skyline from a roof of MIT, where a group of young astronomers have gathered to see the Leonids;
- a homeless person watching as people pass by; or
- the contrast between the window displays of two neighboring stores: one advertising vodka, the other back-to-school supplies.

These are, of course, just samples — please *don’t* write about these ones. Walk around a bit, think about a place or a time that really evokes something about living in the city *to you*, and write it up. Importantly, just *describe* it, as if this were an excerpt from a screenplay; don’t interpret it for us. (One of the key rules of good art is “Show, don’t tell.”<sup>1</sup>)

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<sup>1</sup>Of course, later in the course we’ll reverse-engineer this process, and analyze the scenes that we are shown, but for now we’re just grooving on the elements of a scene. . . .

Before writing up your “scene,” I recommend you re-read the “Looking at Cities” article by Allan Jacobs, as well as the sections on “*Mise-en-Scène* and Realism” and “Composition and the Image” from chapter 3 of Corrigan (both are listed in the syllabus). These former will help you think about how we observe places, the latter about how we observe scenes.

## 2 The Details

### 2.1 Length

This is a *short paper* — please aim for a target of 2–3 pages (approximately 500–750 words). The goal is to present and analyze a few keen, focused observations, not a comprehensive analysis of everything about a city or a neighborhood. Decide what you want to say in advance, strive for tight writing, and revise as necessary to make every word count; remember the three keys to strong writing: trim, TRIM, **TRIM**.

#### 2.1.1 Other Things to Include

- Be sure you give your paper a title.
- Number your pages and *include your name* on each one.
- If you hand in a hard-copy, be sure to staple your pages. (No need for a fancy plastic cover or any of that.)
- You don’t need to include photos or diagrams, but you can if you want; both words and pictures can be useful when observing and describing cities (and films).

#### 2.1.2 Deadline & Submission

This paper is due at 4:00 PM on Monday, February 23. Please submit your paper electronically, in `.pdf` format, to the class Stellar site. If you are unable to submit electronically, you may bring a hard-copy to my office by the deadline (but if you do this, please also submit an electronic copy later, as a back-up).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>See the section on “Late Papers” in the syllabus for additional information about deadlines.

# 11.139: The City in Film

## Final Paper: Guidelines

Ezra Haber Glenn, Lecturer

Due: May 12, 2015

### 1 The Assignment

For the 13 weeks of the class, we've seen films that I've selected, which often highlighted themes that I felt were particularly relevant to explore changing ideas about cities. We've also spent much of our time looking and some pretty old films, representing my idea that we, as scholars (and practitioners!) of urban studies and planning, need to build up our foundations from the historical record; the syllabus brings us up to the cusp of the 21st century, but doesn't include anything from the last 15 years (when most of you have probably formed you *own* ideas about cities and the issues that define and confront them).

This focus was intentional, but also limiting: "What's past is prologue," as they say, but it is not the end of the story, and I expect that the next 100 years will have a lot of new things to say about both cities and films. Similarly, the films in the course have all been set in an American or European context; I expect that city films from other places might raise different issues—an important point for us to consider, given the rate of urbanization in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Luckily, the final paper will give us a chance to address these shortcomings; now it's *your turn* to pick the films and decide what themes *you* want to explore. The assignment—and it is intentionally very open-ended—is to select either *one film* and explore 2–3 themes through it, or alternatively, to select *one theme* and discuss it in the context of 2–3 films. Importantly, although you may certainly draw on your knowledge of the films from the syllabus, you are expected to do "outside research," identifying films about cities that we have not yet screened or discussed. (Note: although I'm offering the chance to include more recent films, you can also decide to use old/classic films if you like—and if you are exploring a change in attitudes over time, you will definitely want to include some older films.)

#### 1.1 Some Examples

Hopefully, it's obvious what I mean when I say, "select ... *one film* and explore 2–3 themes through it"—this is what we've been doing all semester. Do remember,

however, that you don't need to limit your discussion to just the one film: to strengthen your analysis, you may want to connect the issues and ideas you observe in one film with references to films from other times or periods; all I ask is that if you select this first option, the emphasis of your paper is to unbundle as much as you can from one film that we haven't yet discussed.

As for the second option—"select *one theme* and discuss it in the context of 2–3 films"—some examples might help:

### 1.1.1 One Theme, Multiple Films

- Urban decay (or even “ruin porn”) in films such as *8 Mile* (2002) and the new *Brick Mansions* (2014; itself a remake of the 2004 French film, *Banlieue 13*);
- Car culture and the city, in films such as *American Graffiti* (1973), *To Live and Die in L.A.* (1985), and *Drive* (2011);
- Urban existence “After the Apocalypse,” in films such as *28 Days* (2000) or *I am Legend* (2007);
- The city in children’s films, such as *The Muppets Take Manhattan* (1984), *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), the “Rhapsody in Blue” segment from *Fantasia 2000* (2000), and *Hugo* (2011);
- Life in informal settlements, viewed from films such as *City of God* (2002) or *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008);
- A discussion of multiple films set in the same city, perhaps made in different eras (besides the obvious candidates of New York and Los Angeles, good options might be Chicago, New Orleans, San Francisco, Washington, or Boston; but you don't need to limit yourself to American cities...);
- A comparison of three films with the same story (a newcomer finds his/her way in the city; two people from “opposite sides of the tracks” fall in love; a poor person struggles to overcome unemployment; someone gets lost/trapped in the city/a neighborhood and can't get out, etc.) from three different parts of the world, or from three different historical periods.

## 1.2 And Don't Forget

Don't forget: whenever possibly, please try to connect your ideas with the films and the readings we discussed in class. Every new thing you discover or learn is made all the more meaningful to the extent that you fit it into the fabric of what you already know, through comparison, contrast, refinement, and other techniques of synthetic knowledge generation.

## 2 The Details

### 2.1 Length

The total length for the final paper should be 10–12 pages, although it can certainly be broken down into 2–3 shorter sections if that works better for you. Importantly, rather than focusing on the page count, focus on what you want to say, and use the pages you need to say it (and no more).

#### 2.1.1 Other Things to Include

- Be sure you give your paper a title.
- Number your pages and *include your name* on each one.
- If you hand in a hard-copy, be sure to staple your pages. (No need for a fancy plastic cover or any of that.)
- You don't need to include images, but you can if you want; both words and pictures can be useful when observing and describing films (and cities).
- As you write your ideas, you may want to review the Corrigan book, *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*.

#### 2.1.2 Deadline & Submission

This paper is due at 4:00 PM on Tuesday, May 12. Please submit your paper electronically, in **.pdf** format, to the class Stellar site. If you are unable to submit electronically, you may bring a hard-copy to my office by the deadline (but if you do this, please also submit an electronic copy later, as a back-up).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See the section on “Late Papers” in the syllabus for additional information about deadlines.