11.139/11.239: The City in Film
Syllabus and Orientation Notes

Ezra Haber Glenn, Lecturer
Spring 2015

1 Contact Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>name</th>
<th>email</th>
<th>office</th>
<th>office hours</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ezra Glenn</td>
<td><a href="mailto:eglenn@mit.edu">eglenn@mit.edu</a></td>
<td>7-337</td>
<td>Tues. 9–11AM</td>
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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 “film screening” on Thursday evening (to watch a film); a “discussion section” on Monday afternoon to talk about the film and the week’s reading assignment; and an additional “discussion section” on Wednesday for undergraduates in the class to go over paper topics, oral presentations, readings, additional film clips, and other material.

3.2 Credits

At the undergraduate-level (11.139), this is a 12 unit class and it meets the Institute requirements for a HASS-H subject.

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

1listed as 3-0-9 but more accurately described as 3-3-6
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 section or two from the Pocket Guide to Analyzing Films (Spadoni, 2014) 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.

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 mid-
night Sunday following each film. 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 
(36% at the graduate level); 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 “Taking Notes” in Corrigan [2012] and the 
handout on “Film Notes.”)

4.3 Papers

4.3.1 Undergraduate-Level Assignments

Students enrolled in 11.139 (undergraduate-level/HASS-H/12 units) are required 
to write three short papers over the course of the class, plus one larger film es-
say, due at the end of the term. The total writing output of the class, including 
weekly film notes, will be 30 pages. (Grading percentages for papers are shown 
below under “Grading.”)

4.3.2 Graduate-Level Assignments

Students enrolled in 11.239 (graduate-level/9 units) are required to write one 
larger film essay, due at the end of the term. (The three shorter papers are not 
required.) 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.”)

4.4 Grading

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

4.5 Undergraduate-Level Grading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weekly Film Notes</td>
<td>2 x 12 = 24%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Short Papers</td>
<td>3 x 12 = 36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Film Essay</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100%</td>
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Notes:

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

2If you cannot submit them electronically by this deadline, you can submit a hard copy to 
my office by noon Monday.
4.6 Graduate-Level Grading

Weekly Film Notes \(3 \times 12 = 36\%\)
Class Participation 24\%
Final Film Essay 40\%
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.

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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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2/5</td>
<td><em>Metropolis</em>, Fritz Lang (1926)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2/12</td>
<td><em>Berlin: Symphony of a Great City</em>, Walther Ruttman (1927)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2/19</td>
<td><em>The Crowd</em>, King Vidor (1928)</td>
<td>paper due: 2/23</td>
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<tr>
<td>2/26</td>
<td><em>Modern Times</em>, Charles Chaplin (1936)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3/5</td>
<td><em>Ladri di Biciclette (Bicycle Thieves)</em>, Vittorio De Sica (1948)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/12</td>
<td><em>The Naked City</em>, Jules Dassin (1948)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3/26</td>
<td>Spring Break</td>
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<tr>
<td>4/2</td>
<td><em>Play Time</em>, Jacques Tati (1967)</td>
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<tr>
<td>5/7</td>
<td><em>Night on Earth</em>, Jim Jarmusch (1991)</td>
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<tr>
<td>5/12</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>final paper due</td>
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*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)


Read an in-depth critical review of a film you’ve seen, ideally one related to the same 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


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


2/23 undergraduate paper due: observing city scenes

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


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


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


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


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

3/26  —*No Film: Spring Break*—

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


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

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

4/20 undergraduate paper due: films and themes

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

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

5/7 Night on Earth, Jim Jarmusch (1991)
No readings — review previous weeks and work on your paper.

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


