

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

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## 1 Contact Information

name	email	office	office hours
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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 “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,<sup>1</sup> and it meets the Institute requirements for a HASS-H subject.

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

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<sup>1</sup>listed 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 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 (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 essay*, 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

Weekly Film Notes	2 x 12 =	24%
Class Participation		20%
Three Short Papers	3 x 12 =	36%
Final Film Essay		20%
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.

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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.

## 4.6 Graduate-Level Grading

Weekly Film Notes	3 x 12 =	36%
Class Participation		24%
Final Film Essay		40%
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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.

## 5 Schedule

### 5.1 Screening Dates

The films listed below represent a *tentative* schedule; the final schedule will be distributed by the first class.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Film</b>	<b>Assignments Due*</b>
<b>2/5</b>	<i>Metropolis</i> , Fritz Lang (1926)	
<b>2/12</b>	<i>Berlin: Symphony of a Great City</i> , Walther Ruttmann (1927)	
<b>2/19</b>	<i>The Crowd</i> , King Vidor (1928)	paper due: 2/23
<b>2/26</b>	<i>Modern Times</i> , Charles Chaplin (1936)	
<b>3/5</b>	<i>Ladri di Biciclette (Bicycle Thieves)</i> , Vittorio De Sica (1948)	
<b>3/12</b>	<i>The Naked City</i> , Jules Dassin (1948)	
<b>3/19</b>	<i>West Side Story</i> , Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins (1961)	paper due: 3/20
<b>3/26</b>	Spring Break	
<b>4/2</b>	<i>Play Time</i> , Jacques Tati (1967)	
<b>4/9</b>	<i>Midnight Cowboy</i> , John Schlesinger (1969)	
<b>4/16</b>	<i>Blade Runner</i> , Ridley Scott (1982)	paper due: 4/20
<b>4/23</b>	<i>Do the Right Thing</i> , Spike Lee (1989)	
<b>4/30</b>	<i>London</i> , Patrick Keiller (1992)	
<b>5/7</b>	<i>Night on Earth</i> , Jim Jarmusch (1991)	
<b>5/12</b>	—	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, pp. 1-22, 26–29 (chapter 1 and “Taking Notes”)

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

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

Mary M. Brodnax. Man a machine: The shift from soul to identity in Lang’s *Metropolis* and Ruttmann’s *Berlin*. In Kenneth S. Calhoun, editor, *Peripheral visions : the hidden stages of Weimar cinema*, chapter 4, pages 73–93. Wayne State University Press, 2001

Robert Spadoni. *A Pocket Guide to Analyzing Films*. University of California Press, 2014, chapter 1

**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

Robert Spadoni. *A Pocket Guide to Analyzing Films*. University of California Press, 2014, chapter 2

**2/23** undergraduate 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

Robert Spadoni. *A Pocket Guide to Analyzing Films*. University of California Press, 2014, chapter 3

- 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”)  
 Robert Spadoni. *A Pocket Guide to Analyzing Films*. University of California Press, 2014, chapter 4
- 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  
 Robert Spadoni. *A Pocket Guide to Analyzing Films*. University of California Press, 2014, chapter 5
- 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  
 Alberto Sandoval Sanchez. West Side Story: a Puerto Rican reading of “America”. *Jump Cut*, 39:59–66, 1994  
 Robert Spadoni. *A Pocket Guide to Analyzing Films*. University of California Press, 2014, chapter 6
- 3/20** undergraduate 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** undergraduate 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)

† Guy Debord. Theory of the *Dérive*. In Ken Knabb, editor, *Situationist International Anthology*, pages 62–66. Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006/1958

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** *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

- Mary M. Brodnax. Man a machine: The shift from soul to identity in Lang’s Metropolis and Ruttmann’s Berlin. In Kenneth S. Calhoon, editor, *Peripheral visions : the hidden stages of Weimar cinema*, chapter 4, pages 73–93. Wayne State University Press, 2001.
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