

THE AMERICAN CITY IN THE CINEMA: IMAGES AND REALITIES

James A. Clapp, Ph.D.
Professor of City Planning and Urban Studies
Director, Program for Media & Urban Affairs

Course Content

The American city and the American film industry matured together. The beginning of film as a medium of mass entertainment emerged in the last years of the 19th Century, contemporaneous with the maturation of many American cities into their current metropolitan form. Both the city and the cinema grew with the influence of massive waves of immigrants: in the case of the city composing a rich stew of ethnic flavors; in the case of the film industry providing entrepreneurial life blood as well as audience. The city provided the technical advances, a vibrant soundstage of streets and crowds, and varied lifestyles to mine for dramatic conflict. In return, the film industry has held a mirror up to the American city, sometimes enhancing, sometimes distorting, sometimes oversimplifying its complexities, exploring its realities, confirming and disconfirming its myths, always adding to the lore of urban life and influencing the popular consciousness of it.

In many respects the current condition of the cinema industry evidences parallels to the American city. Its original local, cottage industry characteristics, isomorphic to much of other American enterprise in the early decades of this century, has given way to macro-corporate mentalities and practices, often, according to critical commentary, compromising artistic sensibilities for mass appeal and profits. Its local, place-oriented structure has gradually evolved into a placeless, conglomerated structure strikingly similar to the contemporary circumstances of the American city.

As film historian Robert Sklar expressed these parallels:

The two decades from 1890 to 1910 span the gap from the beginning of motion pictures to their firm establishment as mass entertainment; they are also the years when the United States transformed itself into a predominantly urban industrial society. Many American cities doubled their populations; millions of South and East European immigrants brought their unfamiliar languages, religious institutions and cultural customs to create diversity such as the nation had never before seen; long parallel lines of horsecar and streetcar racks pushed out from the city centers to the open land where residential suburbs began to grow. Industry moved in downtown, and the middle class moved out, leaving

their own houses or properties to be occupied by foreigners and migrants from the countryside.

The change was not simply a matter of growth. There were basic alterations in the character of the cities. The old American city, for all its gradations of caste and class, had been a place where people of all incomes and occupations lived close to each other and intermingled. The emerging social structure of twentieth-century cities did away with such proximity and encounter. Increasingly, areas of cities were segregated by social class; how much money you made, the clothes you wore at work, the kind of job you did, the country of origin, set the boundaries of where you lived. The old American city, which had been a single community, became the new American city of many communities, separated from each other by social barriers. (Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, New York:Vintage, 1975).

From Chaplin's *"Easy Street"* to Scorsese's *"Mean Streets"* the American cinema has drawn upon and helped form the American urban consciousness. It is a reciprocal relationship that has received far less attention than it deserves. Like American attitudes toward cities in general the portrayal of the city in the American film is suffused with ambivalence. The celluloid image of urban life is often one of a place of contradictions: of great achievements and failures, hope and despair, community and loneliness, freedom and enslavement, harmony and discord, power and impotence, security and fear. As film often seeks the dramatic prospects of conflict and contradiction, those themes have been recurrently interpreted as the American city has evolved from overgrown village to metropolis, during which time millions of Americans have gone to the movies to have their experiences, preconceptions, personal images and biases, challenged or reinforced.

This course will examine the images of the American city in the cinema in the context of urban-historical analysis of the city in the literature of scholars in a variety of fields. Materials for this course will be drawn from the screening and analysis of selected films (from a catalog list of some 180 films dealing with cities and urban life), selected readings from the social sciences literature on the development of cinematic form and technology which provide historical and analytic background, and interpretative material on the urban imagery conveyed in the respective subject films. The principal focus of this course will be the reciprocal relationship between the film industry and the American city, the development of each, the ways in which film imagery has functioned to shape the American urban consciousness, and the congruence (or lack of it) of film imagery with scholarly analysis of cities and urban life.

Course Conduct

The course will be conducted in a lecture, film viewing, discussion format. Generally, one primary film will be viewed, with selections of segments from related films, as lecture time permits. Selection will be based partly upon availability some of the

films listed in the syllabus below and may be changed if necessary, or at the instructor's discretion.

Course Requirements

Readings: Required text for the course is composed of photocopied articles to be made available for purchase from a local copy center, and *review notes* (made available prior to the midterm and final exam)

Examinations: There will be two examinations: a mid-term and final. The final examination, which will be given during the final examination period. Both exams will be of the objective type, consisting of multiple choice, matching and fill-in questions. Study questions for review will be provided one-week before each of the exams. Examination material will be based on required reading, review notes, viewing of films, and lectures. (70% of course grade) Extra assignments for grading purposes will only be arranged for students who have been ill, or have other documentable circumstances which interfered with their completion of normal course requirements.

Class participation: Sufficient class time will be provided for class participation and students are encouraged to participate by way of comment and question regarding lectures, readings and films. (10% of course grade)

Final grades will be based on the following scale:

A = 100 - 93.5; A- = 93.4 - 90.0; B+ = 89.9 - 86.7; B = 86.6 - 83.5 B- = 83.3 - 80, etc.

SYLLABUS

Note: Underlined films in each section will be the primary films discussed and screened, wholly or in part. Selected segments of other films listed may also be screened.

1. **The Immigrant, The Cinema and the City: Course Overview**

Topics : Parallels and Convergences between the City and the Cinema in America; Immigrants as Subject, Entrepreneur, and Audience

Films: Easy Street; The Immigrants; The Godfather; Ragtime, El Norte, America, America, Ellis Island, Hester Street.

Read: Clapp, "The City in the American Cinema: Introduction,"; Zipperstein, "The Lions of Judah in the Jungle of Hollywood,"; Webb, "Cities On Film."

2. **The City and the Machine**

Topics : The changing structure of American industry; the relationship of industrialism to urbanization.

Films: Metropolis; Modern Times; Pittsburgh; Norma Rae; All the Right Moves.

Read: Weiner, "The Cinema and the City"; Mohl, "The Factory and the City".

3. The Small Town in American Imagination

Topics : The enduring myth of the small town

Films: It's A Wonderful Life; Our Town; To Kill a Mockingbird; Music Man; King's Row; Witness.

Read: Clapp, "The Small Town" Hummon, "Popular images of the American Small Town"

4. The Dark Side of the Small Town

Topics : The small town versus the city

Films: In the Heat of the Night; The Out of Towners; Peyton Place. The Last Picture Show, A Bad Day at Black Rock

Read: Singer, "Whatever Happened to the Small Town" KacKinnon, "Hollywood's Small Towns" (Introduction)

5. The Farm and the city

Topics : The urban conquest; the machine in the garden

Films: Country; The River; Places in the Heart

Read: Clapp, "The Myth of the Self-Reliant Farmer" Ruppensburg, "Subverting the American Dream"

6. The Violent City

Topics : crime, violence and urbanization

Films: On the Waterfront; The Godfather, Serpico; Little Caesar; Death Wish; Prince of the City; The French Connection.

Read: Eder, "Those Mean and Dirty Streets"; "the Implications of Density in Hong Kong, JAIP.

7. Urban Politics: Old Style

Topics : The urban political machine in America; Ethnicity and political participation

Films: The Last Hurrah; All the King's Men; Chinatown; Citizen Kane; Meet John Doe.

Read: Wittman, "American Film and the Urban Political Process: 1890 - 1930

8. Urban Politics: New Style

Topics : The contemporary machine; politics and the media

Films: City of Hope; Bonfire of the Vanities; Network

Read: Clapp, "Urban Cinema and Hyper-reality"

9. Lifestyles in the City: I

Topics : Social class and the urban process

Films: The Best Years of Our Lives; A Place in the Sun; Guess Who's Coming to Dinner; The Way We Were; Breaking Away

Read: Reissman, "Class, The City, and Social Cohesion"

MIDTERM EXAMINATION

10. Lifestyles in the City: II

Topics : Alienation

Films: Midnight Cowboy; Taxi Driver; Mean Streets; Warriors; Easy Rider; Scarecrow; The Boys in the Band; Inside Moves

Read: Clapp, "Cowboys in the City"; Holton, "Individualism, Alienation and the Search for Community: Urban Imagery in Recent American Films".

11. Growing Up in the City

Topics : Nature vs nurture in the city

Films: Dead End; Angels With Dirty Faces; Bowery Boys Films; American Graffiti; Saturday Night Fever; Diner

Read: Plumb, "The Great Change in Children" Woodward, "Young Beyond their Years Sennett, "The Brutality of Modern Families"

12. Life in Suburbia

Topics : Myths and realities of the American suburb

Films: Rebel Without a Cause; The Grass is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank; Rally Round the Flagpole; Boy's Night Out; Fast Times at Ridgmont High.

Read: Berger, "The Myth of Suburbia"; Clapp, "The Suburbs We Love to Hate.

13. Mental Health in the City

Topics : The city and the self; heterogeneity, competition and control

Films: Falling Down; The Prisoner of Second Avenue; Dog Day Afternoon

Read: Clapp, "Is 'De-Fens' Offensive?" Selections from *LA Times*

14. The City of the Future

Topics: The urban dystopia; The overdeveloped society

Films: THX 1138; Wild in the Streets; Westworld; A Clockwork Orange; Bladerunner; Escape from New York; Logan's Run; Soylent Green

Read: Beck, "The Overdeveloped Society" Goldman, "Images of Technology in Popular Film"

FINAL EXAMINATION