

CONTESTED TERRAINS AND DISCORDANT FRAMES: (RE-) PRESENTING THE CHANGING CITY

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, conflict and contestation have been one of the main conditions of urbanity. Urban space, and its patterns, configuration and inhabitation have developed as location of, framework for, catalyst for, and response to various conflicts and their negotiation. The underlying causes of urban conflict comprise social, economic, ethnic, ecological, spatial and political issues – often overlaid on and compounding each other, and fueled by density and an often more than critical mass of people and capital. One could subsume that therefore urban conditions often have a catalytic effect on conflicts latent in a society or culture and become manifest first and foremost in cities. Consequentially, urban form in general can be read as a result of the ongoing negotiation of these conflicts, and the palimpsest that we tend to call “big city”, “urban agglomeration” or “metropolis” with its visible and hidden layers is but a series of battlefields.¹ Conversely, as film co-evolved as medium with the spatio-political realities of 20th century cities, its representations of urban realities can shed light on contemporary conditions and interpretations of urbanity. Beyond, film can operate as one of the few modes in which disenfranchised and marginalized individuals and communities can actually attain a degree of representation, and subvert the capitalist-hegemonial agendas and interests that shaped the urban form and conditions that marginalize them, enabling them to develop, represent and enact much more inclusive and socially and environmentally just visions and versions of city.

FILM AND CITY – A CONTESTED CO-EVOLUTION

The evolution of technologies that made the 20th century city possible has also made possible the modern motion picture. McDonald suggests that the developments of the modern city and the cinema have been not only simultaneous but interlocked, and that the city has been central to two very different strands of film history: first, as environment for melodrama in Hollywood mainstream (from Harold Lloyd’s comedies to film noir). Secondly, “the modern city has been a frequent subject film identified with and often claimed by two traditions of independent cinema: documentary film and avant-garde film.”² Uricchio argues that, “The motion picture evolved during a period of tremendous urbanization. Its development, survival and spread were, to a great extent, a function of this growth. From the outset, there was a natural interaction between the rapid developments of urban life and the medium capable of observing and commenting upon it.”³

To early filmmakers, the city displayed the key characteristics of modernity—the increasing speed and standardization of time; the rise of consumerism and the movement of capital; the emphasis on spectatorship, distraction, and entertainment; a focus on technology, expediency, and mobility; and concerns with overstimulation and ephemerality. The city paved the way for the cinema.⁴ Indeed, “Modernity can best be understood as inherently cinematic...and cannot be conceived outside the

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context of the city.”⁵ Classic films, such as *Berlin, the Symphony of a Great City* (Ruttmann 1927), a film arranged to simulate the events of single day; Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929); and Cavalcini's *Nothing But the Hours* (1926) canonize the urban experience in a particular way, exploring and exploiting film's ability to render the vibrant chaos and intersecting patterns of simultaneous movement and action that characterized the modern city, not dissimilar to Cubism's deconstruction of linear and hierarchical space on canvas.

Ruttmann, who wanted to honor Berlin as the quintessential modern European metropolis, uses the symphony structure as analogous to the structure of city life. Equivalent to the relation between musician and orchestra, “in the city the individual contributions of millions of people are subsumed within the metropolis’ mega-partite movement through the day, a movement that reveals several predictable highs and lows, culminating in a symbolic fireworks that celebrate the conclusion of the metropolis’ productive daily and weekly cycle.”⁶

Writes Weihsmann “The cinema is certainly an exemplary product of urban modernity, but it is also a producer of urban culture and civilization.... From its beginning, film has been linked with the metropolis and the motion picture medium has featured the cityscape frequently and prominently...the city was the primary subject matter of early avant-garde cinematography in the mid-1920s. A new genre was born: “city film,” or, better, “city symphonies.”⁷

The camera was initially seen as a recorder of fact and scientific reality, Weihsmann further notes: “Thus the realm of cinematography was of documentary value, and ‘reality’ became a synonym of ‘actuality.’”⁸ The emergence of editing techniques, in particular the cinematic montage, which, much like collage, allowed cinematographers to deconstruct and reassemble footage, subverting or emphasizing its original spatio-temporal order, quickly became the only language that was able to represent how the city was perceived. Referencing Kevin Lynch’s idea of ‘imageability,’ Weihsmann suggests that, “architectural form relates to the form of film as one text to another, in terms of a structure composed of so many patterns, or rather fragments of structure or language, organized in time through space. Film becomes analogous to the modern perception of the city, continuous sequences of space frames perceived through time...a silent witness of reality...depicting the hidden yet omnipresent and commonplace character of everyday existence in public places.”⁹

With a growing awareness of urban realities hidden underneath the modernist-utopian master narrative, a second theme about cities began to emerge during this same period: the city as nightmare. Based on the tenet that cultures reflect and construct the social reality of the modern era, “a number of forms of expression and modes of critical analysis arose to make sense of the dramatic and rapidly changing social reality in the city.”¹⁰

In narrative film, the city emerged as a place with human affections: evil, sinister alienating (achieved primarily by the use of shadow and light) in 1920s and 1930s film noir. This portrayal of the sinister city was lost with the introduction of color, until more recent films such as “Blade Runner” (Ridley Scott, 1982) and “Batman” (Tim Burton, 1989) successfully resurrected it, introducing the post-modern, apocalyptic vision of the “neo-noirs,” such as “The Man Who Wasn’t There” (Joel & Ethan Coen, 2001) and Christopher Nolan’s “Following” (1998) and “Memento” (2000), and culminating in more recent “post-apocalyptic” films, such as “28 Days Later” or “I am Legend”. The presence of urban space, with its different appearances of order and disorder, carries a large part of the narrative expression, and cultural ideas about moral values, social hierarchy, and the role of the individual in

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society. The city's role in film noir clearly transcends that of mere "setting"—it acts as both symbol and main character in Helphand's¹¹ sense.

Early film theoretician Bela Balazs contends that "The screen provides us with more and more examples of machinery and factory work as the menacing examples of a smoke-blackened destiny. We see the machine acquire a face in film, its movement transformed into a terrifying expressiveness. We have seen more than once how the neutral "terrain" of a factory becomes a grim "landscape," a landscape both alive and lethal."¹² This applies very much to the appearance of the city in film noir. His argument that landscape in the cinema can be read like a human face for its mood and is never neutral suggests that film is a modern art that can most authentically address the horrors of industrialization and urbanization. This shift coincides with the racial tensions, decay and neglect that in mainstream media became increasingly synonymous with the American industrial city before and after World War II.

Beauregard writes, "The postwar traumas of the large cities thereby travelled beyond the actual sites of deterioration and neglect. By doing so, they exacerbated the ambivalence toward cities that Americans have embraced for over half a century. In turn, postwar decline fused urban ambivalence to widespread anxieties about racial relations, prosperity, national identity, upward mobility, and personal safety. The city became the discursive site for society's contradictions, and anxiety emerged as the discourse's dominant quality."¹³ This understanding of city as contested terrain, a location of discourse, and a localized discourse itself, marks a distinct shift from the city as monolithic-modernist master narrative, emphasizing the rational and utopian and articulating what Habermas calls the "project of Enlightenment," to the postmodern city as a "heterogeneous, diachronous, polyvocal, and uneven" construct.¹⁴

If "time, fragmentation, decentralization, militarization and surveillance are among the most important attributes of the postmodern city"¹⁵, then it is clearly visible in contemporary narrative film, such as Sam Mendes' "City of God" (2004) or "Breaking and Entering" (2006) as well as in Spike Lee's documentaries on post-Katrina New Orleans, "When the Levees Broke" (2006) and "If God is Willing and da Creek Don't Rise" (2010). All of these films engage post-colonial cities that are both battleground and active agent. Consequently, these films with their "gritty" appearance of urban reality and particular modes of camera work and editing offset a sleek, dynamic and "cool" rendering of city as a backdrop in TV shows and TV ads that reference the current hegemonial culture.

FILM AS EMPOWERMENT

Spike Lee reappropriated the "city symphony" to construct a counter-hegemonial narrative in his "Do the Right Thing" (1989), showing one day in the life of people on one city block. While in Vertov's and Ruttmann's films individuality is subsumed within the machine of the city.¹⁶ "Rien que les Heures" introduces a set of individuals through which the workings of the city and their consequences are rendered. Spike Lee goes much further, forming a dialectic opposite to "Berlin: Symphony Of A Big City"... "Individuality is virtually irrepressible, people find ways of distinguishing themselves, often by directly confronting those around them."¹⁷ Lee's city is not constructed by the suppression of individual personality into a "harmony", but through the "friendly or hostile interactions of particular citizens."¹⁸ This clearly replaces the notion of overarching harmony" (with all its

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hegemonial connotations) with a much more “polyphonic” understanding: conflict is thus rendered as intrinsic and central to city life.

“Do the Right Thing” goes further in critiquing and supporting the very notions of a multi-cultural democracy – Macdonald calls it a “democratic polemic”.¹⁹ Lee’s setting, one block in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, can be seen as representative of the city as a whole. Its citizens in their African American ‘ghettos’ are typically presented as stereotypes and usually marginalized by the media in general, and both mainstream and independent cinema. Lee demonstrates that in the very variety of these marginalized citizens lies the “energy of democracy”.²⁰ The film ends in the violent destruction of an Italian pizzeria. While Cavalcanti’s “Nothing but the hours” shows crime as not only “an inevitable dimension of city life, but one of the things that renders city life exciting and romantic”, “Lee suggests that, while violence is inevitable in the racist version of capitalist democracy, it is anything but romantic”²¹

“Do the Right Thing” truly forms a counter-narrative, deconstructing city and rendering urban conflict not only as intrinsic, but *integral*. And while history (and build form) are usually written by the victorious and the powers that are, cinema has the possibility to give a voice to those marginalized and disenfranchised and infuse the reading of urban form and occupation with another layer critical to understanding its history and current condition, rendering a “thick” reading²² necessary to understand and engage issues of uneven urban development, social and environmental justice, capital hegemony and the right to the city.²³

This becomes nowhere clearer as in Spike Lee’s documentary “When the Levees broke” (2006) and the successor “God Willing and da Creek Don’t Rise” (2009). It presents the untold stories and history of the Lower 9th Ward and its citizens in New Orleans, its systematic discrimination, ignorance, and ultimate exploitation. This tale appears too familiar – any postcolonial study of third- and fourth-world countries would render comparable narratives and insights, but to see it unfold in a first-world nation is disturbing. It is not the destruction of Katrina that is truly disturbing²⁴ – it is the underlying dysfunctions and injustices of the political, cultural and economic systems that were revealed in the aftermath. Lee succeeds in not only mercilessly exposing those and their perpetrators, but in telling a story of the traditions of defiance, resilience and resistance that created the Lower 9th Ward as both place and community. For the first time, a mainstream audience across the US was exposed to this powerful counter-narrative – showing that the Lower 9th Ward is not merely a disposable – or developable - piece of land below sea level, and its citizenry not something that could be displaced without conflict or consequence.

The predominant narrative that rendered the Lower 9th Ward and other low-lying areas as “green space” or “park” provided a seemingly unarguable conclusion, driven by topographic “facts”. The ignorance of cultural, social, economic and historic conditions and processes with the goal of remaking the city in a different (neo-liberal and whitewashed) image is indeed typical of the ruthless way the processes of capital accumulation and hegemonial power.

Film then has at least the potential to be one of the few modes in which disenfranchised and marginalized individuals and communities can actually attain a degree of representation, a “voice”, in the very processes that marginalize them²⁵ – aided by the availability and easily attained mastery of a technology that was in the realm of privilege a decade ago. Often relying on personifying the consequences of processes that are considered ‘anonymous’ – such as globalization, urban renewal,

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border security etc. - such films facilitate an understanding of not just the process itself, but its fallout. Ultimately, they disallow the audience to pretend that there are no real consequences and that the processes as such are automatic, inevitable, beyond their (or anybody's) control, and hence nobody can be held accountable.

THE CITY AS CHARACTER

If the spatial and cultural form of "city" is a result, however dynamic and ephemeral, of how the aforementioned conflicts and differentials play themselves out spatially and socially, how they "take place", then film is uniquely suited to understand and analyze these processes. Film as a medium is at least three-dimensional – it adds the dimension of time to the two-dimensional screen, creating a more and more perfect illusion of a four-dimensional – real - space. Parts of actual experience can be provided by film, such as movement, activity, temporal and spatial change. The medium can even create more than perfect illusions of place, it is able to go beyond and change the temporal and spatial context of reality, thus creating a "heightened reality". Its "unique and specific possibilities can be defined as dynamization of space and, accordingly, spatialization of time,"²⁶ it is "free of the limits of time and space."²⁷ Cinematic place (and its constituting processes and conditions) can then be interpreted as "subject", "setting", "character" and "symbol".²⁸

These constructs of cinematic place allow to enhance, and literally make visible processes and phenomena otherwise hidden. Vertov's and Ruttmann's use of camera angles, time-lapse photography, overlay and split-screen edits emphasize the choreography of movement and change typical of the urban condition. There are a great number of films that mise-en-scene and aestheticize the urban conflicts in different ways and to different ends, but all succeed in creating the illusion of "place", and revealing the cultural and social interactions that make those places.

The "Ghetto", "the Hood" or the dystopian urban ruins, left over after some catastrophe that is mostly alluded to, but barely ever explained, are often functioning as "supporting actor" – or, in Helphand's sense, as character. They are much more than just the setting in which the urban conflict plays itself out - they are an integral part of it, whether as studio pastiches or as real locations.²⁹ In different ways all of these films represent the connection between the "place" and the "action" portrayed within the frame. Beyond, every single one of them is reflective and revelatory of the critical discourses outside of the cinematic frame, around the time of the inception and shooting of the footage.

CONCLUSION

The study of city in film, and of film in and of the city, as outlined here in snapshots of a complex history, illustrates how the study of the interrelation of landscape and film might form the basis of an analysis of a different kind—one that foregrounds the development of city over time, understood as ongoing interaction between place and people. Abbas suggests that "the practices of the cinema constitute a kind of empirical evidence for an understanding of urban space but also that such evidence is not necessarily evident and only emerges through visual-spatial critique."³⁰

The change in the ways urban conflicts and their "places" are represented in cinema is not only a portrait of their actual qualities, properties and conditions, but also indicative of different

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perspectives, readings, attitudes, and interpretations, and hence can be analyzed to understand the relationship between society and the processes it employs to resolve conflicts – or not - and their manifestation in places.³¹ Looking at how the manners in which urban conflicts are negotiated and the urban condition is represented and present inside and outside of the cinematic frame invites the question to what degree the cinematic frame allows for a projection back onto the frames and conditions of actual urban situations and conflicts³², and its agency in changing them.

On the background of Baudrillard's concept of "hyperreality"³³ one could suggest that the close interrelation and co-evolution of cinema and city and its mutual influences might create a situation within which the city mediates film as much as film mediates the city.³⁴ A more thorough exploration of this mutual mediation, the question of "authorship" of urban conditions and processes, and the agencies of urban form and cinema seems promising, in particular in regards to independent cinema. The question of representation and empowerment (who / what / how / to what end) seems to be particularly interesting. If nothing else, it might involve people and interests that are usually excluded from the decision-making processes about urban form.

Endnotes

1 Sebastien Marot *Sub-urbanism and the Art of Memory* (London: AA Productions, 2003)

2 Scott Macdonald, *The Garden in the Machine. A Field Guide to Places about Film*. (University of California Press, 2001), 149.

3 William Uricchio, W. "The City Reviewed: Berlin's Film Image on the Occasion of its 750th Anniversary". *Film and History*, 18(1) (1988): 17.

4 Through the capturing of images and editing there is a sense of motion through space. In the context of modernist filmmaking the city street became the laboratory, recording the passage of time so significant to the modernist sensibility, and the opportunity to eschew constructed sets for the "reality" of city life. Accordingly, Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin associated the photographer with the wandering flaneur. Vidler (1993, 55-6) quotes Sergei Eisenstein's celebration of montage as collision and in a comparison of architecture as cinematic montage, reformulating architecture as "frozen music", and argues that in modeling how we move through space "architecture is film's predecessor." (Anthony Vidler, "The Explosion of Space: Architecture and the Filmic Imaginary," *Assemblage* 21 (1993): 55-6.

5 Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz ed. *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 2

6 Scott Macdonald, *Garden in the Machine*, 152

7 Helmut Weihsmann, "The City in Twilight: Charting the Genre of the 'City Film' 1900-1930," in *Cinema and Architecture: Melies, Mallet-Stevens, Multimedia*, ed. F. Penz & M. Thomas (London: British Film Institute),, 9-10.

8 Helmut Weihsmann "The City in Twilight: Charting the Genre of the 'City Film' 1900-1930," in *Cinema and Architecture: Melies, Mallet-Stevens, Multimedia*, ed. F. Penz & M. Thomas (London: British Film Institute), 9.

9 Helmut Weihsmann, "The City in Twilight: Charting the Genre of the 'City Film' 1900-1930," in *Cinema and Architecture: Melies, Mallet-Stevens, Multimedia*, ed. F. Penz & M. Thomas (London: British Film Institute), 9.

10 F. Stout "Visions of a New Reality: The City and the Emergence of the Modern Visual Culture," in *The City Reader* ed. R. T. LeGates & F. Stout (New York: Routledge, 2nd ed., 1999), 143.

11 Kenneth I. Helphand "Landscape Films,". *Landscape Journal* 5(1): 1-8.

12 Bela Balazs, *Bela Balazs: Early Film Theory: Visible Man and the Spirit of Film* (R. Livingstone, Trans., London: Berghann Books. 2011, originally 1924/1930), 54.

13 Robert A. Beauregard, *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of U.S. Cities* (New York: Routledge, 2003): viii.

14 Linda Krause and Patrice Petro ed *Global Cities: Cinema, Architecture, and Urbanism in a Digital Age* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 2.

15 Nezar AlSayyad, "From Postmodern Condition to Cinematic City," in *Urbanism: A History of the Modern from Reel to Real*, ed. Nezar AlSayyad (New York: Routledge, 2006), 17.

16 Scott Macdonald, *Garden in the Machine* 172

17 Ibid. 172, 173

18 Ibid. 173

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19 Ibid. 173

20 Ibid. 173

21 Ibid. 174

22 see Marot, *Sub-Urbanism and the Art of Memory*

23 for some of these concepts and frameworks, see Henri Lefebvre, *Le Droit à La Ville* (Paris: Anthropos, 1968) and Neil Smith *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984)

24 The author has been closely involved in the recovery of the Lower 9th Ward from Autumn 2005 on.

25 e.g. "Trouble the Water (Tia Lessin and Carl Deal, 2009), a documentary made by two Lower 9th Ward residents.

26 Erwin Panofsky "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," in *Film: An Anthology* ed D. Talbot (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, Panofsky's article was originally published 1934/36), 18.

27 Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye. The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, originally published 1924), 15-17.

28 Kenneth Helphand, "Landscape Films" in *Landscape Journal*, 5(1), 1986.

29 as in "Training Day", or Robert Altman's "Short Cuts", which provides a stunning cross-section and socio-cultural topography of Los Angeles, or the settings of Fernando Meireilles's films, "City of God" and "The Constant Gardener", both filmed in actual informal settlements, the latter in Kibera, outside of Nairobi, and considered to be the largest slum in the world.

30 Ackbar Abbas "Cinema, the City, and the Cinematic," in *Global Cities: Cinema, Architecture, and Urbanism in a Digital Age* edited by Linda Krause and Patrice Petro (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003): 144.

31 See also J. Hopkins "A Mapping of Cinematic Places: Icons, Ideology, and the Power of Misrepresentation" in *Place, power, situation, and spectacle. A geography of film*, ed. Stuart Aitken and Leo E. Zonn (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 47-63.

32 In a very literal way, the increasing presence of "urban screens", as in Times Square in New York, or Piccadilly Circus in London, suggest to explore the potential to explore the agency to "reflect" or "project" back. See Timothy W. Luke, *Screens of Power: Ideology, Domination and Resistance in Informational Society* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

33 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991, originally published in French in 1984). See also Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, "Debord and the Postmodern Turn: New Stages of the Spectacle," *Substance* #90 (1999): 129-156.

34 Oscar Wilde's "Life imitates Art more than Art imitates life" comes to mind.