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## Cityscapes: Introduction

[Clark Arnwine](#) and [Jesse Lerner](#)



This issue of *Wide Angle* explores the relationship between changing urban forms and the representation of the urban experience in film. Modernism was forged in the crucible of the city, as the dynamic forces of urban life stimulated new approaches to art. The construction of filmic meaning through montage offers a paradigmatic example of modernist expression, and film relies on technological processes (both chemical and mechanical) that exemplify new configurations of industrial production. Cinema first developed primarily within the city and has engaged an urban audience as a site of reception, from nickelodeons, to the first run movie palaces operated by the film studios, to the underground film scene of the nineteen-sixties that emerged in New York. The urban experience has been the focus of many film movements and genres, from Lumière travelogues and "Rube" films depicting the behavior of unsophisticates new to the metropolis in the earliest years of movies, the German "street" films of the Weimar period, gangster films of the nineteen-thirties, the international city symphony cycle, Italian neorealism, much of film noir, Godard's early output, many experimental and avant-garde works, and on to more recent urban crime thrillers and dystopic science fiction; a list that suggests **[End Page 1]** the scope of thematic concerns, but by no means exhausts the relevant lines of cinematic engagement with the city.

Paralleling the development of cinema in the last one hundred years, urban form has undergone historical metamorphoses from the emergence of the dense and vertical modern metropolis of steel-frame skyscrapers built by adapting railroad technology, to the horizontal sprawl of cities along the Los Angeles model with the incorporation of the automobile and communication technologies. The transformations of urban topography bear repercussions for the subjectivity of inhabitants adapting to life within new types of space. Georg Simmel's oft-cited study "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903) details how subjectivity adapts to new contingencies of urban spatiality. City life is marked by

...the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions. These are the psychological conditions which the metropolis creates. With each

crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational, and social life, the city sets up a deep contrast with small town and rural life with reference to the sensory foundations of psychic life. <sup>1</sup>

As people interact with built space and each other according to new patterns of development, inevitable permutations of subjectivity can be expected. Cinema represents these changes in both terrain and psychology even as it develops alongside and contributes to them.

The contributors to this issue approach the filmic representation of the city from diverse theoretical perspectives and engage several distinct periods of cinema. Giuliana Bruno offers a useful overview of theoretical issues inherent in representing the city in her article "Site-Seeing: Architecture and the Moving Image," which stems from work for a forthcoming book on urban representation, travel, and the body, *Atlas of the Flesh*. Noting that film, especially early film, is primarily an urban institution, she argues that it offers a form of "modern cartography," a way of mapping urban locations through vicarious experience akin to an architectural itinerary or journey. Film and architecture both perform an *embodiment* of an observer through various views and angles towards **[End Page 2]** an environment; a process that bears implications for the gendered body. Concentrating especially on a period marking the formation of cinema out of other cultural forms (such as the panorama that became for a time an early film "genre"), Bruno's discussion isolates and provocatively considers important theoretical strands revolving about the position of the spectator relative to cinematic imagery, and the role of filmed images in representing/constructing urban space.

In his richly suggestive essay "From the Kaleidoscope to the X-Ray: Urban Spectatorship, Poe, Benjamin, and *Traffic in Souls* (1913)," Tom Gunning historicizes the figure of the urban observer within changing social and topographic formations by way of conducting an archeology of the early film spectator. Cinema was born into the world of visual spectacle and commodity consumption that increasingly characterized the city at the turn of the century; throughout this process, film both represented and participated in the changing status of subject to spatial structuring. Embarking from the Edgar Allan Poe short story, "The Man of the Crowd," Gunning amplifies upon theoretical **[End Page 3]** discussions of the *flâneur*, the figure of the distanced observer adopted by Benjamin from Baudelaire. He investigates two further incarnations of a subject emerging from the dense concentration of the city, the *badaud* or gawker, who both gapes at the spectacle and mindlessly joins the crowd, and the detective who monitors the crowd, both blending into and reading the mass of people. The early feature *Traffic in Souls*, which explores the sensational topic of kidnapping for prostitution, offers a case study for Gunning's analysis, both for the ways it deploys different types of urban participant-observers, and for the manner in which the film constructs an urban space of different social classes and locations shot through by emerging communication technology and surveillance methods.

In "From Berlin to Bunker Hill: Urban Space, Late Modernity, and Film Noir in Fritz Lang's and Joseph Losey's *M*," Edward Dimendberg offers an engaging complement to Tom Gunning's presentation of the urban observer/inhabitant. Like Gunning, he investigates

modes of surveillance in the modern city as figured in films, but within a broader conception of changing urbanism and artistic production in the middle part of this century, and within a consideration of film noir aesthetics. Dimendberg posits both an early modernism that recognized new technologies and how they impacted on human subjectivity starting around the turn of the century, but also a "late modernism" that would account for artistic responses to changes in post-World War II environment such as the proliferation of suburban-style development, the ascendancy of the automobile, and the emergence of America as a world economic, political and (pop) cultural leader. These two strains of modernism would correlate with differing modes of urban spatial experience. "Centripetal space" corresponds to the metropolis of the early twentieth century, dense and vertical, where surveillance means tracking the individual body through contingent practices of observation by human agents negotiating urban terrain. "Centrifugal space" indicates the horizontality that emerges from the suburbs and the automobile, where surveillance is shifted to data collection and vehicular movement. These **[End Page 4]** differing urban forms are explored through the two versions of the movie *M*, Fritz Lang's noted 1931 version, and the lesser known faithful remake by Joseph Losey set in 1951 Los Angeles. The Berlin of Lang's *M* situates the human subject in a web of social control marked by legibility, whether of newspapers or visible particularities of character detail. As in Gunning's analysis, the city is composed of visual signs of commodities in shop windows, and the street is a site of human passage, but also an arena of detection and surveillance. In Losey's *M*, the urban space is figured horizontally, marked by the automobile, and by the public notices sent via the nascent television technology rather than by the original film version's newspaper and voice.

In the article "Weegee and the Jewish Question" David Serlin and Jesse Lerner propose a different figure of the urban spectator. This text examines both the photographs and the neglected film work of Weegee to wrest him from his position within the canon of photographic modernism into which he has been assimilated and situate his work within an alternative modernism, marked especially by a grappling with questions of ethnicity and a Jewish identity, set within a specifically urban sensibility. In this reading both the celebrated tabloid photographs and Weegee's later distortions and film work exhibit a fascination with a proliferating carnivalesque excess of bodies. The rendition of social space in the city to which he often returns is marked by a recurring suffering, embarrassment and vulnerability that reveal his own subjective working out of an immigrant Jewish identity within a cosmopolitan American experience. Rather than simply producing a low-brow line of street photography that stands alongside other heterogeneous views of the stratified urban texture, in Weegee's corpus the city shapes both the social observer creating images of a decisive moment, and the subjects of the constructed images.

Scott MacDonald's "The City as Motion Picture: Notes on Some California City Films" focuses on a body of California-based "city symphony" films from the late nineteen-forties to the present. MacDonald shows how the city symphony genre has transformed in relation to different urban geographies. As first San Francisco and then Los Angeles have become prominent urban centers, each have invited necessarily differing forms of city symphony interpretation than their earlier New York and European antecedents. Through closer examination **[End Page 5]** of the work of filmmakers Frank Stauffacher, Dominic

Angerame, and Pat O'Neill, this article points to a reconsideration of the city symphony tradition away from a narrow conception of the canonized European period, and suggests how representation changes when differing subjectivities and historical experiences are involved. MacDonald implicitly argues for an aesthetics of later forms of the city symphony genre that acknowledges a surreal stance to city spaces that emerges in these makers' works, as well as filmic strategies that explore the historical conditions for the formation and decline of cities.

The contributors in this volume have tended to focus on films shot on location, as opposed to the studio-designed city. Such an emphasis gets at issues around the translation of tangible urban topography into the film medium; however, attention to the set-designed city will emerge in the forthcoming companion *Wide Angle* issue on the city and film, "Cityscapes II." This future issue will concentrate especially on the urban morphology characterized by Los Angeles as a test case for the study of the representation of urban experience in film, including how the city can be designed in the studio as well as found. <sup>2</sup> It will also follow up on concerns raised by the essays in the present volume. The articles included here offer useful trajectories to begin considering the relationship of cities and film. The authors share an interest in both the figure of the observer in the city, as depicted thematically in films, and in how the process of visual representation constructs a viewer. Thus, a recurrent theme is the relationship of surveillance and observation, whether in the socially critical work of Weegee, or charting power relationships, or investigating how bodies are both read and also addressed within urban space. But other productive lines of inquiry are set in motion as well, such as the relationship of filmed imagery to three dimensional, built space, and the historical situating of film as a medium to broader issues of representing the urban experience. Taken together, these essays illuminate important critical issues and point to areas for further scholarship on the representation of urban space.

The editors would like to express heartfelt appreciation to Ruth Bradley for offering us a forum to pursue these theoretical and historical pursuits. We would also like to thank all of the contributors for their commitment and hard work, with an additional nod to Edward Dimendberg for his publishing insights. **[End Page 6]** Clark Arnwine would like to thank David James and Robert Carringer for their continued support, encouragement and intellectual feedback around these issues, the Getty Research Institute for opportunities to constructively engage the topic, and Lou Arnwine and William C. Arnwine for their unwavering support. Jesse Lerner would like to thank his parents for their continued support and patience.

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essays on photography, film, and video have appeared in *Afterimage*, *History of Photography*, and other media arts journals.

## Notes

- [1.](#) "The Metropolis and Mental Life," Georg Simmel in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt Wolff (New York: The Free Press, 1950).
- [2.](#) A useful departure point for investigating the designed city is *Film Architecture: Set Designs from Metropolis to Blade Runner*, Dietrich Neumann, ed., (New York: Prestel, 1996). See also *The Cinematic City*, David B. Clarke, ed., (New York: Routledge; 1997), for various approaches to the intersection of urbanism and film.

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