

“DECENT PEOPLE SHOULDN’T LIVE HERE”: The American City in Cinema

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ABSTRACT: *This paper explores how the cinema uses the US urban scene as a landscape of the imagination. The essay is an exploratory look at the reactions to the US city by some of our most acute and sophisticated observers, American moviemakers. The assumption underlying this effort is that films help structure the context within which urban affairs take place, are perceived, and are studied. Movies can tell us much about our urban pasts, presents, and futures and provide insights into our collective hopes, fears, fantasies, and phobias. The essay focuses on a number of complementary and competing images of our cities in US cinema over the last quarter century.*

“Decent people shouldn’t live here. They’d be happier somewhere else”—The Joker on Gotham City, *Batman*

Once upon a time, the idea of the American city sparkled so brightly that people from around the nation and around the world were drawn to it as if by an irresistible force. That was long ago. Today, the idea of the city is more likely to repel and so the city’s defenders have developed an understandable complaint:

Somehow it has become an article of faith among millions of Americans that cities are vile places, the natural habitat of lesser Americans, foreigners and people of dangerous sexual persuasions. Cities are places to recoil from and their residents are not fellow Americans, but people to be mocked and despised (Herbert, 1995, p. 25).

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"Somehow." The matter of how this article of faith became established is ignored, but the matter is not easily dismissed. How, indeed, has this article of faith become entrenched? How, to be specific, have so many people who rarely venture to cities developed such strong ideas about them? They received their ideas, their images, their information from somewhere, of course. Among the sources worth investigating are movies.

The impressions, the images, the rhetoric, the noise of the city found in movies (and more recently, television) comprise the only frequent contact that many Americans have with their cities. American movies, moreover, have been inextricably intertwined with the city. Movies were born and reached adolescence in New York City and matured in Los Angeles (Sklar, 1994). The city has played two major roles in the movies, as a "gigantic set" and as "a star: a huge, hulking, multifaceted performer" (O'Toole, 1989).

Movies use the US urban scene as a landscape of the imagination. Motion pictures record the surface of the city: the streets, the taxis, the skyscrapers, the bridges, the panhandlers, "the urban complex in all its chance vitality". The cinema also shapes the way we understand the city, "the concept of the urban experience in contemporary history" (Arthur, 1989, p. 93).

Films capture, according to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (1979, p. xi), the "mentality" of US society, disclosing much about the inner as well as the outer life of the society. "The American movie has provided a common dream life, a common fund of reference and fantasy, to a society divided by ethnic distinctions and economic disparities." Movies influence the way we construct images of the world and, therefore, to a lesser degree, how we operate in it.

"Decent People Shouldn't Live Here" is an exploratory examination of the US city through the reactions to it by some of our most acute and sophisticated observers, American moviemakers. The essay briefly examines the history and role of movies in US society, the place of the city in the American psyche, and the role of the city in US movies. "Decent People" presents a number of complementary and competing images of the city found in our movies over the last quarter century. Finally, it suggests further areas of study.

The assumption underlying this effort is that the cinema helps structure the cultural context within which US urban affairs take place, are perceived, and are studied. In the words of Picasso, no stranger to urban life, "Art is a lie to tell the truth." It shares the belief that "the 'scientific' findings of the social sciences are insufficient and have to be complemented—not merely supplemented—by knowledge acquired from works of the imagination" (Whitebrook, 1992, p. 14).

MOVIES IN US SOCIETY

Schlesinger contends that film has been "the most potent vehicle of the American imagination" and that movies "have something to tell us not just about the surfaces but about the mysteries of American life." Movies, according to Schlesinger, have also acted as a social glue for Americans: "the American movie has provided a common dream life, a common fund of reference and fantasy, to a society divided by ethnic distinctions and economic disparities" (Schlesinger, 1979, pp. x, xii; Gabler, 1988; Sklar, 1994).

Schlesinger may be overstating the case. Are movies more potent than television or rock 'n roll? Do we credit movies with significance because they are so readily available for analysis (and so much fun to watch)? Have films served more to shape popular attitudes or to reflect them? The questions come in crowds and efforts to explore and define how films project basic assumptions, moods, and problems of society remain tentative and conjectural. Further, films only infrequently have consciously tried to illuminate our culture and society. Mostly, they have been content to provide glamor, escape, and security because above all they are economic ventures of profit-seeking firms. As the movie mogul, Sam Goldwyn, is reputed to have put it: "If you want to send a message go work for Western Union."

Regardless of their intent, Hollywood movies cannot avoid sending messages (sometimes loud and obvious, sometimes subdued or even subliminal) about the national mood. Our films have both reflected and shaped the country's prevailing cultural consensus (Sklar, 1994; Ryan & Kellner, 1988).

Films, like novels, are cultural documents that in some way mirror an age: how people live, love, work, dress, talk. More significantly, they reveal "persisting themes, images, styles, legends" (Schlesinger, 1979, p. xi; Hughes, 1976; O'Connor, 1987).

BRIEF HISTORY OF MOVIES IN THE US

For most of the first half of the 20th century, movies were the most popular and influential medium of culture in the United States. Movies were both a communications medium and a primary form of entertainment capable of wielding immense power with their unrivaled ability to disseminate symbols and messages to large segments of the population within a very short time (Jarvie, 1978; Sklar, 1994).

Movies developed during crucial years of change in American life when a new social order was emerging in the modern industrial city. The two decades from 1890 to 1910, during which motion pictures won their dominance as mass entertainment, saw the United States transformed into a predominantly urban industrial society. This industrial revolution was accompanied by demographic upheaval. Millions of Southern and Eastern European immigrants with their exotic languages, religious institutions, and cultural customs, created a demographic and cultural diversity such as the nation had never before witnessed. At the same time, millions of Americans fled what Marx called the idiocy of rural life. From 1890 to 1910, the urban population increased by 20 million. The 1920 census confirmed that the United States had become an urban nation and it was a nation in love with movies.

During World War I, movies became a major social institution, a prosperous and secure business. Early filmmakers, often immigrants, produced films that assumed all the traditional American values and, thus, served to ease the assimilation of millions of more recent arrivals (Sklar, 1994; Gabler, 1988). Moral questions about movies and their players led to the Hays Office and the production code. A few years later when the Depression arrived, movies assumed a major morale-building role particularly with comedies: suave, slapstick, screwball, coarse. A number of gritty landmark movies such as *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), *The Public Enemy* (1931), and *Dead End* (1937), as well as the multifaceted *42nd Street* (1933), were produced.

Sometime between 1946 and 1956, movies were displaced from their central position by television. The size of movie audiences which had peaked at 95 million weekly in 1929, averaged 85 million during the war years and climbed to 90 million in the immediate post-war years of 1945-1948, had sunk to 60 million by 1950 and to 43 million by 1953 (Belton 1994).

TV was a more efficient medium, reaching more people more quickly, more conveniently, and more cheaply than movies (Jarvie, 1978). TV, however, was not the sole factor in changing movie-going from "ingrained habit to infrequent diversion" (Sklar, 1994). Nonetheless, as Garth Jowett (1976, p. 433) noted in the mid-1970s: "In deserting movie theaters, Americans did not desert the movies and, in fact, they are seeing more motion pictures today than ever before—but on television." Indeed, by 1980 the distinction between movies and TV had become blurred. They increasingly became regarded as nearby points in the same continuum with the rise of cable TV channels such as HBO and Showtime (with Disney creating its own channel) and the mass use of video rentals. The succeeding years have only widened the blur.

CITY IN THE US PSYCHE

Since the days when Jefferson imagined that the pursuit of happiness ended on a small family farm, large numbers of Americans have feared and distrusted cities. Indeed, the recurring urban crises of the US city, from one perspective have been, at root, intellectual crises involving inherited attitudes and images of the city (Greer, 1964). As then New York Mayor John Lindsay wrote in 1969 (p. 60), "The world of urban America [a]s a dark and desolate place undeserving of support or help has become fixed in the American consciousness."

Cities, to many Americans, are dirty, dangerous, and congested, homes of the unhealthy, the immoral, and the foreign, in short, sinkholes to be avoided, not treasures to be sought or even problems to be solved. Many of our nation's greatest thinkers, Jefferson, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, Frank Lloyd Wright, for a variety of reasons expressed different degrees of hostility toward urban life in America. Artists known for depicting city life more often have depicted poverty and grit (some were nicknamed the Ashcan School) than the lovely, soft focus bourgeois scenes favored by French Impressionists.

Cities, as White and White (1962, p. 222) put it, seem:

too big, too noisy, too dusky, too smelly, too commercial, too crowded, too full of immigrants, too full of Jews, too full of Irishmen, Italians, Poles, too artificial, destructive of conversation, destructive of communication, too greedy, too capitalistic, too full of automobiles, too full of smog, too full of dust, too heartless, too intellectual, too scientific, insufficiently poetic, too lacking in manners, too mechanical, destructive of family, tribal and patriotic feeling.

Of course, this hostility has not been unalloyed. Even as critical a thinker as Emerson held high hopes for our cities and such figures as Whitman, Wharton, Fitzgerald, and Lowell have positively extolled them (Gelfant, 1954; Lees, 1985).

Our cities thus have been "celebrated and condemned, reprobated and praised, loved and hated" by writers who have "discerned in them the worst and best life had to offer" (Lees,

1985, p. 6). This ambivalence and ambiguity of Americans' attitudes toward their cities, particularly in the 19th century, can be found in the contrasting popular images of the city: "the city's streets are paved with gold" and "the city is a snare and destroyer of youth" (Warner, 1984, p. 181).

During the course of the 20th century, the city has been progressively less loudly or often "heralded...as a place where signs of human progress could be observed routinely and exhibited in a grand fashion." In the late 20th century, scholarly writing, journalism, and popular folklore and legends about the city have come to "reflect generally negative beliefs about city life" (Monti, 1993, p. 316).

IMAGES OF THE CITY

Images, "a likeness...a mental impression or picture...a vivid or graphic description...a metaphor" (Oxford English Dictionary), shape our understanding of, and reaction to what is depicted. Images build up "as a result of all past experience of the possessor of the image" (Boulding, 1956, p. 115). Some images are "cognitive maps", "creative impositions" on the city (Suttles, 1972).

The city itself is a "social image", "a state of mind" (Pike, 1980; Park & Burgess, 1925). Behavior depends on images (Boulding, 1956). The city of the mind, the "thoroughfares and buildings of this invisible city—controls our movement as much as do the actual streets of New York, Indianapolis, or Bombay" (Rodwin & Hollister, 1984, p. 3). Hence, images of the city have been studied, especially in literature (Lees, 1985; Marx, 1984; White & White, 1962; Strauss, 1968, 1976). Strauss, in his pioneering work on urban images in American literature, offered a number of such conceptions which have retained their vitality: positive images such as city as mosaic, city as feast, city as place of freedom, city as place of opportunity, and negative motifs such as the city as dehumanizing environment; city as battleground; city as mean streets (Strauss, 1968).

The images of the city in the academic disciplines of geography, economics, political science, anthropology, sociology, and history and in professional fields such as urban planning, have received the attention of scholars (Lynch, 1960; Rodwin & Hollister, 1984). Social science has not only studied urban images but has created them (Shefter, 1984; Langer, 1984; Glazer, 1984). Certainly, in practical terms, images of the city reflect and mold the direction and strength of reformist currents (Warner, 1984; Frisch 1984). Whenever government intervenes in the city, "it is clear that an image is guiding it" (Glazer, 1984, p. 342).

IMAGES OF THE CITY IN CINEMA

Movies communicate their images through visual signs and symbols and through a mixing of these visual elements with the dialogue and music of the sound track. To understand a film, "it clearly does not suffice to look at the film alone. There is the production and reception to be examined" (Smith, 1976, p. 8). More fundamentally, one must consider the nature of the audience, for it is they who ascribe meaning to the celluloid and, in a manner of speaking, bring it to life. In that sense, a movie is a collaborative effort involving the moviemakers and the movie viewers. An identical film seen in different eras by audiences

bringing different preconceptions and experiences to their respective theaters is not the same. (Also, movies are collaborations of dozens of people who make them, including directors, screen writers, cinematographers, editors, actors, and so on.)

The filmmakers, of course, fully understand the critical importance of the audience, normally placing pleasing the audience in the front of their minds. Filmmakers study, through the use of previews and focus groups, audience reactions which leads to an audience image (Gans, 1957). A finished film, therefore, is, in part, a "conscious probe of American values" based on the filmmakers' own perspectives and values as well as their "shrewdest calculations" of audience receptivity and reaction (Hughes, 1976, p. 70). In *The Love of the Last Tycoon*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's unfinished last novel about Hollywood and the magic of movies, Monroe Stahr, the moviemaker hero, says "Our condition is that we have to take people's own favorite folklore and give it back to them" (Fitzgerald, 1973, p. 106).

Movies do not merely reflect audiences' world views but also help to shape them. Part of the power of film (and cultural expression in general) is that it structures and reflects popular attitudes and memory. The "resonances" of an image of the city are reinforced by filmmakers' and viewers' own experiences of city life, whether real or imagined. Images of the "reel city" represent what Gerald Holton has termed, in the context of themes in science, "unverifiable and not quite arbitrary hypotheses" (Rodwin & Hollister, 1984, p. 6). The study of cinematic images of the city thus raises the inescapable issue of the "correspondence between an urban reality (one that exists or is presumed) and the image of that reality" (Rodwin & Hollister 1984, p. 12).

The links between the "real" city and the reel city appear to be indirect and complex. Film is "always a very partial reproduction of [external] reality." The visual information is selectively recorded and structured to create a pictorial message, whether the film is realistic or fantastic. What passes for reality, in fact, is itself a melange of techniques (a juggled handheld camera) and signs and conventions (graphic depictions of sex, violence, and despair). Films have a "plasticity" which enables them, through editing, to produce a variety of meanings (Smith, 1976, pp. 7, 54, 53; Monaco, 1981; Bordwell & Thompson, 1993).

Different periods have produced different cinematic images of the city contained in different genres but rarely has the dominant image been salutary. Some of the very first movies, including two of Edison's earliest, *Tenderloin at Night* (1899) and *How They Do Things on the Bowery* (1902), were morality tales of the traps and snares of the city, stories of urban dangers designed to shock, forewarn, and titillate (Sklar, 1994). D. W. Griffith, the first great moviemaker, produced *Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), an expose of the harsh realities (and sentimentalities) of urban life.

The role of the city in US movies evolved from the early use of the city as a mammoth outdoor set to the 1920s and 1930s when it became a fabrication, "a collection of painted sets and props with a studio backlot with a few real-life images inserted in the background" (O'Toole, 1989, p. 62). During this period, the city was primarily portrayed as violent, cruel, and implacable, the city of the gangster film and the social problem film, most notably *Dead End* (1937). The gangster films, *Little Caesar* (1930), *Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932), dealt not so much with the problem of crime in American life, as with the modern urban experience of working class people (Jowett, 1976). The gangster is "a man of the city, with the city's language and knowledge, with its queer and dishonest skills and its terrible daring" (Warshow, 1962, p. 131).

Nonetheless, the city of the 1930s was a setting of delightful escapism in frothy movies, "a mulligan's stew of comical ethnic types, machine-gun mouthed career girls and eccentric millionaires—the city as a school for screwballs" (Arthur, 1989, p. 93). Set designs for Hollywood movies throughout the 1930s, like *My Man Godfrey* (1936), *Holiday* (1930), and *Swing Time* (1936), presented cities as "glamorous, sophisticated, progressive and exciting—often a playground for the rich and fortunate who were insulated from drudgery and routine." Even movies that depicted urban problems like poverty and unemployment, such as *Forty-Second Street* (1933), "often managed to glorify the city as a world of opportunity for those with talent and ambition" (Nathanson, 1991, p. 134).

The Wizard of Oz (1939), at the end of the decade, projected a deep ambivalence toward cities. Dorothy, the Tin Man, the Scarecrow, and the Cowardly Lion follow the yellow brick road ("the streets were paved with gold") to the Emerald City. Evocative of a fairy tale New York, it glitters with hope and opportunity. The citizenry are cheerfully friendly and those that appear not to be are won over (Rushdie, 1992). The Witch sometimes makes it a fearful place. Moreover, it is based on the hokum of the Wizard's technology. Dorothy ultimately rejects Oz for the agrarian life of Kansas: "And...oh, Auntie Em, there's no place like home!" *The Wizard of Oz*, according to Nathanson, has been so popular at least partly because it has allowed Americans to have their cake and eat it, too. *The Wizard of Oz* supported the progressive urban utopianism that supplied themes and visual motifs for the Chicago World's Fair of 1933-1934 (The Century of Progress) and the New York World's Fair of 1939-1940 (The World of Tomorrow). At the same time, it supported the traditional rural utopianism of the agrarian, or populist worldview (Nathanson, 1991).

After World War II, the two faces of the movies' city persisted but the emphasis shifted. Postwar genres such as the crime melodrama, the social problem film, and particularly film noir gave us our prototypical view of the US cityscape: "wet, deserted streets, criminal conspiracies lurking behind every facade; uncaring institutions; and hard-bitten ghostlike inhabitants" (Arthur, 1989, p. 93). The urban world of film noir is chaotic, alienating, neurotic, and sinister. It is a realm of evil (Nathanson, 1991).

The city of the late 1940s and 1950s was also sometimes a jungle (of asphalt and blackboards) though there still remained the glitzy New York of *On the Town* (1949), *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953), and *The Seven Year Itch* (1955). The city was portrayed as "penthouse aeries, where tuxes and smart talk were mandatory" (Corliss, 1991, p. 101).

During the 1960s, movies tended to use New York City as a backdrop/set to provide color, for example, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) and *Barefoot in the Park* (1967). The streets, the playgrounds, and the tenements which provided the gritty cityscape for the Academy Award winning urban Romeo and Juliet, *West Side Story* (1961), no longer exist. They were razed under urban renewal to make way for the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts not long after the movie was made. The city, for the most part, remained the city of cosmopolitanism and urbanity. During the decade, however, there was a greater emphasis on geographical and architectural as well as sociological realism which affected not only the look of movies but also what movies were about and how audiences responded to them. The outstanding example is *Midnight Cowboy* (1969). The city of Ratso Rizzo is the catchbasin for life's refuse; it is dangerous and lonely.

IMAGE OF THE CITY: 1970s, 1980s, 1990s

In the quarter century from 1970 through 1994, 39 American movies set in a real or fictional US city received Academy Award nominations for best picture, best director, or best writing and/or was one of the 25 top-grossing movies of the year. A city structures or participates in the action of all of these movies as a physical place, as an atmosphere, or as a set of values, a frame of mind (Gelfant, 1954).

The dominant images of the generic US city and of specific cities in our films of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s have been grim, almost irrespective of genre, location, and director and without regard to whether the audience was for mass audience or niches.

How is this explained? Films set in the city have become bleaker as cities themselves have become bleaker, as the American city has become a "much more menacing place in fact and—especially—in fantasy" (Schickel, 1989, p. 284). What seems likely is that the anticity movie, long a flourishing genre, received fresh impetus from a related pair of phenomena: the growth of the suburbs and the live televised viewing of the great urban riots of the 1960s and Los Angeles in 1992. From the safe distance of the suburbs, audiences could congratulate themselves on their new lives by viewing the degraded and perilous places they had fled. The riots brought the cities to the forefront of the national consciousness with a power and vividness that was compelling. While the cities may have seemed horrors, they seemed fascinating horrors.

POSITIVE IMAGES

The urban cinematic landscape over the last quarter century has not been exclusively dreary, however. While not often the critical and commercial successes of films with negative urban themes, some movies have portrayed the city positively as a center of culture and civility, as mosaic, as center of freedom and opportunity, as a feast/bazaar/place of excitement, and as a place of romance.

Center of Culture and Civility or Rorschach Test

Woody Allen's *Manhattan* (1979) opens with a three minute sequence, a black-and-white montage that establishes the setting and its characters: first the skyline, then individual buildings, and then the streets and the population. Its three dozen views of New York are a visual love poem to the city. This celebratory visual montage is made doubly effective by Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* with its exalted expression of feeling and enthusiasm.

Manhattan is about individuals living life in a modern city and this city could be nowhere but New York. During the montage, Allen, playing an author, Isaac Davis, is choosing from a variety of openings for the first chapter of his novel. The different content and tones of Isaac's openings suggest the different meanings of Manhattan (Allen, 1980, pp. 182-183):

Chapter One. He adored New York City. He idolized it all out of proportion. He romanticized it all out of proportion. Now...to him...no matter what the season was, this was still a town that existed in black and white and pulsated to the great tunes of George Gershwin. Ahhh, now let me start this over.

Chapter One. He was too romantic about Manhattan, as he was about everything else. He thrived on the hustle...bustle of the crowds and the traffic. To him, New York meant beautiful women and street-smart guys who seemed to know all the angles. Nah, no...corny, too corny...for my taste...I mean, let me try to make it more profound.

Chapter One. He adored New York City. Although to him, it was a metaphor for the decay of contemporary culture. The same lack of individual integrity to cause so many people to take the easy way out was rapidly turning the town of his dreams in—. No, it's gonna be too preachy. I mean, you know...let's face it, I wanna sell some books here.

Chapter One. He adored New York City. To him, it was a metaphor for the decay of contemporary culture. How hard it was to exist in a society desensitized by drugs, loud music, TV, crime, garbage. Too angry. I don't wanna be angry.

Chapter One. He was as...tough and romantic as the city he loved. Behind his black-rimmed glasses was the coiled sexual power of a jungle cat. New York was his town. And it always would be.

The reading of the city depends upon the character of the reader. In describing the city, Isaac's hero projects his various moods and conceptions of himself onto the setting. Which of the innumerable and contradictory aspects of the city will characterize the setting is the individual's choice?

This notion of city as Rorschach test is captured by Tom Wingo's (Nick Nolte) lament upon his arrival in New York City in *Prince of Tides* (1991) to be with his sister who had attempted suicide: "It was only my sister who could force me to come to this God-awful city. The city that lowers down on you. She loved it all—the muggers, the winos, the bag ladies, the wall-to-wall noise...Luke [Tom's brother] and I hated it for the same reason" (transcribed from movie).

At the heart of Allen's mature works is his nostalgic conception of the city and "the desire to keep alive th[e] turn-of-the-century notion that the modern city, then coming into full flower, might represent a new and higher form of civilization" (Schickel, 1989, p. 282). Allen sees Manhattan as a cultural document: "I like to think that, 100 years from now, if people see the picture, they will learn something about what life was like in the city in the 1970s"

Allen is the country's foremost New York chauvinist:

It's really the rhythm of the city. You feel it the moment you walk down the street. There's hundreds of good restaurants, thousands of brilliant paintings, you can see all the old movies, all the new ones...It has to do with nerves, with the blood that runs through the city. It's dangerous, noisy. It's not peaceful or easy and because of that you feel more alive."

For Allen, New York is the center of cosmopolitanism, culture, and civility. In *Manhattan*, he touches every base in hip, white upper middle class New York, Elaine's, Zabar's, Bloomingdale's, as well as the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim, Lincoln Center, the Hayden Planetarium, and Yankee Stadium (the only locale filmed outside Manhattan).

L.A. Story (1991) is also about infatuation with a city. The City of Angels is the star of this romantic comedy. Indeed, *L.A. Story* seems to be a reply to Woody Allen's frequent

barbs against Los Angeles, particularly in *Annie Hall* (1977). The L.A. of this story is a place that encourages people to act out their most eccentric selves, an open air fun house with no urban grunginess allowed (Rainer, 1991). Even the muggers are polite ("Hi, my name is Bob, and I'll be your robber"). L.A. is Hollywood with all its pretensions and excesses, but it's still perfect, a sun-drenched paradise. As Martin wrote on the first page of the screenplay "L.A. at its best. No smog. No traffic." Also no poor people, no minorities.

City as Mosaic

One of the recurring themes in the portrayal of cities in movies, other forms of popular culture, and in the social sciences (Langer, 1984) relates to the diversity/heterogeneity of the city. The city teems with people of different races, origins, cultures, classes, and beliefs (Strauss, 1968). Diversity gives rise to cosmopolitanism and the melting pot (and to conflict).

The city is a "mosaic of social worlds" that touch upon one another (Wirth, 1938). *Moscow on the Hudson* (1984) presents Robin Williams as a Russian saxophone player, Vladimir Ivanoff, who defects to the United States in a sound stage version of Bloomingdale, that "temple of mouth-watering temptations of capitalist decadence" (Kael, 1994). The city is a feast.

Moscow on the Hudson is populated almost entirely with ethnic and racial minorities, as Vladimir instantly befriends a black security guard and an Italian sales clerk, and encounters a Korean taxi driver, a Cuban lawyer, and a Chinese anchorwoman, "all of them reminders that all of us, except for American Indians, came from somewhere else" (Ebert, 1994). He moves in with the security guard's family. He gets a job selling hot dogs from a pushcart, works his way up to driving a limousine, and finds an apartment in Greenwich Village, all of which points to the city as a place of opportunity and freedom. The film also depicts the "isolation and paranoia of living in New York. The brutality confuses him; in Russia, he says, he knew who the enemy was" (Kael, 1994).

City Neighborhood as Village

The overwhelming size of the metropolis, so daunting to visitors and residents, can most easily be tamed by disaggregation. A neighborhood, small and self-contained, is isolated for depiction, as if a village, randomly plunked in an ill-defined countryside of no immediate relevance. In literature, this device is commonplace. One thinks of Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, Roth's *Call It Sleep*, Baldwin's *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, and Swados' *Nights in the Garden of Brooklyn* (1960). So it is in movies, with *Dead End* (1937), the Bowery Boys series, and more recently, in *Smoke* (1995) and *Do the Right Thing* (1989).

Smoke recreates a village general store with its cracker barrel philosophers and sentimental stereotypes in the form of a cigar store in the Park Slope neighborhood of Brooklyn. *Do the Right Thing* is much more ambitious, though its ghetto Brooklyn block also recreates a village. Indeed, its ethnic focus suggests a black/Latino shetl reminiscent of Anatevka in *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971). It is a neighborhood like "those city neighborhoods of the Depression—people know each other, and accept each other, and although there are problems, there is also a sense of community" (Ebert, 1994).

Lee (1989, p. 28), according to his production journal, wanted the neighborhood to have a “feel for the different cultures that make up the city, specifically Black American, Puerto Rican, West Indian, Korean and Italian American.” The characters in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood where the film is set are ubiquitous inner city stereotypes, though Lee’s mosaic is, ultimately, hardly the gorgeous mosaic of former New York City Mayor David Dinkins.

City as Romantic Place

Frankie and Johnny (1991) is a romantic comedy set in a West Side Manhattan diner. Like *Moscow on the Hudson*, the film portrays the city as a mulligan’s stew of ethnic and racial types working and wisecracking together. The New York City of *Frankie and Johnny*, *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), and *Moonstruck* (1987), although populated by lonely people, is still a place of romance. Indeed, *Frankie and Johnny* is a “love song for what’s left of New York.” Al Pacino plays Johnny as if “he is New York: pushy, forlorn, indomitable”; Michelle Pfeiffer as Frankie is “every skeptic who tried to fight off the city’s spell.” The film’s view of New York: “it’s a hard place but you gotta go for it” (Corliss, 1991, p. 101)

Woody Allen’s *Manhattan* (1979) presents his city as a place of high romance. There is scene after scene of enchantment, of intensely romantic atmosphere, which combine tender low key lighting with the beauty of the setting, the sculpture garden of the Museum of Modern Art or the 59th Street bridge at dawn (Giannetti, 1993). Manhattan is also elegized in *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) with its sumptuous shots of Central Park and Rockefeller Center blanketed in snow, accompanied by *Winter Wonderland*. *Dick Tracy*’s (1990) production design created a “warmly colored” image of New York, making the city seem “glorious, benign, almost lovably cartoonlike” (Goldberger, 1996).

City as Feast/Bazaar/Place of Opportunity

Another recurring theme in many urban movies is the imagery of the city as exciting place, a feast of dazzling choices: the skyline, the bright lights, the stores, the bars, the brothels, the urban dialects, the scenes and sounds (Strauss, 1968). It is alive. The city is a bazaar, a smorgasboard or a salad bar of ingredients “from which an individual can create his or her particular sustenance” (Langer, 1984, p. 103). The city offers an astonishing richness of activities and opportunities as well as a diversity of people. People can and do elevate their stations in life.

Nearly always, city as feast movies feature an outsider as protagonist. To an insider, to one used to the cornucopia, the feast may seem just another meal. To outsiders, characters such as Tony Manero from Brooklyn in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), Tess McGill from Staten Island in *Working Girl* (1989), or Kevin McCallister from the suburbs in *Home Alone 2* (1992), the table is dazzling and irresistibly attractive.

NEGATIVE IMAGES

The city of the movies of the last 25 years has been cinematically projected as a dehumanizing place of corruption and immorality, as a jungle, as mean streets, as a reservation/

killing fields, as racial tinderboxes, as a growth machine, and as Hell and the Apocalypse. These images are not always sharp cut. They are variants of similar themes and motifs, hybrids of each other. They form a symbolic system rather than remaining separate images (Strauss, 1976).

City as Jungle

The US city in cinema is a jungle, densely packed, with a stunning variety of human fauna and brimming with danger, seen and unseen. In the jungle, each person is confronted with strangers who may be menaces (Langer, 1984). Indeed, the public world of the city is "a world of strangers" (Lofland, 1973). The jungle has a specialized place for each species as it finds its niche and jealously guards its territory (Langer, 1984). The urban jungle is a battleground of conflicting individuals, classes, and races for territory, power, money, respect. Some of the denizens of the urban jungle must be controlled and isolated. The Gestapo-like police commissioner in *Asphalt Jungle* (1950) preaches the virtues of control (Hennelly, 1983, p. 257): "Suppose we had no police force, good or bad...the jungle wins, the predatory beasts take over."

City as Mean Streets

The streets of the US city in American movies of the last quarter century have been mean, sometimes inhumanly so, as in *Wolfen* (1987) and *Predator 2* (1992). City streets are endowed with a metaphorical malignancy symbolizing "all the environmental forces massed to degrade its residents, destroy their potentialities, and prevent their rising to better status" (Strauss, 1968, p. 17). The malignancy of the streets was depicted in early films such as *Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912) and later in the classic gangster and social problem films of the 1930s such as *Public Enemy* (1931) and *Dead End* (1937), to the wind- and rainswept streets of film noir through (a sanitized) *West Side Story* (1961) and *Midnight Cowboy* (1969).

Urban crime films, movies that relate the careers of criminals to the life of cities, flourished in the last quarter century. The crime (organized and otherwise), corruption, degradation, and depredations of the mean streets of our cities are depicted in a video store's worth of movies cutting across all genres and all milieus of the last quarter century. The streets were mean for all nationalities and races: the Italian hoods in New York's Little Italy in *Mean Streets* (1974), Don Corleone's crime boss in the *Godfather* films (1972, 1974, 1990), and the wiseguys of *Goodfellas* (1990), the Irish mob in New York's Hell's Kitchen in *State of Grace* (1990), the blacks in *New Jack City* (1991), *Juice* (1992), and *Clockers* (1995), the Latinos in the barrios of Los Angeles in *America Me* (1992) or the penthouses of Miami in *Scarface* (1983), the Jewish gangsters in the Lower East Side of Manhattan of *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984), the criminal tongs of New York's Chinatown in *Year of the Dragon* (1985). The streets were home to the gangs as well the gangsters. Gangs of youth prowled the streets and subways of our cities, for example, in *The Lords of Flatbush* (1974) and *The Warriors* (1979).

The French Connection (1971), based on the career of a well-known New York City detective, imagines the brutality and danger of the streets, their lawlessness. The police are nearly as brutal as the criminals, a theme echoed in a number of films. In *The French Con-*

nection, not only are the humans dangerous but so are the cars, portrayed in the cinema's greatest car (and subway) chase. The movie also exposes the labyrinthine character of the city, a city of subway tunnels, sewers, and parking garages. Knowledge of the maze of Chicago, Cook County Hospital, the elevated trains, streets, the alleys, Cook County Jail, and the St. Patrick's Day Parade, provides Dr. Richard Kimble in *The Fugitive* (1993) with escape and, ultimately, freedom. For call girl Bree Daniels in *Klute* (1971) the city is a trap. She lives with no fewer than five locks on her door because a psychotic killer is stalking her.

The city is not only heartless and cruel, it is disinterested. Harry, in his first encounter with Sally, sees a "New York death" in her future, where "nobody notices for two weeks until the smell drifts into the hallway." Kevin McCallister's reaction to big city streets in *Home Alone 2* is simple and direct: "It's scary out there."

City as Hell

In 1970, Edward Banfield entitled his classic study of the postriot US city *The Unheavenly City*. City films since that time have "in the main, portrayed a seething human hell" (Mast, 1986, p. 426).

The first line of director Tim Burton's script for *Batman* reads: "Hell has erupted through the pavements and carried on growing" (Pirani, 1989, p. 21). Burton and his production designer, Anton Furst, created in Gotham City "a stygian Babylon of emaciated alleys and big, bruising towers, all murk, sleaze and psychopathic architecture" (Nightingale, 1989, p. 1). The Wagnerian score intensifies the oppressive gloom.

The movie's opening shot of Gotham City shows a dark smoggy wasteland, a "nightmare version of megalopolis, an urban landscape without sun, seen through a smog of pollutants and despair." At street level, "gray and anonymous people scurry fearfully through the shadows" (Ebert, 1993, p. 54). Gotham City is "the City gone psycho...the brutal city where crime festers—a city of alleys, not avenues" (Kael, 1989, p. 83), likened by its creator Furst to a Manhattan built over 200 years with no planning commission and no light in the streets.

The city's politics is corrupt. Its elected officials do the bidding of criminal boss Carl Grissom. As Grissom's chief henchman, Jack Napier (later the Joker), watches a candidate for district attorney on TV promise to make Gotham City safe for decent people, sardonically cracks, "Decent people shouldn't live here. They'd be happier somewhere else" (transcribed from movie). Gotham City must cancel its 200th anniversary because the streets are not safe enough to hold it.

Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) is a "nightmare vision of New York City as one of the middle levels of Dante's *Inferno*" (transcribed from movie). The film opens with a taxi emerging from the steam billowing from the street. It is a vision of a hellish netherworld where "bilious vapors rise slowly from the bowels of the city, colored by the harsh glare of flashing neon" (Magill's Movie Guide, 1994). A sign flashes "FASCINATION" while the taxi driver names the denizens of the night "whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies" who are "sick, venal" (transcribed from movie).

The movie's protagonist, Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro), hates New York with a biblical fury. It gives off the stench of Hell and its filth and smut obsess him (Kael, 1994).

Bickle is sickened by the immorality of modern urban life. As he drives through a noir-like rain, he wishes for a real rain that will "wash all the scum off the streets".

Taxi Driver, according to Scorsese, "is very much based on the impressions I have as a result of growing up in New York and living in the city...The overall idea was to make it like a cross between a Gothic horror and the New York *Daily News*...We shot the film during a very hot summer and there's an atmosphere at night that's like a creeping kind of virus."

When you live in a city, there's a constant sense that the buildings are getting old, things are breaking down, the bridges and the subway need repairing. At the same time the society is in a state of decay; the police force are not doing their job in allowing prostitution on the streets, and who knows if they're feeding off it and making money out of it (Thompson & Christie, 1989, pp. 54, 60).

When *Taxi Driver* was filmed in the summer of 1975, "everyone was suffering from bad vibes in Gotham City that summer: the apocalyptic feeling that fiscal collapse was at hand, the political system had failed and that racial war was around the corner" (Keyser, 1992, p. 67). During the filming of Bickle's killing of a stickup man in a bodega, a real murder occurred around the corner from the film shoot. Soon the players and the aftermath of the real crime became entangled. According to Scorsese, "We didn't know which cops were for us and which were for the real killing around the corner. Everything got mixed together and we really couldn't tell, so we just shot whatever was happening around us" (Keyser, 1992, p. 68)

City as Reservation/Killing Fields

Films by young black directors, *New Jack City* (1991), *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991), *Hangin' With the Homeboys* (1991), and *South Central* (1992), offer especially grim portraits about the fate of US cities and those living in them. *Boyz 'n the Hood* (1991) and *Menace II Society* (1993), with their long helicopter shots of urban wasteland, offer devastating indictments of the city, depicted as a crime-ridden holding tank for a permanent underclass (Sharrett, 1992). The cinematic images give dramatic content to Norton Long's (1971) concept of the US city emerging 25 years ago as an Indian reservation for the poor, the deviant, the unwanted, and for those who make a business or career of managing them for the rest of society. Today, though not reservations, US cities are "misery magnets" (Waste, 1995). Indeed, the police are presented as an occupying force in an "internal colony" (Shefter, 1984) in a number of other films by black filmmakers, including Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*.

Boyz 'n the Hood begins in South Central Los Angeles, c. 1984, where ten-year-old Tre Styles is confronted with the random deadly violence of everyday life in the streets of his ghettoized black neighborhood where drive-by shootings are a fact of daily life. The streets are mean, as Singleton reminds the audience in the opening credits that in inner city America one in 21 young black men will die of gunshot wounds. There is always the possibility that words will lead to insults, that insults will lead to the need to prove their manhood, that with guns everywhere, somebody will be shot dead (Ebert, 1994). If the urban crisis of the 1990s, is murderous violence (McClain, 1995), films like *Boyz 'n the Hood* provide artistic insight and understanding.

Boyz 'n the Hood is the story of three friends who grow from boyhood to manhood on the same street, surrounded by the same people. Ultimately, the film asks the "all-important question of whether there is such a thing as changing one's fate" (Maslin, 1991, p. C1). Chaotic forces overwhelm the best and brightest in their efforts to escape their neighborhood.

If *Boyz 'n the Hood* is the story of a young man fortunate enough to grow up with parents who cared and who escaped the dangers of a murderous black street culture, *Menace II Society* (1993), also set in L.A., is about the many more men who are not so lucky (Ebert, 1994). *Menace II* was shot in the Jordan Downs housing project in Watts. The film is set in 1990s Watts and the Hughes brothers, the codirectors and screenwriters, include film footage of the 1965 Watts riot during the opening credits. The tragedy of the character at the center of *Menace*, Caine, is that he "cannot stand back a little and get a wider view, and see what alternatives are available to him. He adopts the street values that are based on a corruption of the word 'respect'...For him, 'respect' is a product of intimidation" (Ebert, 1994).

The movie opens with a confrontation in a Korean grocery store. Caine and O-Dog want to buy beer. They are followed through the store by a Korean grocery store woman who obviously distrusts them. As Caine and O-Dog are about to leave, the grocery store man makes the fatal mistake of commenting on O-Dog's mother. O-Dog pulls out a gun and kills the man. After obtaining the video surveillance tape from the man's wife, he kills her as well. O-Dog calmly goes through the cash register and the dead man's pockets, taking whatever money he can find.

Among the film's most powerful scenes are the flashbacks to Caine's childhood when his mother, a heroin addict, and his father, a drug dealer, casually shoot an associate during a card game. By the time Caine is a teenager, both his parents are dead. There is an inevitability to Caine's life, a fate determined by the violent realities of the social conditions in which he was raised.

Menace II Society portrays inner city black neighborhoods where "the ubiquity of firearms, the violence of television and video games, and an insanely inflated macho ethic combine with boredom and hopelessness to create a combustible atmosphere that can explode at any time" (Holden, 1993, p. C15). The city and its pathologies are the villains. Though Caine is a murderer, he is, above all, a victim.

City as Racial Tinderbox/City as Riot

Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989), released at a time when New York City was a racial tinderbox, was conceived as a response to a notorious racial incident in Howard Beach, Queens, in 1986 where three white youths attacked three black men, one of whom was killed by a car as he attempted to escape his attackers. The movie was without question the most talked about movie of 1989. Lee appeared on the covers of *Newsweek*, *American Film: Magazine of Film and Television Arts*, and *National Review*. Joe Klein, in his column in *New York* magazine, accused Lee of recklessly courting violent reactions from black youth, who Klein believed would jeopardize David Dinkins' race for mayor of New York (Klein, 1989). For Klein, Lee's message is clear from the opening credits, which roll to the tune of *Fight the Power* by Public Enemy, a rap group known for its anti-Semitism.

Lee responded with a scathing full-page letter, blasting Klein for his implicit racism and blaming then-Mayor Edward Koch for "allowing New York to become a racial war zone." Indeed, Lee made it widely known that *Do the Right Thing* was meant to be a weapon in the political war against Koch. Although Lee would not say that the cops in *Do the Right Thing* patrol the streets like "Nazi concentration-camp guards", as charged by Klein, Lee did contend that "this film is very accurate in its portrayal of the attitude that black and Hispanic New Yorkers have toward the police" (Lee, 1989b, p. 6). (In *Menace II Society*, Caine and a friend are pulled off the street and into the back of a police car, beaten up by white policemen, and dumped in a Latino neighborhood where they presumably could be executed by rival gang members).

The film describes how "on the hottest day of the year, the often amusing foibles, prejudices, and conflicting group allegiances of generally symbiotic neighbors...escalate into a tragic killing of a black man by the police and the torching of a white-owned pizza parlor" (Kaufman, 1989, p. 1). The film explores the black underclass, the people who "live in the bowels of the social-economic system", which Lee sees as "larger than ever, and...may be a permanent part of our society" (Lee, 1989a, p. 109).

Lee presents a portrait of racism but the racism is not the stereotypic white-toward-black variety, but a free-floating vitriolic interethnic, interracial animosity which explodes in his racial slur montage where several characters each in turn face the camera and spew out racial obscenities: Blacks slam Italians, Italians slam blacks, Latinos slam Koreans, whites slam Latinos, Koreans slam Jews. *White Men Can't Jump* (1992) offers a more hopeful view of race relations. Near the end of the movie, a white businessman gives a speech full of platitudes of racial brotherhood while a black kid cracks that its all "bullshit." The film does tell us "in its own comic way that the destinies of blacks and whites are inextricably linked in America" (Pawelczak, 1992, p. 263) and that mutual respect, indeed friendship, are possible.

Do the Right Thing is simultaneously a statement on the state of race relations in New York City and America, on the impact of the city on its residents, on the competing strategies of blacks to deal with their situation in America (particularly on the role of violence), and on the role and responsibility on the black male.

The film is open ended. The riot, or as Lee refers to it in his production journal, the "uprising", that destroys Sal's Famous Pizzeria at the end of the film is followed by two coda, one a statement by Martin Luther King on nonviolence and the other by Malcolm X on the necessity for violent struggle. Lee does suggest that race relations "have reached a standoff that can be addressed only by radical commitments on the part of minorities, even if such activism may be ineffectual and even self-destructive" (Sharrett, 1992, p. 61).

City as Growth Machine

John Sayles' *City of Hope* (1991) is a decaying Eastern city, the fictional Hudson City, New Jersey, that is presented as an organism. The life of the city is seen as "a web of interconnected lives", of "intersections" (Kaufman, 1991, p. 32; Horton, 1991; Langer, 1984). Sayles' cinematic style of long tracking shots using a mobile camera that follows first one character, then another, drifting in and out of lives and conversations, adds to the sense of interconnectedness.

Hudson City, a declining rust belt city faced with disinvestment, deindustrialization, and racial/ethnic change and conflict, is beset by poverty, drugs, substandard schools, street violence, organized crime, and government corruption and abuse of power. What the film portrays is an enduring set of power relationships, a regime (Stone, 1989) that shapes the politics of the city. The power structure of the city consists of a loosely organized and declining white ethnic (Irish and Italian) machine and a less visible but far more powerful constellation of real estate and financial interests.

The residents of Hudson City, a dwindling number of white ethnics, as well as sizable black and Latino communities, are divided by race, ethnicity, history, and culture. Social and political relationships are marked by group animosity and internal divisions, notably between blacks and Latinos. The *City of Hope* is a city of conflict of whites and blacks, young and old, the uncomfortably comfortable middle class, and the desperately workless working class who are all bound together (Alleva, 1991).

Hudson City is a growth machine (Molotch, 1976). Growth machines are “centers for private capital accumulation, with civic leaders both in the private and public sectors viewing their role as primarily one of ‘preparing the ground for capital’” (Squires, et al., 1987, p. 12). In *City of Hope*, this preparing the ground, literally and figuratively, is at the core of its many subplots.

City of Hope revolves around the efforts to build a mammoth office and housing complex financed, in part, by foreign (Japanese) capital. The problem is that the preferred site is occupied by low income housing. Every effort has been made to remove the tenants (cutting off heat, water, and maintenance) but to no avail. With investors threatening to pull out of the deal, a corrupt district attorney (seeking substantial contributions from the investors) blackmails a corrupt mayor (“the second most indictable mayor in New Jersey”) to clear the site once and for all. The mayor’s assistant pressures his brother, the developer of L Street Apartments, to “take care of things.” The buildings are torched. The obstacle has been removed.

The city is often projected as a cesspool of corruption. *Chinatown* (1974) depicts Los Angeles as a moral wasteland, both public and personal. The movie is set against the actual water rights and real estate swindles of the 1930s. Political corruption permeates every level of government in the reel city in America, the cops, the D.A.s, the mayor, the city council. Some or all are on the take in *Miller’s Crossing* (1990), *Dick Tracy* (1990), *Batman*, and Sidney Lumet’s two “cops as robbers” films, *Serpico* (1973) and *Prince of the City* (1981), which present pictures of police corruption in New York City.

City of Hope reflects Sayles’ vision of the city (Davis, 1991, p. 21):

There is this idea that inner cities are just going to be abandoned, that the money’s going to be stripped from them, and whoever wants to deal with them can deal with the problems. And that people are going to have their little enclaves and take out of their pocket to buy a police force or good schools and, in a perverted way, that’s the American Dream: I’ll take care of my own and fuck the rest of you.

For Sayles, the modern city is one of racism, corruption, unequal opportunity, confusion, and greed.

The City as Apocalypse

The cinematic city of the future is even bleaker than the ones of the present and the past. Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) is set in a hellish, claustrophobic city, dark and polluted, and with a continual drenching rainfall, Los Angeles in 2019. It is a "grimy, retrograde future—the future as a black market, made up of scrambled, sordid aspects of the present" (Kael, 1994). *Blade Runner* is the "quintessential skewed vision of contemporary Los Angeles on film." It is a film of dread, tension, angst, anger, and grief. The trashing of Los Angeles in *Blade Runner* and other films of the 1980s and 1990s is significant because Los Angeles had supplanted New York City as the dream of the future. With the destruction of L.A. as popular culture's promised land, no other city has taken its place, suggesting perhaps the demise of the venerable dream of the city as promised land.

The world of 2019 L.A.: nature has gone berserk, deluging the teeming city with an almost constant downpour. Smoke and fog add to the fumigated congestion. There are immense flying billboards, multi racial medieval street life, open markets and open sewers, grungy soda bars, dwarf scavengers, open bonfires. *Blade Runner's* visual language is part film noir and part jungle, the wet black streets, the steam (a hellish image important to *Batman* and *Taxi Driver*), the chiaroscuro, the random craziness in the background. The sound track throbs with eerie sounds, echoes, pounding pistons, and the noises of flying vehicles like reincarnated pteridactyls shuttling through the poisonous atmosphere.

The Los Angeles of 2019 is a Third World bazaar, a mixture of races, primarily Asians and Mexicans (but, curiously, no blacks), and of cultures and language. The lingua franca of the streets is "Cityspeak...gutter talk...a mishmash of Japanese, Spanish, German, what have you". Immense flying billboards flash images of Asian beauties and advertisements for the "Off-World Colonies", a type of suburbanization that echoes the reasons for the migration to California: "A new life awaits you in the off-world colonies. The chance to begin again in a golden land of opportunity and adventure."

Blade Runner quickly became (and remains) "a part of everyday speech in Los Angeles. All someone had to do was mention it and you immediately knew where they stood about the future of the city" (Rieff, 1991, p. 133). *Blade Runner* has become such a commonplace metaphor for the future of Los Angeles that Kevin Starr, for example, in his epilogue to the "L.A. 2000: A City for the Future" report, did not feel the need to explain its origin when he warned of "the *Blade Runner* scenario: the fusion of individual cultures into a demotic polyglotism ominous with unresolved hostilities" (Rieff, 1991, p. 133). After the 1992 Rodney King trial rioting, *Blade Runner* was "on everybody's mind here in L.A. The movie coupled Asian congestion with immigrant violence and consigned Los Angeles to a future of racial and social anarchy. In the aftermath of the riots, it was easy to be a pessimist" (Meyer, 1992, p. 46).

"Disorder, chaos, anarchy...Let's have fun!" commands the chief villain in *The Crow* (1994) which opens with a city burning. This postapocalyptic Detroit is a desolate urban wasteland with dark rain slicked, steaming streets which are the scene of random brutality and wanton murder. One character laments that "what this place needs is a good natural catastrophe...an earthquake...tornado...maybe a flood like in the Bible." The city as apocalypse is also vividly portrayed in the opening scene of *Terminator 2* (1991) where killing machines seek out and destroy human foes in a 1997 Los Angeles incinerated by a nuclear

holocaust. The Los Angeles of a year earlier is also a war zone in *Demolition Man* (1993). The Hollywood sign is on fire and the rest of the city is in worse shape. *Predator 2* (1992), also set in 1997 Los Angeles, opens with shots of a sweltering city lacerated by a pitched battle between drug dealers and police with a loudmouthed news reporter, fuming, "It's like Dante's hell down here. Smoke, fire, oppressive heat. As Columbian and Jamaican drug kings once again transform the streets of L.A. into a slaughterhouse. Who the hell's in charge here!" The city is chaos (Shefter, 1984).

Nineteen ninety-seven is a bad year for New York as well. John Carpenter's *Escape from New York* (1981) presents a dark futuristic tale in which Manhattan has become the nation's maximum security prison, a "conservative nightmare of minorities and criminals rampant" (Ryan & Kellner, 1988, p. 258). Morality has fled along with the Joker's decent people. Only criminals and crazies remain. Cars are overturned and set on fire. Garbage and graffiti are everywhere and people brutally prey on one another. It is a Hobbesian world where only the strong (and vicious) survive. Life is nasty, brutish, and short.

THE AMERICAN CITY AS TWO CITIES

One of the prevailing metaphors of urban social science has been the American city as "two cities" divided by class, by race, by ethnicity, by culture. The two cities are the city of power, wealth, and culture v. the city of the underclass. A core element of both constructs is the close physical proximity but huge economic and cultural differences of the residents of these two cities (Mollenkopf & Castells, 1991).

The two cities imagery is explicitly presented in *Grand Canyon* (1991) and *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990) with their opening scenes of upper class white men, "masters of the universe", getting lost in their cars in the black and Latino underclass haunts of L.A. and the Bronx. The metaphor of the Grand Canyon is its depth and width, like the chasms which separate the different segments of society.

The two cities also are found in different movies filmed in the same city. The New Yorkers of Lee's *Do the Right Thing* and Allen's *Manhattan* are truly brothers and sisters from other planets: Manhattan v. Brooklyn, Harvard classes v. underclasses, Gershwin v. Public Enemy. There are no blacks in Woody's *'Hood* as Lee (1989a) is well aware but even Allen's *Manhattan* itself is subject to a multitude of interpretations and judgments.

The Los Angeles of *Boyz 'n the 'Hood*, *South Central*, *Menace II Society* and *Grand Canyon*, which "is presented as ominous and threatening, an alien landscape where rich people pile up bulwarks of money and distance to protect them from the dangers of poverty and despair" (Ebert, 1994) contrasts starkly with the "lush, magical, enchanted...beautiful exotic, absurd, pretentious, loopy" city portrayed in *L.A. Story* (Benenson, 1991, p. 13).

The image of the two cities is an old one cinematically. *Dead End* remains perhaps the best cinematic exposition of the two cities phenomenon of wealth and poverty existing tooth by jowl. The movie (and the play on which it was based) was an explicit exposition of the force of the environment shaping the future of the individual (people who live decent will be decent), a cliché of the proletarian literature of the Depression.

CONCLUSION

As Swanstrom (1993, p. 54) put it, some films, such as Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* and *Jungle Fever* (1991), "appear to say more about life in US cities than tomes of academic research on urban political economy." They do appear to say more. They may not actually say more because they are confined not by conventions of truth-telling but of story-telling and their ultimate goal is not to illuminate or educate (though, at their best, they do this, too), but merely to maximize profits. Still, whatever they say, they say in vivid, popular, accessible ways, which like carnival microphones, amplify their messages.

The concerns that have led social scientists, historians, and others "to look to works of art for enlightenment" bear upon those aspects of human life that are "the most difficult, if not impossible, to study and observe externally or objectively—the attitudes, emotions, and opinions that shape and are shaped by people's circumstances" (Zuckert, 1995, p. 189). Movies, like works of literature, "expand our experience vicariously by showing us what it is like to live in another fashion." Movies offer "virtual experience" (Kassiola, 1992, p. 62).

This essay represents a reconnaissance of the terrain of the reel city. The movies discussed here (and the images proposed) are illustrative, not exhaustive. "Decent People" leaves many questions unaddressed or barely touched upon. Among the first: Are the themes evident in films consistent with those noted in the "scientific" and popular literature, in other media of mass culture and art, etc? Were positive themes less prevalent in these other media as well? What have been the dominant cinematic images of the city as they have changed over time and across genres?

The images of the American city portrayed in cinema, like the urban images found in sociology and political science, appear to "rise and fall in popularity because of the changing nature of problems that the cities seem to face at any particular time" (Langer, 1984, p. 101; Shefter, 1984). Avenues of future study include a more explicit comparison of the cinematic images of the city with the findings of social scientists about the "objective" state of the city, the real v. the reel city. As the young hooker in *Blow-Out* (1979) put it: "Movies are great but, like this is like real life, on the streets."

Moreover, the images projected by movies and other forms of cultural expression can inform and be informed by the study of images of the city produced in academic disciplines and professions. Monti's suggestive work on urban legends and folklore and their relation to social science theories illustrates the potential of such an approach (Monti, 1993). Specifically, do these cultural stories affect the way social scientists view and conceptualize the city?

Cinematic images react with other elements of culture, including television, music, legend and folklore, and literature, to produce metaphors and systems of metaphors about the US city. These dominant images are rarely the product of single works, no matter how popular and acclaimed they may be. They are "emplotted metaphors" and motifs produced by groups of films that together produce multifaceted images (Palmer, 1993). A study of movies and other media of mass culture can "probe the way that ideas gain credence, that symbols acquire power, and emotional attachments take hold and fears take root" (Henig, 1993, p. 328). Television, particularly, has provided richly textured metaphoric visions of the US city over the last 40 years, *The Honeymooners*, *East Side, West Side*, *Naked City*, *The Blue Knight*, *All in the Family*, *Miami Vice*, *Homicide*, *NYPD Blue*, and especially *Hill*

Street Blues (Zynda, 1986). Television's power to project coherent nuanced images of the city lies in its ubiquity, the attention it commands, and the frequency (weekly episodes), length of runs (often several years), and the quality (occasionally quite high) of programs (McGrath, 1995).

Another broad area of research is the examination of the content and the evolution of images of the US city in cinema over time and across genres. Different images and combinations of images of the city have been projected at different times (as well as the same images projected differently). The city of the interwar period, for instance, was seen by some as a dehumanizing totalitarian machine, the city of *Metropolis* (1926) and *Modern Times* (1936).

One further suggestion for study is the analysis of images of the US suburb (and small town) and their comparison with city images in the sense of representing a shared ideal lifestyle, for instance, pre-World War II city images v. recent images of the suburb and in the sense of representing simultaneously competing ways of life, for example, cities v. suburbs at a common time. After all, the flip side of our anti-urban bias has been the American agrarian ideal, later partially transferred to the suburbs. There is a large body of film set in American suburbs and small towns from *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), and *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dreamhouse* (1948), to *East of Eden* (1955), *Peyton Place* (1957), *The Last Picture Show* (1971), *American Graffiti* (1973), *True Stories* (1986), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), and *Avalon* (1990). Leigh (personal communication, June 1995) has suggested the images of suburb as "Paradise of the American Dream" (in short, a place where decent people should live) and the "Parody of the American Dream" (where decent people don't).

"Decent People Shouldn't Live Here" is meant to provoke my colleagues to look at the city in different ways, specifically here, by seeing through the cultural lens of American movies. It is an invitation to fellow scholars to explore images of cities in film and other expressions of mass culture.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

Given the thousands of American movies set, at least in part, in US cities, the choice of movies to be analyzed, let alone the images constructed, is necessarily selective. In order to reduce in some way these inescapable elements of idiosyncrasy, the films focused on in this essay were, in the main, either popular or critical successes between 1970 and 1995 (i.e. they were among the top 25 grossing movies of the year and/or received Academy Award nominations for best picture, director, or writing and were set in a US city whether real or fictional). Popularity is significant because movies must resonate with their audiences. Recognition by the Academy enhances movies' reception and legitimizes the interpretations and judgments presented and perceived (as well as being worth as much as \$20 million at the box office). Clearly, other selection criteria could be used: different awards or combinations of awards, choices in critics' "best movies" lists, and so forth.

The essay also draws on several movies which were neither honored by the Academy nor among the most popular of their year's releases. Some were later deemed to be among the "best movies" ever made: *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Mean Streets* (1974) (McGillan &

Rowland, 1989; Andrew, 1995). *City of Hope* (1989) is arguably the best film about the intricate politics of US city government ever made.

The cinematic images explored are from movies of the last quarter century. The sheer number of movies released each year necessitated a chronological cut off. The year 1970 was chosen for several reasons: American cities were emerging from the civil disorders of the sixties; they had become "unheavenly" (Banfield, 1970). Cinematically, movies are frequently grouped by decade (Palmer, 1993, 1987). Films made during the early to mid-1970s constituted the "fifth American era" of filmmaking where "the basic generic division...was between city films and country films" (Mast, 1986, p. 426).

The movies analyzed are fictional feature films, as opposed to factual or documentary films as *Roger and Me* (1989) or *Streetwise* (1985) which deal with urban themes such as business disinvestment and unemployment (in Flint, Michigan) or runaway, abducted, or abandoned children living rough in the streets (in Seattle). The movies examined are American movies about American cities. "Decent People" does not, for example, examine foreign films, such as *Pixote* (1981), which vividly and immediately portrays the underclass of Sao Paulo, Brazil, nor even films by foreign filmmakers dealing with American cities, such as *Atlantic City* (1980).

Between 1970 and 1995, 39 American movies were nominated for a best picture, best director, or best writing award and/or were one of the top grossing movies of the year. The urban cinematic landscape has more often been portrayed as hellish than heavenly. (All but one of the cities of the past, present, or future (Gotham City in *Batman*) is real, and almost all take place in New York or Los Angeles, whether real or fictional.)

Images of the US city can be categorized and analyzed from a great number of perspectives: by genre, by era, by city, by filmmaker. The one essential feature of all urban images regardless of source is the "attitudinal dimension from positive and enthusiastic to negative and disdainful" (Rodwin & Hollister, 1984, p. 13). Twenty-four of the 39 movies offered overall negative portrayals. (Movies often present a mix of positive and negative images and motifs. An inescapable element of idiosyncrasy sometimes remains in the determination of whether the dominant tone is positive or negative.) One might suspect that a larger sample would confirm the prevalence of negative images. Although not the subject of exact arithmetic, those movies projecting negative images appear more broadly and deeply negative (witness *Taxi Driver*, *Batman*, *Boyz 'n the Hood*) than movies with more uplifting urban themes are positive (for example, the more nuanced or ambivalent themes in *Saturday Night Fever*, *Working Girl*, and even *Manhattan*).

Social scientists and students of literature suggest other dimensions of US city movies. One dimension relates to whether the action centers on: (1) unique individuals or groups or individuals clearly representative of groups and (2) the form of conflict portrayed. Is the conflict personal or social, violent or nonviolent? Shefter (1984) sees the type and level of political conflict to be a key ingredient of city images in political science. Langer (1984) sees images of the city in sociology as of ordered diversity and derives four dominant images of the city found in sociological research, based on whether the image of diversity/order is positive or negative and whether it focuses on individuals or groups, organizations, and institutions.

City movies, like city novels (Gelfant, 1954), also can be distinguished by the form of the presentation of the image: portrait movies reveal the city through a struggle of an indi-

TABLE 1

Popular/Acclaimed "City" Movies, 1970-1994

Movie	Year	Academy Award	Top 25	Positive/Negative
The Crow	1994	no	yes	-
The Fugitive	1993	yes	yes	+
Sleepless in Seattle	1993	yes	yes	+
Demolition Man	1993	no	yes	-
Prince of Tides	1992	yes	yes	-
Home Alone 2	1992	no	yes	+
White Men Can't Jump	1992	no	yes	+
Boyz 'n the Hood	1991	yes	yes	-
Grand Canyon	1991	yes	no	-
New Jack City	1991	no	yes	-
Goodfellas	1991	yes	no	-
Dick Tracy	1990	no	yes	-
Avalon	1990	yes	no	+
Do the Right Thing	1989	yes	no	-
Batman	1989	no	yes	-
Ghostbusters II	1989	no	yes	-
When Harry Met Sally	1989	yes	yes	+
Working Girl	1988	yes	no	+
Crocodile Dundee II	1988	no	yes	-
Moonstruck	1987	yes	yes	+
Crocodile Dundee	1986	yes	yes	-
Witness	1985	yes	yes	-
Ghostbusters	1984	no	yes	-
Tootsie	1983	yes	yes	+
Fame	1980	yes	no	+
Manhattan	1979	yes	yes	+
Kramer vs. Kramer	1979	yes	yes	+
Saturday Night Fever	1978	no	yes	+
Annie Hall	1977	yes	yes	+
Taxi Driver	1976	yes	yes	-
Dog Day Afternoon	1975	yes	yes	+
Godfather, Part II	1974	yes	yes	-
Chinatown	1974	yes	no	-
The Conversation	1974	yes	no	-
Serpico	1973	yes	yes	-
The Godfather	1972	yes	yes	-
The French Connection	1971	yes	yes	-
Klute	1971	yes	yes	-
The Out-of-Towners	1970	no	yes	-

Note: Academy Awards are for best picture, best director, best screenplay.

vidual protagonist (e.g., *Saturday Night Fever*, *Working Girl*). In synoptic movies the city itself functions as a major player and in which the filmmaker emphasizes the multiplicity of city experience (e.g., *Taxi Driver*, *Manhattan*, *L.A. Story*). The ecological movie "focuses on one small spatial unit such as a city neighborhood or city block and explores in detail the manner of life identified with this place" (e.g., *Smoke*, *Do the Right Thing*) (Gelfant, 1954, p.11).

Finally, images of the city are affected by the billing that the city gets in a film. In some movies, the city plays the role of the set and in others, a star. Sometimes, characters in a movie are placed against an urban setting that is "not the vital and necessary condition for their acts" (Gelfant, 1954, p. 5). In other movies, the city is presented as "animate and potent. It makes and breaks men" (Strauss, 1968, p. 5). Thus, a distinction can be made between true city movies and urban local color movies. In the true city movie, the city actively participates in shaping character and plot. In an urban local color movie, substitution of another background might alter the details within the movie but not the essential patterns of plot, characterization, and theme (Gelfant, 1954, p. 5). Films such as *Moonstruck*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, and *Home Alone 2* might be considered urban local color movies.

These categories, not developed here, offer elements of focus which may provide future researchers with some conceptual tools drawn from the study of images in literature and the social sciences. In so doing, they may systematically examine some of the points I have raised more impressionistically and some points may be supported and others discarded.

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