THE CITY IN FILM
USP 314
Spring 2012, Thursdays, 4:00–7:40 pm

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In this course, we critically explore the representations of cities and their inhabitants in feature films through lecture, in-class screening, reading, discussion, independent film study, reflective writing, and an essay exam. The course is designed to foster careful reading and interpretation of urban issues in consonance with other courses and literature in urban studies. This course can be petitioned to fulfill a cluster requirement for Community Studies.

Class Format:
Each week we will consider and discuss an urban theme illustrated by a cluster of three films, one of which we will watch in class. The other two will be available on 4-hour reserve at the Library. The films on reserve are optional viewing for all class members but are intended to be viewed in clusters for individual term projects (see NOTES, below). You are expected to take notes on the film and actively discuss it in terms of its urban themes.

Assigned Reading: B. Mennel, Cities and Cinema (available at the PSU Bookstore)

Evaluation:
1. Film Reviews (5): 50%
2. Participation: 15%
3. Project: 20%
4. Essay exam (15%)

Film Reviews:
Students will submit at the beginning of each class a full five-paragraph (4-6 sentences per paragraph) film review of the previous week’s film showing. The format, which must be followed, is as follows:
Identification information: At the top of the page, put your name, date of submission, title of film, and name of director (you may have to google to learn this last item).

Paragraph 1: An overview of the film’s contents (no details or analysis, just a general description of what the film is about – setting, plot, the main characters).

Paragraph 2: Discuss the basic story line (the narrative).

Paragraphs 3 and 4: Analytically discuss the most pertinent issue(s) that reflects the director’s representation of the city and its inhabitants.

Paragraph 5: Give your assessment, with reasons, about whether or not the director succeeded in her/his apparent objective in telling a story about the city.

Reviews must be typed, double-spaced, 12 pt. font, stapled, and at least 700 words (not including the initial identification information).

There are 9 films for exhibition, of which you are required to complete 5 reviews. Your average grade for the reviews will count as 50% of your term grade. No late reviews are accepted.

Term project: For the term project, students will write an analytical essay about the city and city inhabitant representations based on one of the film clusters. The essay should be typed, double-spaced, 12 pt font, one inch margins, and, at minimum, 3,000 words in length. The first film in the cluster will have been viewed in class; the other two films may be checked out from library reserve (for 4 hours) and viewed by the student at any time during the term. In developing your essay, you are expected to use the following sources:

- notes from class lectures/discussions,
- your in-class reflection paper,
- notes from personal viewing of the films in the cluster,
- concepts drawn from the assigned book for the class, and
- additional material from books/articles, including other work by the directors that is relevant to your topic.
Due Date: No later than Thursday, May 31st for First Draft Option; All Final Drafts by Monday, June 11th, Noon.

Format: At the top of the essay paper, include your name, date of submission, titles of films reviewed and their directors, and title of your paper.

Good essays include discussion of a central issue, which you should develop at the outset of the paper, a synthetic (combining elements) and unifying rendering of the story lines of the three film narratives, a careful and thoughtful reflection on the common theme and how it is presented, and a critique (positive or negative) of each of the three directors’ works (perhaps with some commentary on other relevant work by that director) and a reasoned commentary about whether each director was/was not successful (and why) in her/his representation of the city and its inhabitants.

Exam. The final exam is based on the textbook assigned for this class and will be composed of three short essays (minimum of 300 words each). The exam is 2 hours in length. It’s worth 15% of the term grade. Bring bluebooks and pens.

Participation. A discussion will follow the film exhibition. Students are expected to take notes on and engage the lecture, film, and group discussions. These notes and the text assignments will assist students in writing the reflection essay. Active participation in these discussions counts as 15% of your term grade. Regular attendance (one absence max.) is required (and recorded). Weak attendance will reduce your participation grade.

Discussion leaders. A group initiative intended to identify and elaborate the key points in the assigned readings and video presentations, raise critical issues, and provoke discussion among members of the class.

Mentoring. Everyone is required to meet with WIC assistant Dan Schlegel at least once during the term.

Disability accommodation: Any student with a documented disability condition can make arrangements with the Disability Resource Center at PSU for meeting any special needs. Both the instructor and DRC should be contacted at the beginning of the term.

Plagiarism: A very serious offense. Any evidence of plagiarism will be handled by administrative action in addition to a failing grade.

Class Schedule

Week 1 (April 5): Introduction to Cities in Film Representation
A film excerpt for discussion of city representations and its inhabitants, along with discussion of class objectives and requirements. Note that the underlined film title is the in-class showing. The others are on 4-hour Library reserve.

Week 2 (April 12): Urban Dystopia
Question: How is the theme of a dysfunctional modernity captured in the film?
Fight Club
District Nine
The Lives of Others
Read: Mennel, Introduction and Chapter 6

Week 3 (April 19): Urban Youth, Urban Violence
Question: How is the degradation of urban youth experience depicted in the film?
City of God
Boyz in the Hood
Salaam Bombay!
Read: Mennel, Chapter 1

Week 4 (April 26): Race, conflict, and urban change
Question: What are the critical issues for residents of urban ghettos and ethnic communities?
Do the Right Thing
Bend it Like Beckham
La Haine/Hate
Read: Mennel, Chapters 2 and 7
Week 5 (May 3): Suburban utopia, lost community, postwar adjustments to modernity
Question: How is the theme of the fatuousness of suburban life captured in the film?
Ordinary People
The Castle
The Truman Show
Read: Mennel, Chapter 6

Week 6 (May 10): Land development, corruption, resistance, unsustainable cities
Question: How is the corruption of town and city life revealed in the film?
Chinatown
The Garden
Milagro Bean Field War
Read: Mennel, Chapter 4

Week 7 (May 17): Critiques of corporate capitalism
Question: In what ways is the corporation seen as an urban destroyer?
Roger and Me
Metropolis
A Civil Action
Read: Mennel, Chapter 9

Week 8 (May 24): Environmental Disaster and Resistance
Question: In what ways is capitalism seen to be on a collision course with the environment?
Erin Brockovich
The China Syndrome
Norma Rae
Read: Mennel, Chapters 5

Week 9 (May 31): Cities of Charm and Mystique
Question: In what ways is the city treated in film as romantic?
The Cruise
Amélie
Black Orpheus
Read: Mennel, Chapters 3 & 8
First Draft Project Paper Option: Last date for submission

Week 10 (June 7): Immigration, multi-ethnic working class
Question: In what ways is the city treated in film as hostile to class and race?
Dirty Pretty Things
La Ciudad
Eat, Drink, Man, Woman
Read: Mennel, Chapter 9 & Conclusion

Week 11 (June 11): Last date for submission of Project Papers – Noon
Week 11 (June 14): FINAL EXAM – 3:30 pm

NOTE regarding changes to the syllabus: When necessary, changes will be made to accommodate unforeseen circumstances or inadvertent omissions.