

City and Cinema
(Points for Discussion)

1.

2. In his 1903 essay, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," Georg Simmel described the experience of the big city as a "constant barrage of impressions," resulting in "the intensification of sensory perception." In his view, "the rapid concentration of shifting images ... [and] the unexpectedness of impressions that force themselves upon one" are constitutive of the conditions for perception in the metropolis. This is analogous to the perception of the discontinuous cinematic images which flit past the spectator's eye. Walter Benjamin (in his book on Baudelaire): "Only film incorporates shock-like perception as a formal principle." **The affinity between urban perception and cinematic spectatorship results in an early synergy between city and film.** In addition, the migration to the big city in the decade before the war became the historical basis for the rapid acceptance of film as the **primary urban art form.**

3. Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's short avant-garde film **Manhatta (1921) celebrates New York as "the city of the world (for all races are here)" with documentary images of New York City** and--intercut--a Whitman poem of the same title. Manhatta is both modernist (it deconstructs renaissance perspective in favor of multiple points of view) and romantic in its longing for an urbanism (and a world) that is in harmony with nature. Soon thereafter, Fritz Lang's science fiction film Metropolis (1927) already shows the apocalyptic breakdown of a city in the year 2000.

4. Classical city films--examples are Walter Ruttmann's 1927 Berlin--Symphony of a Big City. Dziga Vertov's 1929 Man with a Movie Camera. Godfrey Reggios' 1983 Koyaanisqatsi) -- tend to oscillate between **moments of confusion (the camera at eye level and in movement) and moments of control and totalization (achieved by high-angle or aerial shots).** The practice of filming the city attributes meaning and order to activities that seem random, purposeless, opaque, and blind. **The framing of the camera constructs an urban text that makes the complexity of the city readable and translates the mobility into a transparent text;** it creates readers, as de Certeau would argue. The "ordinary practitioners of the city" live 'down below', below the thresholds at which visibility begins"-- it is no coincidence that **many of city films' most characteristic shots use high angle, thereby suggesting a perspective --like a celestial eye-- that allows recognition of patterns, readability.**

5. In Berlin Symphony and Koyaanisqatsi, the city appears as a **closed system, as a self-sufficient organizational cosmos with interlocking economies and classes.** The modern metropolis is not organized according to a two-tier system of rulers above and working slaves below (as in the futurist Metropolis); it is **experienced as a vertigo.** Ruttmann's modernist film documents this experience as both exhilarating and destructive, while the postmodernist Koyaanisqatsi sees urban living as "life out of balance" and juxtaposes feverish urbanity with undisturbed primordial nature and myth. Urbanization is here seen as a global condition of postmodernity.

6. The city is often represented as a **network of social relationships among perfect strangers**. While the celebrated city novels by Balzac and Zola explore also social relationships, they involve characters who know of each other. What counts in the city film--exactly as in the city streets--is **emphasis on anonymity, surface, image, mobility of people and camera**.

