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| City Films |
| City symphonies |
| ‘City films’ or ‘city symphonies’ are labels applied to experimental films devoted to the depiction of city life. They are perhaps the most prevalent experimental film sub-genre in the first half of the twentieth century, but are not confined to this temporal frame; a considerable number of filmmakers still work in this mode. City films are usually devoid of narrative or of individualized characters. They focus on the anonymous metropolitan crowd and on the urban physical environment: buildings, streets, infrastructures, and means of mass transport — subways, elevated trains, and cars. City films are at the crossroads of a number of modernist interests: the machine aesthetic, the cult of dynamism and speed, the interest in exploring shapes and textures of contemporary life, and the perception of the city as an emblematic modern environment. Canonical representatives of the genre are the European titles *Rien que les heures* (Cavalcanti 1926), *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) and *Man with the Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov 1929). City films evince the close association between the cinema and the modern city — not only the main setting for the production and consumption of the cinema, but also, as far back as the Lumière brothers’ films, one of the camera’s favourite spectacles. |
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Canonical representatives of the genre are the European titles *Rien que les heures* (Cavalcanti 1926), *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) and *Man with the Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov 1929). City films evince the close association between the cinema and the modern city — not only the main setting for the production and consumption of the cinema, but also, as far back as the Lumière brothers’ films, one of the camera’s favourite spectacles. Origins and Antecedents The city film arises from a fascination with the spectacle of the modern metropolis. Its immediate antecedents are artistic developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that also shared this interest: Impressionist painting, with its capture of fleeting city views; the straight urban photography of Alfred Stieglitz and Eugène Atget; and the early film genre known as ‘urban actualities.’ Urban actualities portrayed slices of city life, usually in single takes. Some were random shots of traffic and crowds, or of found — or, at times, staged — scenes intended to look spontaneous; others portrayed the city’s monumental façade, as does *Panorama of the Flatiron Building* (1903) or the numerous films of the Brooklyn Bridge and the high-rises of Lower Manhattan often filmed from moving boats. Due to the influence of this popular genre, some early city films seem at first sight to be collections of actualities, though more artfully filmed and edited. Aesthetics City films gave cinematic shape to what German critic Walter Benjamin famously described as a prime modern experience: the drift of the *flanêur*, or aimless wanderer, across the metropolis, regarding the world around him (the modern city stroller was usually male) with detached attention. However, in city films the perceiving agent is not an individual, but the camera. The recording mechanism is the surrogate of the spectator and the device that organizes perception. Because of this mediation, city films show a double fascination: with the wonders of city life and with the capacity of the camera to capture and relay them. City films are examples of what Tom Gunning famously named the ‘cinema of attractions.’ They are less interested in narrative than in showcasing enticing visual spectacles. These include those that materialize more or less spontaneously in front of the lens, but also exploit the ability of the apparatus to provide images unavailable to the naked eye: frozen movement and fast motion, abrupt abridgements of time and space, and jolting juxtapositions.  Because of this, city films are not only visual translations of strolls through the city, but also exercises in non-human vision. Vertov’s *Man with the Movie Camera* shifts from the moving images taken from the streets in a perspective that approaches that of the human eye, to those same images being mediated through various technological supports during the film’s production: run through a moviola, parsed out in separate frames on a strip of celluloid, and cut and spliced by a film editor. Frequent superimpositions and split screens further articulate views alien to organic vision. Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin* (1927) opens with a sequence of swish pans, rapid cuts, and blurred views that convey the speed of a train journey into the city. This means of foregrounding the apparatus is not exclusive to well-known titles in the genre. Robert Florey’s *Skyscraper Symphonie* (1929) distorts and multiplies the outlines of buildings by means of prisms and makes them swing and dance through oscillating camera movement. The relatively unknown *Markt am Wittembergplatz* (Wilhelm Basse 1928) used frame shooting to compress the entire day of a Berlin market into a few minutes. For its ability to convey the frantic pace of metropolitan life, frame shooting is also widely used in later examples of the cycle such as Marie Menken’s *Go! Go! Go!* (1964), Hilary Harris’s *Organism* (1975), and Godfrey Reggio’s *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982).  Other films foreground the workings of the apparatus more subtly. Joris Ivens’ *Regen* [*Rain*, 1929] lyrically depicts how a sudden shower momentarily disrupts the routine of a city. Beautifully framed shots show dripping railings and trees; forests of umbrellas in the streets; and raindrops impacting on a variety of surfaces, from puddles to window panes. The apparatus here acts as a surgical device that extracts discrete views out of a perceptual continuum. In all cases, by showcasing visual capabilities only available to the cinema, city films not only participate in the aesthetics of attraction and astonishment; they also turn their means of expression into one of their main subjects, which, in critic Clement Greenberg’s famous formulation, was one of the characteristics of modernist art. Approaches and Types City films may be divided on the basis of their approach to the city. Many of the earliest ones showed a panoramic ambition to account with some degree of wholeness for a particular setting (as was the case with Strand and Sheeler’s *Manhatta* (1921) or Ruttmann’s *Berlin*), or for the entirety of the urban experience (as in Vertov’s *Man with the Movie Camera*). Such panoramic aspiration is enhanced by these films’ organization as single day-long cycles in the life of a city, a natural unit that puts closure on the exuberant, seemingly boundless activity that the films portray. *Manhatta*, *Berlin*, and *Man with the Movie Camera* use this strategy, as do later examples such as Marie Menken’s *Go! Go! Go!*, Hilary Harris’s *Organism* (1975), or, more recently, Fernando Pérez’s *Havana Suite* (2003).  Most titles in the genre, however, forego such encyclopedic ambition and focus instead on particular aspects of city life. Jean Vigo’s *A Propós de Nice* (1930) concentrates on the mixture of wealth and crassness found in Nice’s elegant seafront, and ends up contrasting the vitality of the young revellers in a carnival parade with the bland stolidity of older bourgeois watching from the sidelines. In Ivens’ *De Brug* [*The Bridge*](1928) the city is an almost incidental backdrop to the transit and activity around a Rotterdam steel bridge. These examples notwithstanding, early city films tended to aim for completeness and to use the daytime as a framing device, while titles made after World War II tended to take partial views of their subjects and to blur temporal markers.  Another distinction may be drawn between films that present the city as a sight to be consumed visually and those that present the city as a setting for various types of actions that go, at times, against habit or collective sanction. This distinction may be read against the evolution of the genre. While early films presented the city as a spectacle, films after World War II tended to see it as a stage for activity that leads at times to the re-enchantment of everyday spaces and situations. Significant examples of this mode are Helen Levitt and James Agee’s *In the Street* (1948, 1953) Joseph Cornell’s *What Mozart Saw on Mulberry Street* (1956), and Shirley Clarke’s *In Paris Parks* (1954); they all concentrate on the spontaneous choreography of children’s games and gestures and on the transformative effect that these have on their surroundings. The late-1950s collaborations of Jack Smith and Ken Jacobs (*The Whirled*, *Star-Spangled to Death*) and Jack Smith’s *Scotch Tape* (1963) also belong in this category. In Smith’s and Jacobs’s films, it is not children, but a band of outcasts that turn the city into their own particular playground; their games are a hysterical way of acting out their alienation from an oppressive, dehumanizing environment.    Two less frequent modes are the lyrical and the essayistic city film. In lyrical approaches, the documentary quality of the city film yields to the personal expression of the filmmaker. Two paradigmatic examples come from Stan Brakhage. *The Wonder Ring* (1955) is a film of a trip on New York’s Third Avenue Elevated train filmed at Joseph Cornell’s request and often co-credited to both artists. Brakhage’s later *Unconscious London Strata* (1982) is a highly abstract recreation of London that amplifies the elusive resonances the city raised in the filmmaker. In both titles, especially in the latter, the materiality of the city volatilizes somewhat, as it becomes a catalyst for highly individual perceptions and associations.  Quite different in rhetoric are argument-driven, essayistic films such as Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke’s *The City* (1939) or Arthur Elton and Edgard Anstey’s *Housing Problems* (1935). *The City,* written by Lewis Mumford and sponsored by the American Institute of Planners, is a plea for the abandonment of the cramped inner city in favour of the suburban sprawl, still seen as a post-urban utopia when the film was made. While *The City* attacks the crowded, mechanical quality of the traditional city, it unwittingly portrays its warmth and unconscious beauty, lovingly photographed by Steiner. Similar in intent to *The City*, *Housing Problems* is a matter-of-fact depiction of the unsanitary British slums and a plea for their clearance and replacement. Detached voice-over commentary and harrowing on-camera testimonies by slum-dwellers, together with images that set the derelict slums against the luminous, spacious housing built in their place, drive the point home forcefully. Some films bring together the lyrical-poetic and the essayistic. Chris Marker *Le Joli mai* (1963), is both a document of a city in transition and a poetic meditation on the paradoxes of everyday life in the modern world. It shows Paris in May of 1962, shortly after the colonial conflict of the Algerian war came to an end. An era of peace is beginning. The new peace, however, is not entirely void of confrontation and malaise; concomitantly, the new consumerism that replaces the austerity of the post-war years turns out to be as exhilarating as it is banal and ultimately dispiriting. The Parisian urban layout changes in tandem with these transformations: from the concentrated inner city to the dispersed habitat of the outskirts, dotted with new high-rise apartments promising unprecedented comfort but delivering, at the same time, impersonality and isolation.  In the same way that lyricism and argument occasionally blend, so does fiction impregnate at times the essentially documentary quality of the city film. An early example is Alfredo Cavalcanti’s *Rien que les heures* (1926): it revolves around a prostitute and a newspaper seller whose passage through the city allows the film to delve into the Parisian underworld. Other films that employ some sort of narrative device and focus on distinct characters are Alfred Leslie’s whimsical *The Last Clean Shirt* (1964) and Chantal Akerman’s *News from Home* (1977), both set in New York City. In Leslie’s film, made up of a single shot, an interracial couple drives through Manhattan; the camera frames them from behind and the city courses by in a blur. While the white woman soliloquizes endlessly, verging at times on complete nonsense, the black man just drives and offers no response. *News From Home* shows long takes of New York streets and subways, with a particular emphasis on de-industrialized, deserted Lower Manhattan; meanwhile, present only as an off-screen voice, a Belgian mother reads fragments of her letters to her daughter, a visual artist living in New York at the time.  For its fascination with the city as visual spectacle and as a stage for a varied range of activities and styles of habitation, and for its exploration of the possibilities of the apparatus, the city film is an essentially modernist form. Its currency during modernism’s historical period and its contemporary persistence (in the work, among others of Fernando Pérez, Dominique González-Foester, and Chris Marker, whose *Chats perches*, 2004, may be seen as an avatar of the genre) indicate that the form is as inexhaustible, and as amenable to transformation and evolution as the modern city that inspired it. Selected Filmography: *Rien que les heures* (A. Cavalcanti, 1926)  *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (W. Ruttmann, 1927)  *The Bridge* (J. Ivens, 1928)  *Rain* (J. Ivens and M. Franken, 1929)  *Man with the Movie Camera* (D. Vertov, 1929)  *Skycraper Symphonie* (R. Florey, 1929)  *A Propós de Nice* (J. Vigo, 1930)  *Housing Problems* (E. Anstey and A. Elton, 1935)  *The City* (R. Steiner and W. Van Dyke, 1939)  *In the Street* (H. Levitt and J. Agee, 1948)  *In Paris Parks* (S. Clarke, 1954)  *The Wonder Ring* (S. Brakhage and J. Cornell, 1955)  *What Mozart Saw on Mulberry Street* (J. Cornell and R. Burckhardt, 1956)  *The Whirled* (K. Jacobs, 1956-63)  *Scotch Tape* (J. Smith, 1963)  *Le Joli mai* (C. Marker and P. Lhomme, 1963)  *The Last Clean Shirt* (A. Leslie, 1964)  *Go! Go! Go!* (M. Menken, 1964)  *Organism* (H. Harris, 1975)  *Letters Home* (C. Akerman, 1977)  *Unconscious London Strata* (S. Brakhage, 1981)  *Koyaanisqatsi* (G. Reggio, 1982)  *Powaqqatsi* (G. Reggio, 1988)  *Havana Suite* (F. Pérez, 2003)  *Chats perches* (C. Marker, 2004)  *Star-Spangled to Death* (K. Jacobs, 1955-1964, 2004) |
| Further reading:  (Chapman)  (MacDonald)  (MacDonald, The City as Motion Picture: Notes on Some California City Films)  (Suárez)  (Uricchio) |