

## **Henry Jenkins**

### ***Tales of Manhattan: Mapping the Urban Imagination Through Hollywood Film***

Jenkins began his talk by showing the opening scenes from Woody Allen's *Manhattan* (1979) where the voice of Allen struggles to describe or summarize how he feels about New York and finds himself revising, hesitating, and contradicting himself.

He then went on to describe the different "views" of cities taken by films. Spatial stories, as Michel De Certeau tells us, explain and justify occupation of geographic spaces and map the boundaries between the known and the unknown. Films with a panoramic perspective create a composite account, sequencing and juxtaposing image fragments to construct a more meaningful whole. Films from the 110th floor focus on seeing the whole, as one would from looking at NYC from the top of the World Trade Center, and produces a "celestial view of the city." Another view, from the sidewalk, such as is used in *West Side Story*, actively engages and becomes a participant in the scene. Other examples are Charles Lane's *Sidewalk Stories* (1989) and Charles Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936). The view from a lower balcony is situated midway between the street and the sky, and an example from film is Godfrey Reggio's *Koyasquatsi* (1983). The film *On the Town* (1949) shows New York from the pages of a guidebook. *Sunrise* (1927) shows the city from the perspective of the countryside. King Vidor's film *Street Scene* (1931) shows the life of the city from a perspective of a street corner. Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928) shows the indifference of the city and the crowds to an individual. Films located at train stations, such as Vincente Minelli's *The Clock* (1945), use the station as a nexus where many different stories intersect and paths cross. People are brought together and then separated. Another view is through the rear-view mirror, such as Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), and embodies the random events and unstable social relations in the city. And finally, Alex Prokas' *Dark City* (1997) offers the noirish vision of the postmodern city, depicting urban space as an incomprehensible maze.

Jenkins concluded by saying that he tried to tell many stories of the city, yet they don't fit together very well. The story of the city can't be told - at least not as a totality. There is no single vision which can express and contain our complex and contradictory feelings towards the American metropolis. There are only ways of seeing, only provisional vantage points which offer a succession of near perfect images of urban life.

#### **Discussion and Questions**

Q: What has been the effect of these images? What is the relationship between film and city planning?

A: This type of research is just starting. It's clear that these images may have an effect on citizens, but it's not clear the effect they may have on planners.

Q: Are the interpretations of these films uniquely American or can you imagine them coming out of Europe as well?

A: These have a particular resonance in an American context. It's unique in its preoccupation with individuals, their personal goals, and personal life to the exclusion of larger collective processes. It's much different than Soviet film which builds a composite vision of their society. But there are lots of overlap with other national cinematic work.

Q: Are these films about New York, or the city?

A: New York is an emblem of the city. More than 400 films have been made about the city. It's a very important part of film.

But we also have a fascination with other cities as well.

Q: To what extent does it matter that many of the films about NY are often not filmed in NY, but places like Toronto?

A: Location is only part of what the film about. The myth is often built in other ways. It's only marginally built on location. On one hand it matters, especially for locals, because shots often don't make sense geographically, but for the rest of the country, it doesn't matter so much.

Q: There are primarily two polar opposite views of the city. Were there some periods where one view was held?

A: There may be a tendency during one period or another, but there is enormous ambivalence in all these films. There are certainly themes (e.g. the mob psychology in the 1930s), which can probably be mapped onto other conversations about the city that were going on. Mapping those themes would be the next step in the research.

Q: How did you select the 13 films you showed today out of the 400 that have been made about New York?

A: It started by making a list of films that stood out in my memory as vivid images of New York. There are lots of films set in NY, but these films were about New York and asked questions about them. Some are impressionistic, some are what I like, but tried to select films that cut across periods, directors, and tone.

Q: You keep using the word narrative. Do you think you could come away with an image, using simply narrative conversation? Could you get as powerful image using narrative and not using visual images?

A: I think it possible to tell the story of NY in any number of media which can represent it in a number of ways. But would the audience could read it and not conjure up visual images? There is a residual effect from the images.

Q: There is so much class in these images -- as in social class. It's hard to get out of being a wealthy New Yorker when you see these images. So is there any way of looking at the city without infusing it with a class perspective?

A: I doubt it. These films often take a class perspective, and a gendered one too -- none of these films were by a female director. Only one was by a black director. It's a challenge. There's a romanticization of proletarian culture. Viewpoints are class situated.

Q: Planners often create narratives. You could look at the film Dark City as an embodiment of community participation in the development process -- strangers go out and extract their vision of the city. And the city they come up with is random and often alienating. Is it possible as a planner to create a narrative about a city that is responsive to the heterogeneity of the city, but still make sense to people?

A: I love your reading of Dark City. Part of the problem is that planners are not of the city; they are not socially situated. It's the fantasy of creating for a community, but being removed from it. You have to be embedded in the community. My advice is to know the city you're designing for. You should know the people. You should know the city. The idea of flying from place to place and designing other people's world for them and then flying away again is an inherent problem. And look at images from other media about the city.

Q: The film clips you showed covered a long period of time, and I'm struck by how consistent the images are and how the same clichés keep reappearing. If you chose other films, could you have constructed a different story?

A: Yes, with enough films, you could construct almost any story. But the clichés are generally stable.

Q: The image of NY is overly negative. There is development in Brooklyn to create a "Hollywood of the East." Is there an attempt to control and create more positive images about the city?

A: New York has always competed with LA. But films that come from NY filmmakers range from Woody Allen to Martin Scorsese. There's no reason to think that NY filmmakers would be inherently more sympathetic.

Q: I was struck by the continuity of images. These collections of visual images run through all of them. I'm also struck by the formulaic notion of the plots.

A: I was struck by how little cinema studies has done on the city given its centrality. The city as a metaphor runs through almost every major theory of the cinema but in an unreflective way. There's been so little conversation between urban studies and cinema studies. We have enormous number of things to learn from each other.

**Respondent: James Buzard**

Much of what Henry describes can be traced back to British 19th century. I was struck by how the presentation today was much more of a catalogue, while the paper presented much more of an argument, so my remarks address this argument.

Two questions that we're concerned with -- a thematic and formal question. The theme about the ambivalence about the city can start probably at Virgil. I'll look at mid-19th century views. The passages come out of British romanticism (Wordsworth, Blake). Blake shows a street-level view of the city but doesn't think that it conflicts with the more generalizing impulse, but is linked to it. Generalizing is necessary. Both views have to be taken together and are necessary. The argument that I sensed from the written text was that it was ambivalent the subject as the filmmakers were about the city. It was ambivalent about its ambivalence. And I think Henry comes down more on one side than the other -- that is, he comes down on the evil of the detached overview and the ethical rightness of the perspective from street level. This is a humanist gesture that is creditable, but there are times when other perspectives have value. Mid-point perspective is exciting to me, but that view takes place on a private balcony and make me wonder is it only possible to have this mixing of two views from a private vantage point. Is there any public vantage point?