



The City on Screen: A Methodological Approach on Cinematic City Studies

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Abstract

The city has a strong memory and it never forgets its own experiences. The past, the present and the future of the city can be read in its streets, buildings, sounds, myths, rhythms and stories. More importantly, if the city is portrayed through a camera, it becomes as fictional and designable as films. At this stage, there is no difference between watching a film and seeing a city. Also, cinema itself turns into a paradigm that belongs to the city. This parallelism between the city and film is like an inevitable destiny so much so that they constitute and develop each other. Accordingly, those who attempt to understand the notion of the city should consult the films made about them and vice versa; hence, this paper deals with the question of how the city is cinematized, but this question involves another question: how does cinematic imagination fictionalize itself in the city?

Keywords: The City, Cinema, Society, Reflection, Methodology.



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Sertaç Timur Demir

INTRODUCTION

How does cinema differ from literature, music, painting or theatre? Why do most theorists attempt to analyze social forms such as community, culture, ideology, religion and urban experience by means of film? More importantly, why do we look at the city in films? I suppose that, as Orhan Pamuk, a Nobel-winning Turkish author, writes: “ ...just as we learn about our lives from others, so, too, do we let others shape our understanding of the city in which we live” (2006, 8). Similarly, inhabitants who become blind or remain unresponsive under the influence of intensive observation and excessive images of the city inevitably need an external eye to see where to look and how to realize what they see.

A monologue from the Turkish film, *The Letter / Mektup* (1997), summarizes why we need an external eye: “Once upon a time, the swamp was being seen from a distance, but, now, it is not being seen, because we are under the swamp”. This aphorism indicates the importance of cinema in cities that are full of swamp-like visual images and messages. The cinema, as an external eye, stimulates an off-voice, activates fiction and logical cohesion, clarifies how modern cities turn into a dump due to complex relations, unlimited consumption, endless mobility, uncontrolled population explosion, thoughtless demolition, rebuilding and increasing pollution. Cinema portrays the city by elaborating on its hazy environment and reducing its excessive and unnecessary intensity.

If it is accepted that spatial and temporal practices in the city are non-neutral (Harvey 1992, 239), it may be claimed that: The audio-visual intensity in the city creates a different kind

of blindness and desensitization. Meanwhile, films have a shocking and awakening effect. Tarkovsky (1987, 106) defines the stimulating and evocative notion of films as “an impression of the truth, a glimpse of the truth permitted to us in our blindness”. Since films have a multisensory orbit (Mullarkey 2009), they are preferably dealt with by researchers who want to analyze social structures and experiences of the city.

In order to investigate today`s society, one must listen to the confessions of the products of its film industries. They are all blabbing a rude secret, without really wanting to. In the endless sequence of films, a limited number of typical themes recur again and again; they reveal how society wants to see itself (Kracauer 1995, 294).

Namely, thinking about films is to think about society and the city; therefore, those who try to solve the puzzle of the city and society should look for some clues on screen. All films either imply or explicitly articulate the hope and disappointment, struggle and deadlock, peace and conflict, harmony and contrast, solidarity and enmity of urban life. “Hence when we talk about film, we talk about society and vice versa” (Diken and Laustsen 2007, 13).

Undoubtedly, films have their own language and form; moreover, they add new emotions, colours and sounds to the city while portraying it. “The designed world of the cinematic city thus refracts the designed world of the living city, and often adds its own signatures” (Orr 2003, 284). In other words, for instance, a French film constructs French pleasures, and Paris becomes the city of light (Kracauer 2004, 140). Similarly, Berlin is identified with “the city of tempo and work” (ibid, 187) in the hands of cinema. Manhattan, which is a cinematic space and stage, is (re)constructed by Woody Allen (1979). Ultimately, film directors work on cities as if they are city planners. Some films are based entirely on city

life. Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) and Dziga Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929) are best-known films in this study. "Both use the 'day in the life of a great city' structure. Both attempt to capture a dynamic of traffic, machines, work, and leisure" (Donald 1995, 86). Especially, "Vertov's film should be seen neither as a record nor a portrait but, following the precepts of formalism, as an analysis which makes our normal perceptions of the city strange by laying bare the device of cinema" (ibid, 87).

The City and Cinema

"When the real world is transformed into an image and images become real" (Agamben 2007, 78), urban analysis turns into an image analysis. Cinema is, literally, a feast of images. In other words, as Morin (2005, 169 cited in Diken and Laustsen 2007, 1) describes it, "the cinema is like a kind of great archetypal womb that contains in embryo genetic potential all visions of the world". Nevertheless, cinema is *not* like a bulldozer that excavates everything without considering whether it is usable or not. Cinema does not fill itself needlessly with non-functional and amorphous images; on the contrary, it channels human perception into critical points by simplifying and purifying the visual bustle in the city. Even if cinema sometimes produces surreal environments, impossible loves and exaggerated lives, this implies that "it [cinema] is far richer than life itself" (Tarkovsky 1987, 112). Films, deliberately or unintentionally, gain insight into the invisible world by making it concrete. The power of cinema stems from its transparent nature.

Urban and social realities take the screen as a model to follow. Films' impact factor on the city is so immeasurable that, as Clarke (1997, 2) states, the city turns into a cinematographic value. "Ours is a society increasingly concerned with signs, images and sign systems, an

increasingly ‘cinematized’ society” (Diken and Laustsen 2007, 5). Cinema is, phenomenologically and contextually, awash with experiences and realities of socio-urban life; perhaps for this reason, Odin (2008, 430) claims that there is no difference between watching a film and walking on a city street. Inhabitants are, just like the actors on screen, actors of their own cities. They are surrounded by a fictional environment that is indeed constituted by a scenario. “Thus the city repeats its life, identical, shifting up and down on its empty chessboard. The inhabitants repeat the same scenes, with the actors changed; they repeat the same speeches with variously combined accents; they open alternate mouths in identical yawns” (Calvino 1974, 65). Nonetheless, films are never the product of an individual (Kracauer 2004, 5), but of a society. “Films, then, are like dreams, not individual dreams, but rather collective ones” (Gilloch 2007, 131).

The interrelation between the city and film is explained well by Mennel (2008, 15): “Films reflect such urban patterns in how they code neighborhoods as rich or poor or landscapes as urban or rural. They reflect class in costume and setting, and in whether characters are positioned inside elaborate domestic spaces or outside in the urban public space”. Spatiality, particularly the city, may shift the quality of interpersonal communication, because the city is an open communication system (Clark 1996, 118). The system is so embedded that it is hard to separate the city itself from the people who live in it. It may be for this reason that Shakespeare in *Coriolanus* (Act III, Scene 1, Line 1977) says: ‘the people are the city’. People are at least products of the city, because the city infuses its own culture into them. The city creates its own generation and assimilates it. The city that “is culturally produced as an integral part of material culture” (Borden et al. 2000) produces culture, “daily life, social activities, and personal rituals” (ibid). It passes along its own language, accents, tastes, beliefs, interests, fears and desires to its

inhabitants.

According to Besnard (2008, 246), the city is the main character of films; concordantly, living in a city means acting in a film. In other words, “cinema is life and life is cinema: they tell the truth of each other” (Diken and Laustsen 2007, 2). Life needs cinema and its fictional capability because, as Rancière (2004, 38) states, “the real must be fictionalized in order to be thought”. Besides, most filmmakers tend to focus only on one street, one person, one story, etc. in order to capture a city (Sauvaget 2008, 442); however, this may run the risk of not recognizing the city in its entirety; similarly, theories and concepts on architecture may not be adequate to expose the urban area that is surrounded by social forms, relations and networks.

The city cannot be reduced to either form or representation: it is neither a collection of object- buildings nor the equivalent of models, schemas, drawings, and projections of all kinds. ... The city is not the product of planners and architects (Borden et al. 2000, 5).

Therefore, in parallel with social scientists rather than film critics, it is necessary to focus not only on the technical parameters such as editing, camera movements, light and sound, but also on the narrative dimension of cinema, such as the stories and lives that inhabit streets and buildings, in order to comprehend all the corners and details of the city. In other words, it is necessary to place an emphasis on other academic disciplines such as sociology, history, architecture, literature, etc., in order to analyze the city that is, as Lefebvre (1996, 95) describes, a collective being and social organism. Although social life in the city is visible and observable, it is also multi-layered and complicated. As a result of this dilemma, the city itself is both a golden opportunity and a slippery slope for researches; that is why I suggest looking at the city through *the projector*. Films have a power to simplify the city in such a way that as to reflect it

as actually is (Kracauer 1995, 328).

A Methodological Discussion: Reflection or Representation?

The issue of how cinema interprets and reproduces the world has been discussed ever since moving images were first captured. The debate continues over whether the images that were produced by the Lumière brothers' *cinématographie* were `representation` or `reflection`. What is cinema, indeed? More importantly, how does it manage the world and the city? Is it illusion or reality? Is it fantasia or confrontation? Formalism or realism? Secret or revelation? These questions concerning cinema are not only based on an epistemological issue that stimulates a sense of wonder, they are also crucial questions that have the potential to reveal ontological relationships between eye and image, perception and visibility, consciousness and inanimate objects, capturing and presenting, etc.

Films, although they may touch upon urban experiences deliberately or not, do not create a new city; instead, they create a possibility to create a city image for spectators who are losing their senses because of over-saturation. This is the possibility of awareness for them about where and whom they (the spectators) are. The camera is able to reveal some blurred or concealed images and stories by zooming in / out, pausing, rewinding and renewing. This is the superiority of the camera in comparison with the eye. This superiority is crucial, because "our visual environment is crowded with multiple objects; however, at any one time we tend to be aware only of a limited part of this array of information" (James 1890, cited in Findlay and Gilchrist 2003, 35).

Formalist doctrine claims that films have the (cap)ability to form and deform objects and events by using their formative features. Formalist film theories postulate that there is always a

gap or distance between films and social reality; accordingly, that gap (or distance) can and must be filled by symbols, icons, metaphors and references. In other words, phenomenology and semiology have crucial importance in terms of realizing social reality through film. Formalism *formulates* social life and cinema separately. According to this formula, films do not reflect the city or society `as it is`. Thus formalist film criticism focuses mostly on films themselves, rather than on society or urban experience. Aesthetic taste, enthusiasm and passion are seen as more important and functional than knowledge, consciousness and inference. As a result of this, the formalist perspective approaches the cinema mainly from the aspect of *aesthetic beauty* and *secrets inside the form*. However, “films are particularly inclusive because their `visible hieroglyphs` supplement the testimony of their stories proper. And permeating the stories and the visuals, the `unseen dynamics of human relations` are more or less characteristic of the inner life of the nation from which the films emerge” (Kracauer 2004, 7).

Cinema (or the camera itself) is, as Godard (1972) defines it, like an *X-ray machine*. The machine monitors both explicit realities, which can easily be seen at a single glance, and implicit realities, that hide beneath the images. Tabor (2000, 122-38) also defines cinema as an X-ray machine, and also like a *mirror*, *keyhole*, *gun* and *shield*. Indeed, cinema plays a crucial role that manages temporality and spatiality on behalf of spectators who are desensitized, due to monotony and routinized activities. For this reason, although “films are the mirror of the prevailing society” (Kracauer 1995, 291), it is hard to define the cinematic power on eye and vision only with *the mirror* metaphor. “Cinema is much more than reflections of a reality” (Diken and Laustsen 2007, 129); that is why, analyzing the city through the projector requires more functional method than *flâneur*. As the city changes continuously and rapidly, fictional cinema, which is a delicate sense that captures urban and social experience, can be the best way

to appreciate changes in the city.

The film camera is uniquely able to penetrate and capture in myriad and novel ways our environment, in particular, the human built-environment composing the cityscape. Film not only presents and reveals what it has recorded with unprecedented felicity and fidelity, but also allows for the critical recomposition and reconfiguration of this visual material (Gilloch 2007, 116).

Cinema is a running memory of the city; therefore, cinema may be *a gun* and *shield* that manipulates or edits the future. This may be one of the impacts of cinematic narration; however, this is not enough to describe the other features of cinema. Consequently, I suggest that the metaphor of the *keyhole* as being the best descriptive metaphor for cinema. A keyhole does not only show; it also symbolizes an irrepressible curiosity and emotion about others` lives. Looking into a mirror can mostly be through necessity, while looking through a keyhole is a reference to a fantasy, imagination, passion as well as a thought and knowledge about what is going on behind the door. A keyhole has deeper symbolic meanings than a mirror in a world that is full of closed doors. The mirror is an introverted object that reproduces what it reflects, whereas the keyhole is an extroverted object that focuses on others. Each part of the body is active in front of the mirror; however, only the eye has authority over a keyhole. A mirror may be deceptive. As Calvino (1974, 54) explains, “at times the mirror increases a thing`s value, at times denies it. Not everything that seems valuable above the mirror maintains its force when mirrored”; however, the frame that is seen around the keyhole is the most naked framing of people or stories, because they do not know they are being watched by someone else.

There are some significant differences between a camera and an eye that looks through a keyhole: a film camera, which is a go-between (Odin 2008, 437), knows exactly when it needs

to capture and what to look for. “This refers to the camera’s unprecedented and unrivalled capacity for capturing the `real`, for revealing and recording `physical reality`, which Kracauer aptly terms `camera reality`” (Gilloch 2007, 127). It finds, selects, captures and portrays the most valuable frame (Kracauer 2004, 7); also, it records physical reality as a camera reality (Kracauer 1960, 28). In other words, cinema is not only a passive spectator that has transparency and mirroring features (Kracauer 2004), but also an active (f)actor that has the ability to act upon reality (ibid) and restore what it sees. The camera reality is so real that it gives shape to the social relations of the city. In due course, camera reality replaces physical reality; besides, it constitutes a “cinematized society” (Diken and Laustsen 2007, 5). For this reason, it can be claimed that “no form of art is as tied to reality as cinema” (Hamilton 2011).

How to Analyze the City through the Projector

Theory-based writing is seen as an integral part of researches in social sciences, because theory itself determines methodology and affects the findings of researches. As Urry (1995: 1) claims, “the understanding of place cannot be undertaken without major theoretical endeavor”. Is a theoretical perspective enough to comprehend the city or films? In contrast with Urry’s thought, according to Amin and Thrift (2002, 9 cited in Tonkiss 2005, 115), the phenomenology of the city “cannot be known through theory and cognition alone”, because there may be some implicit images and symbols in the details of the city. The visual associations, which require focusing on film technique itself rather than what it portrays, can be captured along with an eagle eye and attentive perception. “Film captures and reproduces for us that which normally eludes everyday perception: things at speed, things in motion, things too small, too large or too slow” (Gilloch 2007, 120-121). “Owing to diverse camera activities, cutting and many special

devices, films are able, and therefore obliged, to scan the whole visible world” (Kracauer 2004, 6). Therefore, as mentioned before, those who attempt to analyze the city can and must benefit from camera movements, lighting, montage, effects, colors, sounds, scenario, characters, filmic location, narrative and storytelling. All these technical aspects of the cinema should not be separated from the theoretical framework in urban and social studies. The reflective power of the camera can be understood as long as the theory and the technique are brought together in an analysis.

More obviously, analyzing a city not only enables one to gain insights into its streets, buildings and walls, it also enables one to comprehend a society that consists of various components, e.g. different languages, cultures, traditions, lifestyles, etc. Since “places without stories are unthinkable” (Price 2004), it is necessary to consider stories in order to gain insights into the city, which itself is a social practice rather than a framework (Castells 1978, 93). All critical objects and subjects that are seen on screen should be analyzed.

Architecture in this context is significant in terms of being a filmic element. It refers not only to a visual, but a cultural variance. It is probably one of the most remarkable parameters of film analysis because, as Pallasmaa (2001) mentions, both architecture and cinema describe living places. Both of them produce detailed visions of life and define the essence and dimensions of space and place. In addition to these, “cinema constructs spaces in the mind, creates mind-spaces, thus reflecting the inherent ephemeral architecture of the human mind, thought and emotion. The mental task of buildings and cities is to structure our being-in-the-world and to articulate the surface between the experiencing self and the world” (ibid, 17). On the other hand, to observe the buildings, streets, places of entertainment and squares of cities may not be enough to understand the cities themselves. There are some other determining

factors of cities, such as sounds, traditions, value judgments, movement and mobility. These crystallized components, which are indeed never neutral, reveal invisible phenomena that belong to the city. In other words, these non-neutral spatial practices are continuously decoded, as mentioned, by cinematography and theory.

Apart from these, *the rhythm* of the city is important in city analysis. What does the rhythm of the city mean? The term rhythm can be dealt with within the scope of Henri Lefebvre and his book, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (2008). According to him (ibid, 8), “everywhere where there is rhythm, there is measure, which is to say law, calculated and expected obligation, a project”. The rhythm is based on linear and cyclical repetitions (ibid). But is it merely sound repetitions in streets? There are rhythms of stable buildings, walls, squares, ways, houses, cemeteries, etc. And rhythms are not only acoustic but also include lights, smells and images. Briefly, the trace of any rhythm should be sought in the world of the senses. It should be noted at this point that the world of the senses plays a significant role in cinematic cities. All films, most of the time involuntarily, highlight the different senses that are part of the city. Spatiality is experienced mostly by means of the senses; therefore, spectators have a tendency to realize, first of all, the sensual features of the cities they visit. Some cities are cities of the eye, while some have an unforgettable taste or musical harmony; whereas other cities are kept in mind through their smells. All these experiences indicate how the senses have critical importance for the city and society. Georg Simmel, who first realised the importance of the senses, placed emphasis on them by writing: “every sense delivers contributions characteristic of its individual nature to the construction of sociated existence” (Simmel 2000, 110). He classifies senses in accordance with their mechanism and function. Simmel, in his superficial but stimulating work, gives some crucial clues about the links between sensory analysis and urban

studies for those who study this mutual affinity. In this sense, I suggest that his theory and senses themselves should be used and improved by researchers interested especially in film and urban studies.

Conclusion

Interestingly, spectators tend to be familiar with the city by means of a camera; furthermore, they like or dislike the city in the light of films, because cinema, as a city phenomenon, (re)visualizes and reproduces the city (Feigelson 2008, 284). The city is no longer independent of the influences of the cinematic age. The camera captures the city as if it were an eye. However, eyes may lie about visible phenomena. But, it is necessary to remember that “films are never `just films`, lightweight fiction destined to amuse us and thus to distract us from the core problems and struggles of our social reality. Even when films lie, they tell the lie which dwells in the very heart of our social edifice” (Žižek in Diken and Laustsen 2007); for this reason, “no medium has ever captured the city and the experience of urban modernity better than film. Indeed, the relationship between the city and the cinema, although less than a century old, is a strong and well established one. The images and sounds found in movies today routinely bring people the experience of distant cities they may never visit” (Alsayyad 2006, 1).

Cinema has so great an influence on social reality that “social reality sometimes appears as a fallout effect of cinematic virtualities; producing the uncanny impression that reality mirrors cinema and not the other way around” (Diken and Laustsen 2007, 1). This means that cinema is important, both as a replayable memory that portrays what has already been done, and as a predictor that designs the future [*as it would wish to find it*]. “It is as if the film implied a warning, for these screen figures anticipate what will happen in real life a few years later”

(Kracauer 2004, 218). Hence, film itself should undoubtedly be considered as a case study for urban planners, technology designers, architects, sociologists, psychologists, pedagogues, linguists, etc. Cinema increases its impact factor with each passing day, because “what the screen postulated came true in life” (ibid, 118). Casetti (1999, 125) defines a key role of cinema as one of *social testimony*. Žižek (2007: xi) takes the concept a step further: according to him, “our societies themselves can only reproduce themselves through films”. This shows that there is no alternative way to comprehend social reality, apart from through film. Paradoxically, “this is no doubt why cinema is disappearing: because it has passed into reality. Reality is disappearing at the hands of the cinema and cinema is disappearing at the hands of reality. A lethal transfusion in which each loses its specificity” (Baudrillard 2005, 124-5). The power of cinema is related to its informal nature: “film must reflect society whether it wants to or not” (Kracauer 1995, 292). Finally, this shows that every kind of film – mainstream or independent, imaginative or realist, meaningless or didactic – has a different dimension that inevitably collects and interprets a different component of the city.

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