



Modernity and the city film: Berlin



Today all segments of the population stream to the movies, from the workers in suburban movie theatres to the haute bourgeoisie in the cinema palaces.

Siegfried Kracauer



Learning objectives



- To understand the role of Berlin in the development of the city film in the Weimar Republic
- To outline the concept of modernity and the contributions of its different theorists
- To define the genre of the street film and consider its gendered dimensions



Introduction



“A new genre was born: ‘city film’,” claims Helmut Wehsmann about avant-garde films in the mid-1920s (10). City films as a crucible of modernity created urbanity as the modern space, and during the 1920s in Europe, this modern city par excellence was Berlin.



After the First World War Berlin played a central role in Germany and Europe as the locus of modernity and cosmopolitanism, a place where modernist art flourished.



The city of Berlin was the theme of several city films, the site of production with several studios located on its outskirts – including the famous Ufa in nearby Neubabelsberg – and it was also the site of elaborate movie theaters where important premières took place.



Berlin was also a place of coffee-houses, bars, newspapers, and magazines where those who entered the new industry met and networked, and those who wrote about the city and its culture gathered to discuss. Berlin was central to the development of the cinema and from its inception German cinema has been “preoccupied by the big city as a site of adventure and modernity”



The birth of the city film



Weihsmann suggests that the early filmic depiction of cities in the 1920s resulted from a growing fascination with “metropolitan motifs, motion, and development” and from the assumption that the camera could capture visual evidence of a city. In “documentary style” city films filmmakers reproduced different “urban motifs,” while in “pictorial colportage” they mixed documentary footage and fiction shot on location.



Karl Grune's *The Street* (1923), Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (1924), G. W. Pabst's *Joyless Street* (1925), Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), Robert and Curt Siodmak's *People on Sunday* (1928), Joe May's *Asphalt* (1929), and Lang's *M* (1931) were all produced within one decade, and all take place in a city – most often Berlin.



The Last Laugh: The city at night



But not always – and thematize urbanity, especially the period's understanding of the dangers and pleasures of modern urban life: crime, anonymity, a loosening of morality, unemployment, and class struggle on the one hand, and movement, speed, entertainment, and liberated erotics on the other.



The genre of the city film thus integrates the aesthetic and the documentary aspects of film. It constitutes a genre with its own history and a prism through which to address a host of related and interconnected topics regarding cinema and urbanism.



Several films depict the city as the setting for social problems: *M* famously tells the story of the search for a child murderer, and *The Last Laugh* portrays the fate of a hotel employee who has lost his position but continues to wear his uniform to garner respect.



The figure of the prostitute embodies both liberated and commodified sexuality located in the streets of the metropolis, for example in Grune's *The Street*, Pabst's *Joyless Street*, and May's *Asphalt*. All these films except for *The Last Laugh* constitute the genre of the street film developed between 1923 and 1925.



Other social problems, such as class conflict, perceived as crucially defining the urban metropolis in the early twentieth century, are expressed spatially, as in Lang's *Metropolis*, where a vertical, futuristic city is segmented into the upper world of the factory-owner and the lower world of workers, portraying a dystopian vision of urban modernity.



Most importantly, however, the experience of the modern metropolis changed visual perception and yielded new narrative forms and possibilities for aesthetic representation: abstract shapes and compositions, episodic narratives, and cinematic montage express the experience of urban modernity.



The Last Laugh: A typical Berlin working-class tenement court yard



The film industry created not only artificial cities as settings for films, but also an artificial city for film production: Neubabelsberg, in the no-man's-land between Berlin and Potsdam. The Weimar Republic witnessed the early development of the studio system, particularly with the growth of Ufa (Universal Film Aktiengesellschaft), the studio that Klaus Kreimeier labels “one of the most important movie studios in the world”.



It was founded during the First World War for the purpose of creating national propaganda. In this “film-city” (Ward), unemployed and underemployed architects created their architectural visions in set designs , because in the immediate post-war period building projects were denied to them .



Janet Ward emphasizes the artificiality of Neubabelsberg, describing it as “Babelesque, consisting of towers and tunnels over eighty-odd acres of artificially lit outdoor and indoor playgrounds” . And while movie production created its own fantastic city outside of Berlin, moviehouses, called film palaces, changed the face of the metropolis itself.



In Germany the rise of modernity was accompanied by theoretical discussions articulated by Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber, who had a keen interest in the city and the cinema.



Their theories offer us ways to think about cinematic representations of urbanity with regard to the city film from the Weimar Republic, but they also provide us with foils for discussions about the cinematic representation of urban space in general.



Theories of modernity and urbanity



Sociologist Georg Simmel noted the importance of the emerging metropolis for changing life, culture, and subjectivity in the early twentieth century. His seminal essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903) focuses specifically on the effect of the city on subjectivity and describes “the metropolitan type” as characterized by a rational and intellectual response to uprootedness, the increased speed of information and impressions, and the “*intensification of nervous stimulation*”



Discontinuity and fragmentation characterized city life, where actions and events assaulted individual inhabitants actively and unexpectedly. The shift at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century created a radical rupture of the “sensory foundations of psychic life” and created a new kind of “sensory mental imagery”



Simmel described the effect of the modern metropolis on subjectivity in a combination of imagery and sensory perception, motion and stimuli, a combination that encapsulates the potential of the medium of film to express the characteristics of the city.



A film such as *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* reproduces the sensory experience of the city through its “associative montage,” a method which can capture the fragmented aspects of modern life in the metropolis. Other films combine the contrast between the rural and the urban environment with a developmental narrative from rural to urban.



German director F. W. Murnau's *Sunrise – A Song of Two Humans* (1927), made in the United States, is a case in point. A woman from the city tries to seduce a man from the country to kill his wife while crossing the river on the way to the city. The city is embodied by the destructive seductress and the country by the wife, who is also a mother, a caring and quiet character defined by her social roles in the rural village.



In contrast, the woman from the city is characterized by her independence and her appearance: clad in a sexy black dress, smoking, and using make-up, she is the incarnation of “the archetypal metropolitan female of the 20s”. If the husband does indeed drown his wife, the familial ties connecting him to the rural soil will be destroyed.



Instead, however, he travels to the city with his wife and experiences with her its pleasures and dangers. On their arrival, echoing Simmel's description, traffic surrounds and overwhelms them and the wife is almost run over. They find many distractions – going dancing, having their photo taken, and visiting a barber shop.



Sunrise also refers to the role of cinema in negotiating the contrast between country and city, generally associating cinema with the latter. When the city woman tells the man about the city, a film is projected against the rural sky transposing the city onto the rural environment.



Once the man and his wife are in the city, they have their photo taken in a studio, thus participating in the modern technology of visual self-representation. They are adding their technological and visual literacy to the journey, which becomes a passage into maturity associated with the city.



The metropolis is defined by Simmel as a place of money economy, which for him goes hand-in-glove with the metropolitan rationality that redefines human relationships in terms of exchange value and turns all action in the metropolis into “production for the market”



Simmel describes characteristics that we find not only in the early city film but in the visual and narrative strategies of present-day urban films, such as the emphasis on one well-known city that is inhabited by an urban type. He differentiates between cities that have become significant through “individual personalities” – such as Weimar, which will be forever associated with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe – and the metropolis, which is significant in and of itself, even beyond its physical boundaries



This explains the predominance of Berlin as the setting in the Weimar Republic city films. And the particular urban types that we find in city films from different time periods and geographical locations echo Simmel's descriptions: there is first and foremost the "blasé attitude" that he ascribes to characters shaped by the urban experience.



The two crucial moments articulated by Simmel – movement through the city, and the commodification of relationships in the city – were extensively theorized by Walter Benjamin, the foremost philosopher and cultural critic during the Weimar Republic. He observed and described the flâneur, strolling leisurely through the city, as a key figure in nineteenth-century Paris and then in Berlin in the early twentieth century.



Many of the important theorists on the interconnection of the city, cinema, and modernity emerging out of the 1920s in Germany were in dialogue with each other, as were Benjamin, Simmel, and Siegfried Kracauer. Both Benjamin and Kracauer were concerned with changes in perception, the emerging masses in the metropolis, and the subsequent changing character of art.



**Advertisement for Walter Ruttmann's
Berlin: Symphony of a Great City (1927)**



The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1905) contrasts the rational capitalist with the figure of the adventurer capitalist, who Weber assigned to the premodern, marked as geographically and temporally different civilizations:

“Whenever money finances of public bodies have existed, money-lenders have appeared, as in Babylon, Hellas, India, China, Rome . .



The Weimar street film



A subgenre of the city film that developed in the Weimar Republic was the street film, organized around the street as a space of random encounters, violent crimes, urban surveillance, and ambiguous morality and sexuality – the emerging social space and public sphere of modern urbanism.



The fascination with the street reflected technological changes that enabled a new and different kind of street life in the city than previously existed. Frances Guerin explains that by “the 1920s, the industrialization of light that had begun in the mid- nineteenth century reached a moment of intensity”. Life in the streets became visible at night, which opened another dimension for interaction.



The street in the Weimar Republic street film became the setting for “psychological melodramas” that represented “a dangerous lure and a force of tragic destiny for the imprudent male” , the danger lying in the possibility of illegitimate desires bridging social divisions and moral codes.



The inner workings of modernity were externalized in the urban modernity of the street, as we can see in Pabst's *Joyless Street*, which focuses on the working poor in its portrayal of class conflict.



G. W. Pabst. *Joyless Street* (1925)



The street is the space of social encounters across class. Joe May's *Asphalt* (1929) portrays the dangers as well as the possibilities of those random encounters in the streets of the city. The film exposes the dangers of urban modernity by juxtaposing the transgression of law with the reconstitution of law, poles embodied by a prostitute and a policeman.



An early scene shows the Potsdamer Platz with a policeman who is trying in vain to control the traffic with his hand stretched out, which positions him at the mercy of the modern metropolis.

A low camera angle foregrounds the asphalt and the cars exceeding his control across which the title of the film, Asphalt, is written.



The film constructs a stark contrast between interior domesticity, inhabited by the policeman's parents and coded as premodern, and the exterior urbanity of the modern metropolis, inhabited by the prostitute who seduces the policeman.



Like the prostitution and adventure capitalism in the space of Madame Gill's Bar in Joyless Street, the character of the prostitute in Asphalt shows the seduction of modernity and capitalism gone awry. Her cosmopolitan modernity connects her to crime across national borders in the form of a boyfriend who robs a bank in Paris.



When the policeman visits her and her criminal boyfriend arrives, the policeman kills the boyfriend out of jealousy and is consequently arrested. The figure of the prostitute is an early incarnation of the femme fatale of film noir in that she seduces a law-abiding man to kill her lover – see the readings of Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* (1944) and Howard Hawks’s *The Big Sleep* (1946).



The shooting of *Joyless Street*



The city film of the Weimar Republic was more optimistic about the possibilities enabled by these new social spaces than was the later cynical film noir, and *Asphalt's* narrative has a happy ending – the prostitute testifies that the policeman acted in self-defense and promises to wait for him until he is released from jail.



He has succumbed to the sexual seduction of the cosmopolitan metropolis – his fate was foreshadowed by his inability to control the traffic early in the film – but the prostitute is domesticated by his love, honesty, and morality.



In general, scholars disagree on how to read the gendered politics of the street film. At one end of the spectrum, Bruce Murray argues that, beginning with *Joyless Street*, the street films “promoted the maintenance of patriarchy” vis-à-vis the mysterious woman who threatened to undermine it.



Whereas the films mentioned thus far project the seduction of modernity onto the woman-in-the street, Lang's *M* portrays "the darker side of the urban flâneur". As we have seen, in *M* a child murderer is terrorizing the city, and when the police efforts to catch him begin to impede the illegal activities of the underworld, members of the latter decide to capture the murderer themselves by mobilizing the beggars of Berlin.



The empty street as setting in Fritz Lang's M (1931)



A blind street-vendor recognizes the murderer by his whistle – a brilliant use of sound in early sound films – and where modern police methods of surveillance have failed, the gangsters succeed in capturing the murderer using their knowledge and organization of those who inhabit the city.



Anton Kaes suggests that M's "obsession with surveillance also addresses the deep-seated fear of an expanding urban population," explaining that "Berlin more than doubled in population by the end of the decade; it had reached 4.5 million inhabitants in 1930". M's "conflict between surveillance and obscurity" connects cinema and the metropolis, according to Carsten Strathausen.



In *M*, the murderer's sadistic sexuality is presented through the narrative and mirrored in the social space of the city, but is evident also in the commodified space of a window display. At one point we see Beckert, the killer of little girls, looking into a shop window, his face framed by the reflection of knives displayed there in an ornamental pattern. The next shot is from Beckert's point of view as he looks into a mirror in the same window and sees a little girl outside, this time framed by the knives.



The shadow of the mass murderer meeting his next victim



Characteristic of the subgenre of the street film, then, is the street as the site of social interaction and control. It is also the space in which desires and anxieties are acted out. In accordance with the theories advanced by Benjamin, Simmel, Kracauer, and Weber,



the street film is highly gendered: female figures appear repeatedly as prostitutes, and male characters range from enforcers of the law, in the form of policemen, to those who break the law, in the form of criminals. The gendered interactions are negotiated in the public space of the urban street.



Modernist aesthetics: the city symphony



While the street film offers melodramatic narratives acted out by characters, other films such as Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* reproduce the psychic and visual experience of modernity without relying on a conventional narrative.



Hake accords *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* a radical position because it organizes Berlin's "social and spatial qualities in visual terms" . However, despite the fact that many have applauded the film's aesthetic expression of the avant-garde and modernism, Hake maintains that Ruttmann's "ultimate goal was visual pleasure, not critical analysis"



In Ruttmann's film, the modern metropolis of Berlin is anthropomorphized through the temporal organization of a full day there, from beginning to end, arranged in five acts. Onto the opening shot of calm waves of water and the sun, abstract shapes are projected: a circle, lines, and a square move in an abstract formation, accompanied by a short, atonal score.



The abstract opening then cuts to a shot from a train moving towards Berlin through the surrounding gardens, industrial areas, construction sites, empty train stations, and advertisements, to the sign announcing Berlin. The very next sequence contrasts a close-up of a machine, signifying the anonymity and efficiency of modern production, with the old splendor of Berlin's cathedral shot from above.



Human beings in the metropolis are continually subordinated to the material dimension of modernity in shots of modernist architecture, industrial design, and electricity. The emptiness of the streets in act one, at five o'clock in the morning, emphasizes both the absence of humans and the city as an entity in itself as the particular focus of the film.



The film's abstract opening of different shapes edited together and forming a rhythmic pattern is followed by a train-ride into the city. This sequence is not only a formal consideration, but reflects the fact that, as Kaes points out, "Berlin has always been a city of migrants from rural areas"



The film's opening shows nature and abstraction as two poles framing the idea of the modernist metropolis. Hake describes this model of editing as “a kind of associative montage,” which, in contrast to the political commentary associated with Sergei Eisenstein, “confirms total exchangeability and eternal recurrence as the foundation of experience in modern mass culture”



The modern metropolis is marked mainly by the camera's repeated return to places in the city that are not identified by their national significance in the capital of Germany, but rather by their role for transportation or leisure. Instead of architecture, we find traffic, which continues the fascination with movement and brings into play the dynamic possibilities of the editing.



Walter Ruttmann. Berlin: Symphony of a Great City (1927): Traffic



The shots are organized according to abstract principles of movement and composition, cross-cutting masses on the way to work with soldiers, marching in formation, and animals, and increasing the profusion of people from one shot to the next. Views of masses moving through the city, in turn, are intercut with close-ups of industrial, mechanical, and electrical machines that dwarf humans, and we also see instruments of communication, such as the typewriter and the telephone, which signal modernity.

Because there are no individualized characters, the few singular individuals take on a symbolic function, and once again one of the few is a prostitute, a streetwalker recognizable through her interaction with a man who picks her up. She is seen through the corner of a shop window, aligning her with both the seductiveness and sexualization of consumption and the public space of the street.





The next contrasting shots show mechanical window displays and a wedding couple, pointing to the mechanization of sexuality in contrast to traditional matrimony. Frequent shots of neon signs dominate the cityscape announcing movies and reviews. Thus Ruttmann's film reflects aesthetically the experience of modernity, characterizing the city as Kracauer's "surface."



The street film captures the experience of modernity in narratives about urban types and projects the changing gender roles onto the newly emerging urban space of the street. Berlin: Symphony of a Great City responds to the experience of modernity as fragmented and abstract through its aesthetic choices of editing, rhythm, and rejection of traditional narrative.



Both examples, however, reflect aspects of modernity highlighted by important theorists during the Weimar Republic, such as that of the flâneur and the metropolitan type, the configuration of the mass ornament, and the different formulations of the crowd; in short those kinds of configurations of cultural productions, urban spaces, and human subjectivity that changed with modernity but that also produced modernity in the city.