Chicago Plays Itself: Views of the Cinematic City

Introduction to Film and Culture

MOVI/ENGL 230
Professor Harry Burson

Spring 2026

Chicago Plays Itself: Views of the Cinematic City

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What does Chicago look like at the movies? What stories are told and who gets to tell them? Since the dawn of cinema, filmmakers have been drawn to the city with hopes of capturing its distinctive architecture, lakefront, and people on screen. In Hollywood films across the decades, Chicago has been portrayed a metropolis alternately defined by cold-blooded gangsters, civil unrest, suburban malaise, and, most recently, vigilante superheroes. Today, as contentious portrayals of the city are driving national politics, this course will ask students to examine how Chicago has been both represented and misrepresented on film.

We will trace the history of the cinematic city by exploring three major topics: the film industry in Chicago, depictions of crime and policing, and finally gentrification and urban renewal, with a focus on the neighborhoods around the UIC campus. Students will be encouraged to consider how films about Chicago compare to both historical accounts and their own everyday experiences of the city.

LEARNING GOALS

- Recognize, describe, and explain social institutions, structures, and processes and the complexities of a global culture and diverse society.
- Think critically about how individuals influence and are influenced by political, geographic, economic, cultural, and family institutions in their own and other cultures and explain how one's knowledge and beliefs may differ from others.
- Explain the relationship between the individual and society as it influences: individuals' cognition, ethics, social interactions, communication practices and affect; and the quality of life of the individual, the family, and the community.
- Examine how literature, history, ethical systems, scientific inquiry, or communicative practice shape our knowledge and perception of individuals and social structures.
- Using the most appropriate principles, methods, and technologies, gather and analyze previous inquiry regarding the relationships between individuals and society, draw logical conclusions about such inquiry, and creatively or scientifically apply those conclusions to one's life and society.
- Address questions of: interpretation, poetics, value & cultural and historical context in relation to the creative arts.

Integration with Hull-House Materials

(Content adapted from original course syllabus by Hull-House educators to reflect how materials were used for in-class instruction and assignments)

TOPIC: THE CINEMATIC CITY

This week of classes will be focused on "City Symphonies" and introducing students to the Near West Side while situating Hull-House's place within it historically. Discussions will center around screenings that depict Halsted Street as it once was.

READINGS & SCREENINGS

- Tom Gunning, "One-Way Street: Conrad's Halsted Street."
- *Halsted Street* (dir. Conrad Friberg, 1934, 15')
- *Chicago – A Metropolitan in the Making* (dir. Heinrich Hauser, 1931, 65')

TOPIC: URBAN RENEWAL, GENTRIFICATION & THE UNIVERSITY

This series of classes, spread over five weeks, will centered around the Hull-House and Jane Addams' legacy on the Near West Side today. Class discussions will consider how we experience change in our cities and neighborhoods.

HULL-HOUSE & THE NEAR WEST SIDE READINGS & SCREENINGS

- Jane Addams, "The House of Dreams"
- Kathleen D. McCarthy, "Nickel Vice and Virtue: Movie Censorship in Chicago, 1907-1915"
- *A History of Circle Campus* (1974, 3')
- *Good Night, Socrates* (1962, 34')

URBAN RENEWAL READINGS & SCREENINGS

- Lilia Fernández, "Race, Class, Housing, and Urban Renewal: Dismantling the Near West Side"
- "*Mi Raza: Portrait of a Family* (dir. Susan Stechnij, 1973, 31')

THE CITY AS CAMPUS READINGS & SCREENINGS

- Sharon Haar, "'Model of the Modern Urban University': The New Spatial Form of the Chicago Circle Campus"
- *Stranger Than Fiction* (dir. Marc Forster, 2006, 114')

DISPLACEMENT READINGS & SCREENINGS

- Aviva Briefel and Sianne Ngai, "'How Much Did You Pay for This Place?' Fear, Entitlement, and Urban Space in Bernard Rose's Candyman"
- *Candyman* (dir. Bernard Rose, 1992, 101')

MAXWELL STREET SCREENINGS

- *The Blues Brothers* (1980)
- *Cheat You Fair: The Story of Maxwell Street* (2006)

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CLASS PROJECTS

In addition to class participation, students will exhibit their handling of the course material through three types of assignments that could integrate Hull-House sources along with others from the class.

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

This will be a brief 1-page assignment in which you share your interest and/or background with film and digital media. This is a low-stakes essay that allows me as your professor to get to know more about you as we begin the semester.

QUIZZES

Twice during the semester we will have reading/viewing quizzes that will cover key concepts and arguments from the readings, as well as narrative and formal elements from the assigned screenings. These quizzes are designed to ensure that you are keeping up with course material and to encourage close reading and viewing.

FILM ESSAYS

Each of our three 5-week units in the course will culminate in a short essay asking students to reflect on Chicago films. These three essays will respectively address narrative tropes, visual representation, and each student's experience of films set in the Chicago area.

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