The Soul and the City: Art, Literature, and Urban Living

Professor Arnold L. Weinstein
Arnold L. Weinstein
Edna and Richard Salomon Distinguished Professor and
Professor of Comparative Literature
Brown University

Arnold Weinstein was born in Tennessee in 1940 and received his undergraduate degree in romance languages from Princeton University in 1962. He studied at Université de Paris in 1960–61 and at Freie Universitat, Berlin, in 1962–63. He received his masters and his doctorate in comparative literature from Harvard University in 1964 and 1968 respectively.

Dr. Weinstein has been teaching courses on European, English, and American literature at Brown University since 1968. In addition, he is the sponsor of Swedish Studies at Brown. He has been the chairperson of the Advisory Council on Comparative Literature at Princeton University and is actively involved in the American Comparative Literature Association.

Among the many academic honors, research grants, and fellowships he has received is the Younger Humanist Award from the National Endowment for the Humanities, 1971–72. In 1983 he was visiting professor of American literature at Stockholm University where he received the Fulbright Senior Lecturer Award. He is currently a member of the Academy of Literary Studies and the director of a NEH-funded program in great books. In 1995 he received Brown University’s award as best teacher in the humanities.

The Soul and the City:
Art, Literature and Urban Living

Scope:

This set of eight lectures explores artists’ complex renderings of city life from the 18th to the 20th centuries. Art represents the city in ways that go beyond quantifiable measures, serving as a record of subjective experience and providing a rich picture of how we live in an environment. Several vital themes appear in artists’ subjective renderings of urban living: orientation, finding our way; the marketplace, exchanging goods and services; anonymity, experiencing solitude or freedom; encounters, fearing or choosing connections with others; history, maintaining contact with other times; and cultures, entering the cities’ ever-changing cultural forms. City art incessantly draws the map on which we live, showing us that coordinates in time and space are larger than we might think, and helps us to a richer, fuller picture of ourselves.

The first four lectures focus primarily on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century city art, examining the themes of orientation, anonymity, the marketplace, and encounters. We come to understand how the urban artist is a mapmaker orienting us spatially and temporally. We see eighteenth-century London as a materialist spectacle, and a place where anonymity can lead to urban freedom. Finally, we investigate the secrets of urban encounters—how people fear unexpected links with others, or value their chosen connections.

The final four lectures focus primarily on nineteenth- and twentieth-century urban art, investigating the themes of history, the marketplace, and cultures. We examine the frightening possibility of entire cities being annihilated, and the role that understanding one’s life can play in the saving of a city. The idea of the city as a container of histories is explored, as is the importance of the machine in the marketplace of the industrialized city. The series concludes with an examination of how urban culture has changed, from commercial, to industrial, to corporate, and a final affirmation of the city as sumptuous container of nutrients, sounds, sights, and experiences.
Lecture One
The City as Container, the Artist as Mapmaker

Scope: In the first lecture, we consider how art creates speculative rather than quantitative accounts of city life. For instance, we see how William Blake’s poem, “London,” provides us with a rich, condensed picture of how people live in a city environment, making visible the relationships between individuals and institutions. “London” and other examples of city texts suggest recurring themes that characterize urban life: anonymity, encounter with others, exchange of goods, entry into culture, orientation, and history. We can think of the city artist as a mapmaker, subjectively representing these themes by surveying and chronicling the urban environment.

Outline

I. Why use art as a guide to city life?
   A. Art usually supports what we learn from scientific studies of urban life.
   B. Art provides us with something social science cannot: a subjective rendering of city experience that is not quantifiable. Such a depiction includes our fears, desires, dreams. Art serves as a record for these experiences.

II. Phrases and words from William Blake's poem, "London" (1793), illustrate what art can tell us about the city, providing us with a condensed, rich picture of how people live in an environment.
   A. I wander: This is a fundamental act of city life, spending time on the streets.
   B. Chartered: This emphasizes the tie between the ruled and ruler, as well as the need for pattern.
   C. Marks of weakness: The city is miserable, a place of totalitarian vision; this vision is aggressive and distorting.
   D. Mind forged manacles: This is also totalizing, suggesting that the police force that does the most damage to us is the one we have internalized. Repression is from within.
   E. The Chimney sweeper's cry: In the London of Blake’s day, chimney sweepers were boys five to eight years old, and they often went into the chimneys naked. The cry is uttered from the inside of a chimney where no one can hear it. Blake is drawing for us the connection between the child (urban worker) and institutions of London culture (the church).
   F. The hapless soldier's sigh Runs in blood down Palace walls: This probably refers to a soldier who is losing his life abroad for Empire. The Thames becomes a river of blood—a script for everyone to see.
   G. Plague: (venereal disease.) It is passed along from prostitutes to men, to wives, to children. Thus, the marriage hearse.
   H. Overall, “London” is a visionary poem that shows us what we are unable to see on our own.
      1. The poem helps us to see the causal connections between individuals and institutions that inform and govern people’s lives.
      2. The poem shows us an entire culture’s charters and contractual operations, and what they betoken for individuals.

III. “London” and other city art express vital themes of urban living.
   A. Anonymity is the fundamental condition of city life.
      1. A negative take on anonymity is solitude and alienation.
      2. A positive take is freedom, mobility and self-invention.
   B. Encounter with others is a great plot of city literature.
      1. A negative reading is encounter with violence.
      2. A positive reading is friendships and chosen links.
   C. Exchange is a basic activity of cities.
1. A negative reading depicts people as goods.
2. A positive reading includes goods, services and information.

D. *Entry into culture*: cities are the cultural form that people live in; city art depicts rites of passage.

E. *Orientation* presents us with the challenge of city living: to find one's way.

F. *History* is a way of re-experiencing the past.

IV. We can think of the urban artist as a mapmaker.

A. Unlike conventional maps, city art is a way of plotting the subjective experience of the urban environment, a way of laying out the city.

B. Artists’ mapmaking privileges us by extending our experience.

C. City art as mapmaking leads to our awareness of space and time as the grids of urban life.

D. Art helps us to realize the reaches and dimensions of our environment and our own lives.

**Reading Suggestions:**


**Questions to Consider:**

1. Professor Weinstein begins by reading an article from *The Washington Post* that represents the city as a war zone. How does he go on to complicate this image of the urban environment?

2. If the city artist is a mapmaker, how, specifically, does William Blake present us with a map of eighteenth-century London?
Lecture Two
Lost in Space

Scope: This lecture explores the role of design in the domestication of city space. We learn how, in the Myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, the building of the labyrinth renders the tale a parable of urban design. We also come to see how the planning of Petersburg leads to the construction of a modern, European, imperial city that becomes a fertile theme in Russian literature. The designs of other cities and city planners are examined to illustrate some of the challenges that arise in the domestication of space.

Outline

I. Space is the fundamental medium of the city.
   A. Space can also be referred to as design, social order and pattern.
   B. To give shape or form is not only pleasing to the human mind, but is also one of the most elemental human instincts there is.
   C. The city is an arena for experiments in design.

II. The building of the labyrinth in the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur makes the fable akin to an urban tale.
   A. The idea of building an environment that one must find ways in and out of makes the story an urban parable in many ways.
   B. The tale presents us with a structural, educational pattern we will see in other city texts: entering the labyrinth and facing up to the secret that is at the heart of it.
   C. Within the story there is a slew of elements present in much city art.
      1. While the maze is a marvel of order for the designer, it is a prison for the monster.
      2. The role of human cunning and the drama of finding your own way are central to the story.
      3. One person’s design can be another person’s nightmare.
      4. The building of structures constitutes an exercise in power, particularly if they are buildings people live in.
      5. There is conflict between the clarity of the blueprint and the murky experience of living in the environment created.
   D. Ariadne's thread is a metaphor for orientation within the built environment, a mythic version of keys to the city.
   E. Daedalus' labyrinth is a marvel of rational design of willed construction. He embodies the myth of the builder, the man who orders nature according to his own will, which is parallel to the artist.

III. St. Petersburg, an eighteenth-century Baroque imperial city, is an example of what might have happened if Daedalus had become king and had the power to carry out his design on a massive scale.
   A. It was created as a capital for Russia—"a window to the west."
   B. Western architects created a geometric city, unheard of in Russia.
   C. As an absolute ruler, Peter was capable of building on a scale unmatchable by an Western ruler.
   D. St. Petersburg was an arena for eighteenth-century Enlightenment culture.
   E. The contrast between this imperial city and the rest of the country is a rich and enduring theme in Russian culture.
   F. The contrasts within St. Petersburg are a theme in Andre Bely’s novel, Petersburg.
      1. The novel takes place in 1905 in a divided Russia, with revolution on the way.
      2. The book focuses on the gleaming, baroque facades of imperial power, and on the disgruntled workers, made feverish by agitators.
      3. Bely is attempting to show how gleaming facades cover up all kinds of ferment and disorder.

IV. Washington, D.C. is the American equivalent of St. Petersburg, only there was no despot to carry out the design. This monumental scale has never appealed to people to live in.
V. Le Corbusier is a contemporary example of the autocratic city planner. His plans in the early 1920s included self-contained environments, super-highways, skyscrapers and elevated streets.

VI. Italo Calvino's city of Perinthia (in Invisible Cities) shows how a writer deals with the hubris of city planning imposing a design. The harmony of forms on paper are not always actualized.

VII. Jane Jacobs critiques grand design city planning in The Death and Life of Great American Cities. She favors intimate design and understands the importance of quality human interaction.

Reading suggestions:
The Myth of Theseus
Andre Bely, Petersburg
Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities
Jane Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities

Questions to Consider:
1. On the surface, “The Myth of Theseus” has little to do with city art, yet it can be considered an urban fable. Explain how the myth might represent various themes prominent in urban art.
2. Bely’s Petersburg is a novel of contrasts. How do these contrasts relate to the idea suggested in Lecture One, that city art might help us to see what we are unable to see on our own?
Lecture Three
The Marketplace

Scope: The central defining feature of cities has often been thought to be the marketplace. As backdrop for Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* and two sequences of paintings by William Hogarth, we are first presented with an historical recounting of eighteenth-century London as increasingly a city of financial power and materialist spectacle. The lecture then explains how Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* and Hogarth’s paintings represent alternative pictures of the rise of capitalism in London. Moll Flanders celebrates material acquisition much more than do Hogarth’s morally conservative paintings.

Outline

I. London in the eighteenth century is an example of how the marketplace is one of the central defining features of the city, and of how city artists like Daniel Defoe, William Hogarth, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Bertold Brecht use the city environment to critique and celebrate materialism.
   A. London during the eighteenth century was becoming a modern city.
      1. Its population had doubled within a century. People from the country and immigrants were flocking to the city.
      2. Financially, London was a center of great international trade and power.
      3. The mercantile class was rising in importance.
      4. London was first to put goods on display (shopping).
      5. There was also heightened intellectual exchange, especially in coffee houses. People of different ranks shared ideas.
      6. Affectation is a major issue in the eighteenth century—people trying to pass for something they were not in an anonymous setting.
   B. Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* is a classic urban text about eighteenth-century London.
      1. Moll, an orphan girl in seventeenth-century London, makes a successful career of thieving, marrying and coping with the adverse conditions of city life.
      2. Although Defoe outfits his story with moralizing and guilt, the story ultimately shows that crime pays. Moll's cunning and animal vigor are good things, even if not in ethical or social terms.
      3. The novel depends on the freedoms inherent in the city. Moll lives by her wits. Disguises allow her to live incognito.
      4. The novel dwells on the material world. The so-called moral life is translated into a cash system of debits and credits.
      5. Things are reduced to their thing-status. There is no "emotional value."
      6. Moll enjoys urban freedom. The past does not show, except in one's consciousness.
   C. William Hogarth takes a satirical and punitive view on urban migration and of the shenanigans possible in eighteenth-century London.
      1. He treated the city around him as history. He wrote cautionary fables of people who try to overreach their freedoms and fail.
      2. There is an inherent precariousness in Hogarth's work.
      3. Hogarth had two very popular sequences of paintings that were conservative, moral fables.
         a. "The Harlot's Progress" is an uncanny pictorial version of Defoe's novel, only Moll Flanders' success story is reversed into a moral tale of warning. We see the progression of a young woman lured to the city for easy money, becoming a prostitute, and dying of syphilis.
         b. "The Rake's Progress" is a fable of a young man inheriting money and then plunging down the road to perdition. We see his travel from finery and riches to debt and jail. Finally, he ends up in an insane asylum. The pictorial tale pronounces a moral verdict on urban life as marketplace.
   D. Toulouse-Lautrec, an artist who lived in a Paris brothel and regularly spent time in a dance hall during the nineteenth century, shows what the great pleasure haunts are really like if you live in them: ennui, routine, and fatigue dominate the lives of the exhausted people working for a living with their bodies.
E. Brecht, a twentieth-century playwright, writes about a Chicago lending library in “The Jungle of Cities.” This absurdist play suggests we have all become commodities.

**Reading Suggestions:**
Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*
Bertolt Brecht, “Jungle of Cities”

**Questions to Consider:**
1. How is anonymity connected to Moll’s freedom in the city?
2. Hogarth paints a dark view of “The Harlot’s Progress” and “The Rake’s Progress.” Both could be looked upon as the same story—unless one considers economic class and gender. How do the stories become different when one takes into account their different stations in society and their different genders?
Lecture Four
The Family Plot, or Municipal Bonds

Scope: Literary plot and the bonds between people in urban art are central in this lecture. We learn how plot in detective fiction relies on fitting clues into a pattern so that the environment becomes readable, and how the unexpected links between people are made explicit. We also learn through works by Dickens, Balzac, and others how the city can be a place where even the poor and the rich are related, and where blood ties can be replaced by a newly created family.

Outline

I. Plot and bonds are the key words in the title of this lecture.
   A. Plot is about the relating of discrete parts—beginnings, middles, and ends.
      1. In life it is hard to assign beginnings, middles, and endings because we are always in the midst of life.
      2. Aristotle described plot as one of the important characteristics of tragedy.
   B. Living bonds are a great objective of city art.
      1. However, bonds can turn into bondage (alienation and anonymity).
      2. This is a hard lesson for Americans, who believe in rugged individualism as opposed to interconnectedness.
   C. Thomas Carlyle's account of typhus fever in Edinburgh is a haunting story about connectedness.
      1. A widow, who is refused help by charitable establishments in the city, becomes ill with typhus and infects 17 others, thus proving her sisterhood or connectedness to others.
      2. Plague can be seen as a kind of language or communication. You can't see it, but you're connected.

II. Detective fiction is a genre that highlights unexpected links between people.
   A. It features a hidden crime and the community's need to solve it.
   B. Details turn into clues: everything is part of a larger whole.
   C. Detective fiction is popular because of its triumph of rationality. It posits a world that may be evil but is at least in the end coherent.
   D. It is urban because it gives a satisfying form to deep fears of urban life: anonymity and threat of the unknown.
      1. Because these are urban fears, detective fiction could not be popular in a generally rural community.
      2. The stories please and soothe us because the cause of the evil, the monster, will be found out and removed from the community, and that is cathartic.
   E. We can view Oedipus as the first detective in literature. Like a sleuth, he works his way backwards to his own origins and discovers bondage. The man he killed was his father, and the woman whose bed he shares is his mother.

III. There is a more celebratory vision of connection. Dickens offers London mysteries that unravel secrets and inform lives.
   A. Many of Dickens’s most affecting protagonists are obliged to unravel the mystery that surrounds their origins. Such in the case with Pip in Great Expectations.
      1. Pip has to learn to discover the true identity of his benefactor.
      2. He comes to understand that it is not Miss Havisham, but instead is Magwich, the escaped convict, who becomes his figurative father.
   B. In Bleak House, he portrays urban secrets and connections.
      1. In the “London fog,” you don't know who is who.
      2. The revenge of the slum is that ghettos are an illusion: we are connected.

V. Balzac was Dickens' French counterpart. He wrote Pere Goriot.
   A. A young man in Paris finds out how rich and poor are linked.
B. As the story of the failed family is uncovered, a story of a growing family is revealed.

VI. The following are other examples of municipal bonds in film and poetry.

A. "Midnight Cowboy" portrays brotherhood in a brutal city.

B. *Bonfire of the Vanities* is a contemporary novel with themes similar to Dickens and Balzac. It has a plot about connectedness in the city.

C. Baudelaire was the first to write about crowds and modernity.

D. Whitman welcomed the unruly, bustling street life of the cities.

**Reading Suggestions:**

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* and *Bleak House*

Balzac, *Pere Goriot*

Tom Wolfe, *Bonfire of the Vanities*

Walt Whitman, “Crossing the Brooklyn Ferry”

**Questions to Consider:**

1. In Lecture Two, we found that a structural educational pattern of city texts is the entering of the labyrinth and facing up to the secret that is at the heart of it. Does this idea connect “The Myth of Theseus” with Pip in Dickens’ *Great Expectations*?

2. How can dark and celebratory visions of city bonds co-exist?
Lecture Five
Urban Apocalypse

Scope: This lecture focuses on the substratum of terror that stalks human life in the city, especially as it relates to the decimation of urban existence in the form of the plague. We learn not only about The Black Plague, but also how plague has been used by urban artists as an allegory for other forms of city apocalypse, such as the German occupation. We come to see nuclear annihilation as another kind of urban apocalypse. All is not lost, though. Art, the mind, memory, and narrative can lead to a rebirth of the city—figuratively if not literally.

Outline

I. Even more daunting than urban terror is urban apocalypse.
   A. Throughout the Old Testament, the City is routinely destroyed as punishment.
      1. This punishment is carried out by warring tribes and nations, or by God himself.
      2. Cities in the Old Testament were dens of iniquity, punished because they were secular places where people flouted the laws of God.
      3. Babylon is the archetypal city of secular corruption, personified in the figure of the Whore of Babylon.
   B. The dying city is a formidable notion. No amount of knowledge can offset the brutality of the event.

II. Another example of urban apocalypse is The Black Plague in the mid-fourteenth century, which destroyed entire towns. Plague was understood as God’s punishment for the evil that people do.
   A. Plague and apocalypse are present as themes in city art by Boccaccio, Edgar Allen Poe, Ingmar Bergman, Albert Camus, Daniel Defoe, and Peter Watkins.
      1. Boccaccio's *Decameron* presents storytelling itself as an activity that might rival the creeping death. Storytelling is a way of passing the time while the characters are quarantined.
      2. Poe's "Masque of Red Death" personifies plague as a red invader. The short story is about the effort to close up ranks and keep the plague out.
      3. Ingmar Bergman's movie "Seventh Seal" (1957) came at a time when people became aware of total destruction for the first time. The film was made in 1957, when Bergman was thinking about nuclear annihilation. He uses The Black Plague to symbolize nuclear apocalypse.
      4. Albert Camus wrote *The Plague* about the same time Bergman made “Seventh Seal.” He uses the outbreak of plague in Algeria as an allegory of the German occupation in World War II.
      5. Camus was inspired by Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*, a fictional account of the 1665 London plague. His journalistic approach gives a grisly modern ring.
      6. Peter Watkins, also inspired by Defoe, filmed "The War Game," which stages a mock nuclear attack on England that results in urban anarchy.
   B. Antonin Artaud's essay, “The Theater and the Plague” in *Le Theatre et son double* (The Theater and Its Double) is a positive appropriation of the apocalypse. The essay presents the theater as having a common cause with the plague.
      1. Artaud wanted to rescue the theater from being a sterile, literary form.
      2. The concept of plague is useful in this task. The anarchy that results from plague leads to the falling away of taboos. The normative rules of how we govern our lives simply go up in smoke. Artaud believed anarchy could revitalize the theater.
   C. Hogarth's nineteenth-century engravings, “Beer Street” and “Gin Lane,” are examples of how the death of the city has been used in marketing.
      1. Both engravings were done as part of a promotion for people producing beer.
      2. “Beer Street” is a happy scene, representing beer as a healthy alternative to gin, the more inexpensive drink in the nineteenth century. Even the poor could afford gin.
      3. “Gin Lane” represents scourge. Only the undertaker, the pawnbroker, and the distiller are doing well. The central figure is a woman covered with syphilitic sores, who is besotted with gin and unknowingly letting her baby fall to its death.
D. Art is not necessary for images of urban apocalypse. Dresden, Hiroshima, Kuwait City, and Dubrovnik are modern examples.

IV. Death of cities is not always on a grand scale.
   A. Time more slowly alters cities.
   B. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud meditates on the changing of Rome and the challenge of representation that this entails. He uses man’s ability to reconstruct the historical changes in the city of Rome as a way of explaining “memory traces.” The mind has the capacity to retain things that have passed, that are buried, but are retrievable by dint of memory and thinking. In a sense, then, the human mind is the great archeologist, the great retriever.

V. It is the mind’s ability to retrieve, to reverse time, that can lead to a city’s rebirth. The ruins of the city, a city’s pasts, are recoverable through memory. The following are artistic examples of this recovery.
   A. Oedipus recovers his life story which is crucial to saving the city.
   B. In the film "Hiroshima, Mon Amour" a painful past is recovered in the setting of a bombed city. The movie becomes a story about how rebirth, how getting past the plague, is possible.
   C. In the film "Chinatown," narrative also brings about recovery.

Reading Suggestions:
Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*
Edgar Allen Poe, “Masque of Red Death”
Albert Camus, *The Plague*
Daniel Defoe, *Journal of the Plague Year*
Antonin Artaud, “The Theater and the Plague”

Questions to Consider:
1. In the Old Testament, apocalypse is punishment by God. What is represented as the cause of city apocalypse during later time periods? Speculate on why these causes have replaced the wrath of God.
2. Why does Antonin Artaud find anarchy resulting from apocalypse to be positive for theater?
Lecture Six
Transmission and Storage

Scope: In this lecture, we consider how the city is a container of history that can enlarge our sense of ourselves through contact with ideas and cultures beyond our own. This living chain of cultural memory stored in the city is infinitely more complex than the intricate circuitry of the electronic machines we use for work, especially when we consider art’s simultaneous representation of different ages of the city. We come to understand by the end of the lecture that just as “the city lives by remembering,” the opposite is also true: “the city dies by forgetting.”

Outline

I. Up to this point, we have seen how individual memory redeems the city. Now we consider the city itself as a container of history, as is suggested by a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson: “The city lives by remembering.”
   A. Cities are containers of history allowing contact with other times, contact with ideas, cultures, and living thoughts beyond those any of us are capable of producing by ourselves.
   B. Lewis Mumford argued that the city’s great role in culture is that of translation, storage and transmission.
      1. The city throughout history has served the role of storing the products of human exchange and cultural activity for those who come after.
      2. We can think of the city’s buildings, vaults, archives, monuments, tablets, and books as records of times past.
   C. The city is a cultural circuitry, which is fluid, not static, and the central agent in this flow of information is the human being. This living chain of being is infinitely more complex than electronic machines that we currently use for work.

II. An historical understanding of Paris in 1857 helps to serve as a backdrop for a poem by Baudelaire.
   A. Louis Napoleon had had himself proclaimed emperor after the bloody but failed revolution of 1848, a loss that was a crushing blow to the liberal thinkers and the forces of democracy. Napoleon III’s one monumental ambition was to turn Paris into a grand imperial city.
   B. Baron Haussmann was commissioned for the job and is responsible for the way Paris looks today: grand boulevards, vistas, facades of grey stone, and improvements in sanitation.
   C. However, he polarized the city.
      1. He tore apart narrow winding streets to create boulevards—large thoroughfares that would permit the movement of military troops. The boulevards would allow the government to block insurrectionary movements and avoid a repeat of 1848.
      2. The boulevards, though, also caused the neighborhoods to lose their individual character, and people became mere inhabitants instead of citizens.
      3. Thus Paris in 1857 foreshadowed the city of today: a centralized government, and citizens without a personal stake in its operation who feel powerless to instigate change.

III. Baudelaire's poem "The Swan" is an artistic representation of Paris in 1857.
   A. The poem is dedicated to Victor Hugo, who left Paris during the reign of Napoleon III as an act of resistance, and became an exile.
   B. “The Swan” represents the urban environment as a place where you live life on the surface and have no connectedness to the past—the condition of the exile and the theme of the poem.
      1. The swan the narrator sees in the poem is walking among city buildings and is exiled from the lake.
      2. The consumptive black woman is walking the streets of Paris, trying to see the Africa she has come from.
   C. Exile is the condition of the modern city dweller.
   D. We can return to places we have been exiled from, the poem suggests, by thought. Thinking is a route to the past that cannot be barricaded.
E. Thinking also, though, is a model of self-loss when turned inward. It is the condition of people who are lost within themselves, caught in an endless activity, which explains why there is no finality at the end of the poem.

IV. James Merrill's "Urban Convalescence" is a modern version of "The Swan" set in New York.
   A. While a man is convalescing, he hears machines tearing up buildings on his block.
   B. There is a poignant effort at reconstruction.
      1. The man’s memory moves from a forgotten building to his barely remembered experience of a woman he had loved in Paris.
      2. The poem is a general reflection on loss, on the wear and tear and vandalism that is a psychic phenomenon as well as a city one.
   C. “Urban Convalescence” suggests how cities remind us of our mortality and dimensions, and incite us to these acts of retrieval and recovery.

V. Godard's futuristic film, "Alphaville," also addresses transmission and storage in the city.
   A. The focus is on the computer, Alpha 60, which is the ruler of Alphaville. "No one has ever lived in the past," the computer claims.
   B. The computer is powerful and thriving while the people are thin and poor. Language and poetry are lost.
   C. The message is that the city dies by forgetting. The film stages a choice between electronic retrieval versus human recall.

Reading Suggestions:
Baudelaire, “The Swan”
James Merrill, “Urban Convalescence”

Questions to Consider:
1. How does the theme of exile in Baudelaire’s “The Swan” also connect with the urban theme of alienation? Does alienation precede exile? How can one still live in the city and be exiled?
2. How is “Urban Convalescence” a modern version of “The Swan”?
Lecture Seven

The Industrialized City and the Machine Vision

Scope: We see in this lecture how artists both criticize and celebrate machines and the industrialized city. While artists like Monet and Leger see in the advent of the machine a mode of extraordinary elegance, beauty and power unmatched in history, others see a world where work has become so specialized and automated that people are reduced to machines. We explore how the stimuli of the industrialized city can overwhelm and capsize us, but also lead to kinship with the homeless, the outcasts, the dehumanized.

Outline

I. Art can be both a critique and a celebration.
   A. We tend to think that the purpose of reading, and the purpose of a work of art when we examine it, is to become critical, and that probably the artist had a critical project in mind.
   B. In many ways, though, a work of art is simply a presentation. Many artists feel that their subject matter is simply too complicated, too rich, or too multiple, to have a single, clear reading of it.
   C. Art might be more essentially a celebration than a criticism—even a celebration of things we don’t like.

II. Lewis Mumford, a social scientist, critiques the nineteenth-century city and the Industrial Revolution, while Charles Dickens gives us an artistic portrait of the kind of city that Mumford is critiquing.
   A. Mumford said new cities produced a degraded environment in terms of sanitation, air, light, and use of space; and that there are specific governing principles that caused these developments.
      1. The degraded city environment was caused by the abolition of the guilds, which had been operative as social and economic organizations since the middle ages. This led to permanent insecurity for the nineteenth-century working class.
      2. The degradation was also a result of the competitive open market for both labor and the sale of goods.
      3. Finally, use of foreign dependencies as a source of raw materials and a potential export market led to degraded cities.
   B. Mumford adds that the quasi-religious belief that undergirds the above system is the notion of the atomic individual, whose property, rights, freedom of choice, and free enterprise are to be protected at all costs. He is making an impassioned critique of capitalism.
   C. In *Hard Times*, Dickens gives a portrait of such a degraded industrial environment, Coketown.
      1. It is a city of machinery, serpents of smoke, rivers that run purple, and the constant sound of pistons in steam engines. Sameness dominates the workers lives.
      2. Dickens describes a dark winding and twisting pathway through the labyrinth that is Coketown, leading ultimately to Stephen Blackpool, a city worker.

III. There are examples of artwork that celebrate the industrialized city. Even Dickens’ portrait of Coketown is a celebration of the way the artist enjoys the art of representation.
   A. Dickens describes the train (which according to Mumford, rapes the industrial city) in a way that is artistically pleasurable. He gives us the feel of the station.
   B. Monet's painting "Gare St. Lazare" shows his obsession with the power and shapes of trains. He does not criticize them, but instead renders the excitement and power of locomotives.
   C. Fernand Leger painted during the 1920s, during the heyday of machine excitement, futurism, and vorticism.
      1. His painting, "The Mechanic," done in 1920, shows limbs and appendages as mechanical parts, suggesting that the human body can be thought of as an assemblage of interlocking parts.
      2. Leger thought painting the city was the greatest challenge to formal design and color that one could imagine. 'The City" celebrates these designs and colors with representations of traffic lights, construction, and other city scenes.
D. Dziga Vertov's film "Man With a Movie Camera," made in the 1920s, is a full-length film about one day in the life of Moscow. He concentrates on filming all the machines of industry and the home, and shows that the movie camera is capable of things humans are not by showing scenes in slow motion, in fast-forward, and in reverse. The movie, in celebratory fashion, suggests Moscow is a machine.

E. Fritz Lang's movie "Metropolis" is a moral tale about the Master of Metropolis who is running something like a slave-labor industrialized city and learns that his workers are not machines.
   1. Lang was awed by the challenge of making a set that could render an entire mechanical city and create visual excitement.
   2. The robot is a logical result of the division of labor, Lang's robot, however, is a strangely liberated figure. It is the robot that is the underground unconscious of the film.

IV. We can attend to the other side of the equation, which is not the machines but the kind of city that machines produce and the human response to them.

A. George Simmel argues in "The Metropolis and Mental Life" that the city is a place of almost intolerable stimuli.

B. Baudelaire was not able to shut the stimuli out.

C. Freud addresses this in his view of homeostasis, the incessant efforts of the brain to screen out invading stimuli as a means of maintaining balance. If we are incapable of doing this, there is the danger that the stimuli will capsize us.

D. Much literature deals with what happens when people are not able to shut out the stimuli, such as Melville's short story "Bartleby," originally called "A Tale of Wall Street." It is about Wall Street in the 1850s.
   1. Bartleby, who is employed as a copyist by a law office, breaks down and refuses to function at work. “I will not serve,” he repeats.
   2. In his refusal to copy, he illuminates the looniness of the law office. The story shows us a modern city theme: Bartleby, a homeless figure who chooses to live instead of work, is saying that a place where people can come together to work has got to be a place for living. This is the antithesis of the mechanical and productivity vision.

E. Edvard Munch in his paintings shows city people who have become spectral mummies, their faces hollowed, eaten out. All solidity is gone; they have become walking ghosts.

F. Edward Hopper’s painting, “Night Hawks,” shows the city as a place that makes human solitude visible, and “Morning in the City” illustrates the emptiness of urban living

G. Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, shows what happens when the city comes in. The book is a story of losing one's defenses. The walls around us that shore up our identity come tumbling down.

Reading Suggestions:
Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*
Herman Melville, “Bartleby”
Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*

Film Suggestions:
“Man with a Movie Camera”
“Metropolis”

Questions to Consider:
1. How might the body be considered an assemblage of mechanical parts? In what ways does this view invite both celebration and critique of our connections with machines?
2. How does Melville’s “Bartleby” represent an inability to shut out city stimuli?
Lecture Eight
A Moveable Feast

Scope: In the final lecture, we consider how the life of the corporate city is now moveable in ways that are unprecedented in history. According to Marshall McLuhan, media must be understood as an extension of the human nervous system, or as instantaneous and global transportation systems that render the traditional patterns of the city as marketplace and political structure obsolete. We can still find value in the city, though, because it is the most promising spacio-cultural arrangement that humans have yet devised, and like art, it is potentially a feast that nourishes.

Outline

I. The city itself is now moveable in ways unprecedented in history, and talk of the city as an obsolete structure no longer serves any purpose. This involves such issues as whether you need to live in the area where you work or where you shop. The electronic revolution has changed our sense of having to be physically present at a particular place.

A. The American city is said to have developed in three phases.
   1. The commercial city is the first phase. This is the city that is a trading post for the metropolis abroad, the city of colonial America, where the wealth was siphoned off to London.
   2. The industrial city, phase two, is the city of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a site where heavy industry and production were located.
   3. The most recent phase, the corporate city, is the high-tech environment that exclusively or predominately processes information.

B. In literature, these three phases would be represented by the move from realism to modernism to postmodernism. In technology, the shift would be from the steam engine to the electric and combustion motors, to the electronic and nuclear power. Socially, the shift could be described as moving from products to money to credit.

II. Marshall McLuhan, one of our most influential thinkers of the corporate city, claims that all media must be understood as an extension of the human nervous system.

A. Money, telephones, and televisions can be thought of as transportation systems, extending our whereabouts.

B. McLuhan argues that the electronic age, which is instantaneous and global, resists the traditional pattern of the city, which is a center-margin arrangement. Instead, we are in an electronic system that wreaks havoc with the city we have taken for granted for 2,000 years.

C. When information moves with the speed of electricity, with the same speed of the signals in our central nervous system, all the older forms of transportation—road and rail, car, train, and even plane—become theoretically obsolete.

D. The city may have lost its original function in other ways.
   1. Through history, the ultimate military units have been cities. They maintained themselves by fortifications, armies, and navies. This is no longer the case.
   2. The city is no longer an authoritative political unit. It is instead part of a complex relationship between city, state, and federal governments.

II. If the city is no longer the dominant social structure, what is its significance now? The answer is living and human interaction. The quality of human life is a larger proposition than whether business has become international, or can be conducted by the fax, the computer, or the conference call. Cities help us meet our needs for certain facts of human life that are not changeable.

A. We live in bodies that obey the laws of gravity, that require nurturance, that must have contact with others, both socially and in a larger species sense, if there is to be continuance.

B. Our bodies process and enable our engagement with the world in ways the TV monitor, the phone, even virtual reality, cannot. The plenitude of encounter is body-to-body.
C. We cannot live as disembodied images or messages because we are physical, sentient entities. The urban corollary is that the city is the most promising social arrangement devised because it allows us to add to our lives by transforming the environment into individual enrichment.

D. The city is a living chain of being that stores and transmits the news of human life. This allows us a sense of cultural continuum, of growth, of symbiosis between self and society.

III. The above are similar to the kind of conclusions we might draw about the value of art.

A. Art makes visible the patterns that we cannot see with our eyes, such as the governing relations in most people’s lives.

B. Even at its darkest, artwork such as Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Project for a Revolution in New York*, is true to human feeling. These dark visions are valuable both because they get on record things that are otherwise unrecorded, and because the most disturbing pictures are the ones that help us to imagine alternatives.

C. Art helps us to a fuller view of human encounters. It helps us to recognize responsibility in our interconnectedness, that we do live together in relation.

D. City art draws out the map on which we live, and helps us to a fuller, richer picture of placedness, showing us that coordinates in time and space are larger than we might think.

E. The city is a feast. It nourishes people literally and figuratively. It is a place where we can encounter and absorb the traditions of others—the languages, the festivals, parades, fairs, circuses, museums, shows, and concerts. The city has a plentitude, an immediacy, a dimensionality, and excitement that no transcription of it can have.

Reading Suggestions:
Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*
Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Project for a Revolution in New York*

Questions to Consider:
1. At the time McLuhan wrote, the computer did not play the prominent role it does in people’s work and private lives that it does today. How has the computer advanced even further the idea that the city might be an obsolete structure?

2. What are some of the city artworks discussed in this series of lectures that suggest cities should help us meet the needs of human life, such as nurturance and human interaction?
Glossary

**Bildungsroman:** a term used to describe novels of education, not necessarily in the sense of formal schooling. More typically the term describes a novel where a naïve youth becomes educated in the ways of life and maturity. Many of the best examples of bildungsroman are in German.

**Catharsis:** the idea, especially as it is applied to tragedy in literature, that the literary work purges the mind of such emotions as pity, terror, and fear by evoking them through responses to art.

**Futurism:** a movement in the arts that began in Italy in the early twentieth century, advocating principles of dynamism, the cult of speed and the machine, a glorification of war, and a rejection of the past.

**Homeostasis:** the widespread inclination of all sentient beings, including humans, to maintain a state of equilibrium in the face of changing conditions.

**Intertextuality:** the assumption that any written text is constructed partly through references, both explicit and implicit, to other texts.

**Topos:** a rhetorical term signifying a commonplace in terms of either structure or conventions. The term is often used to describe commonplace literary terms or subjects.

**Trope:** a rhetorical term, trope involves the use of a word in a sense other than the literal. Metaphors, similes, irony, and paradox are examples of tropes.

**Vorticism:** an English modern-form movement in the arts during the early 20th century that was related to cubism and futurism, it consisted of new theories of energy and form, emphasizing a hard-center of unromantic kinetic forces in both painting and literature.
Biographical Notes

Artaud, Antonin (1896-1948). The Frenchman who wished to de-emphasize words in the theater, Artaud wrote sixteen volumes of words. He is generally recognized as a prophet of twentieth-century experimental theater who valued performance over theory.

Baudelaire, Charles (1821-1867). Although his work was not well received during his lifetime, eventually he was to earn renown as a French symbolist poet. His poems were banned during the nineteenth century, and he was accused of obscenity and blasphemy. At the end of his life, he lived in obscure poverty.

Balzac, Honoré de (1799-1850). He is best known for his towering work, La Comédie Humaine, which consists of over 80 novels and tales. The sheer scope of the work alone is impressive. There are over 2,000 named characters, all of whom stand before the backdrop of the French Revolution and Empire.

Bely, Andre (1880-1934). He is Russia’s greatest modernist writer and a leading poet of the period of Russian intellectual history called the Silver Age. He believed that when art moves toward music it becomes more profound, and so all his prose has distinct rhythmical qualities.

Blake, William (1757-1827). Influenced early on by the mysticism of Swedenborg, Blake went on to develop his own distinctive mystic poetic vision. He is considered an apocalyptic visionary, who condemned the belief, prevalent during the beginnings of the industrial revolution, that the world operated according to mechanical principles.

Boccaccio, Giovanni (1313-1375). He was born in Italy, and was in Florence during the Black Death. His writing displays an unusual versatility, containing a variety of genres, many of which were pioneer ventures. His literature exercised a powerful influence on succeeding generations.

Defoe, Daniel (1660-1731). An extremely versatile and prolific British writer, he produced some 560 books, pamphlets, and journals during his life, many of them anonymously. He is best known for his later works, which have led critics to regard him as the first true novelist.

Dickens, Charles (1812-1870). An English novelist who captured the popular imagination as no other had before. In 1850 he founded his own weekly journal, where several of his novels were published in serialized form. His works are praised for their complexity and his skill at humor and caricature. Many consider him to be England’s greatest creative writer.

Hogarth, William (1697-1764). The major eighteenth-century painter of London city scenes, especially in terms of moral dilemmas and social satire. See, in particular, "The Harlot's Progress" and "The Rake's Progress." He contributed greatly to the art of caricature.


Leger, Fernand (1881-1955). A French painter who, inspired by wartime artillery, became a proponent of machine vision in 1920s, especially in relation to city themes and forms. He is known as the developer of machine art. His work is a vibrant and joyous celebration of these new structures and possibilities.

Melville, Herman (1819-1891). He was born in New York City, but became best known for his stories of the sea, especially Moby Dick. Although his works were hidden in obscurity for many years after his death, he now is not only considered a great stylist who mixed realistic narrative with rich, rhythmical prose, but also a shrewd social critic.

Monet, Claude (1840-1926). The leader of the nineteenth-century impressionistic art movement, almost all his artwork displays the changing effects of light. For his city scenes, see the "Gare St. Lazare" series from the 1870's and his depictions of the Grands Boulevards.
Rilke, Ranier Maria (1875-1926). One of the greatest poets of the German language, and one of the greatest cosmopolitans of modern literature, Rilke continually used his ceaseless travels in his artwork. The homeless are a supreme metaphor for rootlessness, a major theme in his poems.

Robbe-Grillet, Alain (1922-?). He is the best known of the *nouveaux romanciers* in France. He worked as an agricultural scientist until he turned to literature after illness brought his career to an end.

Toulouse-Lautrec, Henri de (1864-1901). Known for both his paintings and posters, Lautrec chronicled nineteenth-century Parisian night life, especially in Montmartre, in the Moulin Rouge with its legendary occupants, and in the brothel in a tender and unromantic fashion.

Whitman, Walt (1819-1892). Born on Long Island, New York, he is considered by many today to be the greatest American Poet. Although initially his poems were criticized for being formless and crude, his simple style devoid of rhyme, meter, or ornament was a precursor to the modern poetic style of today.
Bibliography

*Denotes Essential Reading

1. Literary Works

*Balzac, Honore de. Pere Goriot. Trans. A.J. Krailsheimer. New York: Oxford University Press, (1990). This is Balzac's masterpiece on the vicissitudes of living and learning in Paris in the early nineteenth century, and is seen as one of the great education novels in French literature


*Boccaccio, Giovanni. The Decameron. Trans. John Payne. New York: Liverwright, 1925. This work is considered his masterpiece. It contains numerous stories by individuals who are quarantined during the Black Death, and signals Boccaccio’s move away from allegory to realism.

Calvino, Italo. Invisible Cities. Trans. William Weaver Orlando. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1974. This is the most delightful, airy and inventive of all modern city texts; it casts as a series of conversations between Kubla Khan and Marco Polo, and is an inexhaustible series of urban meditations.


**II. Critical Works**


*Mumford, Lewis. *Myth of the Machine, volumes 1-2*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1969-1970. While it is generally held that the machine is beneficial and advances our progress, these two volumes complicate and critique such myths.