DAVID RIKER FRAMES NEW YORK CITY: GAZING AT THE LATIN AMERICAN IMMIGRANT IN LA CIUDAD [THE CITY]

DAVID RIKER FORMATA A CIDADE DE NOVA IORQUE: CONTEMPLANDO O IMIGRANTE LATINO AMERICANO EM LA CIUDAD [THE CITY]

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ABSTRACT: My study surveys the work of cultural studies' critics and applies the theory of the study of the city to the film *The City* (David Riker, United States, 1998). My analysis shows how the director uses the focalizations of illegal immigrants to deliver an urban center than differs greatly from the traditional image of New York delivered by films where we see the city as glittery and inviting. The protagonists basically hope to realize their dreams and instead find a soulless city.

Keywords: The city; *The City* (*La Ciudad*); US latin cinema; cultural studies.

RESUMO: Meu estudo pesquisa o trabalho de crítica dos estudos culturais e aplica a teoria do estudo da cidade no filme *The City* (David Riker, Estados Unidos, 1998). Minha análise mostra como o diretor usa as focalizações dos imigrantes ilegais para mostrar um centro urbano que difere enormemente da imagem tradicional exposta de Nova Iorque em filmes que nos mostram uma cidade cintilante e convidativa. Os protagonistas basicamente esperam realizar seus sonhos, mas ao invés disso, eles encontram uma cidade desalmada.

Palavras-chave: A cidade; *The City;* cinema latino-americano; estudos culturais.

Italo Calvino, through the narrative voice in Imagined Cities, addresses the dynamic nature of an urban space: "The city consists of its relationships between the measurements of its spaces and the events of its past" (10). Accordingly, fiction writers and film directors often portray the city as a synchronic story occurring within a diachronic space. They depict cities as a palimpsest that includes and contains its past and present. Scholars in the field of urban studies explore the relationships between time and space and study the city as a space where people live (Charlos Molesworth, Paul Patton and Iris Marion Young). They explore how the author or director perceives the city and how the inhabitants interact with each other and their shared space.

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Postmodernist critics have greatly advanced the field, by studying the politics of place and space, the role of gender, class and race, and the city as a postmodern space. My study surveys the work of these cultural studies' critics and applies the theory of the study *The City* (David Riker, United States, 1998). I analyze how the film contemplates the nature of the fragmented New York City presented in this film. The director uses the focalizations of illegal immigrants to deliver the city to the audience from a distance. The characters hope to realize their dreams and instead find a soulless city. The director switches from long- to medium-range shots to emphasize the sharp contrasts between the two spaces: 1) the affluent city hidden behind the foggy pollution looming far away, and 2) the poor shanty town that assaults the audience with its abrasive violence. I focus on the mise en scène and photography to explain how Riker uses them to deliver a message of hope by means of city that contrasts sharply with the jungles of New York City.

THE CITY: IN SEARCH OF A THEORETICAL MODEL

For decades, social scientists have studied the city as spaces of community interaction. At the same time, scholars in the humanities have studied the city as places of human interaction and specifically, as spaces artists portray through their special filters to present a city that welcomes, scares, overwhelms, traps, protects and serves as the setting for narratives, poems, plays and films. Contemporary literary critics, based greatly in the postulates of postmodernism, have devised new models that have allowed scholars to study the city from new perspectives and within additional frameworks. This broad range of studies includes the exploration of cities as spaces that stand not merely as a backdrop for human interaction, and development of identities but as the main protagonists of the works themselves. Some of them are positive, while others offer opposing views.

Postmodern critics add to the cultural conversation about "Imaginary Cities" by often providing contrasting, rather than complementary views or positions. For instance, Frederic Jameson defines the city as inclusive of postmodern spaces which are disorienting and disabling (HARVEY, 1990, p.114). D. Harvey approaches the city with a more positive mind set and portrays the city as a space which offers an 'emporium of styles" (Rabat's phrase) from which the individual might choose one. Thus, Harvey proposes that a city dweller has many options or models when picking an identity (Harvey, 1990:115). Harvey's city is imaginary in the structural sense of the term: "A realm of appearance which is undoubtedly real but nonetheless dependent upon a deeper reality; an epiphenomenon in the sense that, for Marx, the entire sphere of exchange and consumption is dependent upon some relations of production" (HARVEY, 1990, p.116). She argues that in cities, people are given to acting and to putting on a show. We must learn to read stereotypes to deal with others: clothing, for instance. Echoing Rabat's ideas, Harvey proposes that this gives the city a theatrical sense: "intrinsic theatricality" (HARVEY, 1990, p.117 from RABAT,

1974, p.37). Thus, the city allows for individuality, performance and self-identity. Manuel Castels defends a similar viewpoint in by proposing that actors (city dwellers) use communication to develop a new identity that allows them to redefine their position or role within society.

Iris Marion Young advances a view in opposition to Harvey's. She explains that the city favors living in a community: "The ideal of community privileges unity over difference. It threatens to reinstate the structures of exclusion which operate in ethnic and other forms of chauvinism" (YOUNG, 1990, p.118). The city does not favor individuality. This presents problems for feminists and other marginal groups in search of a voice. At its best, city life embodies an ideal form of social relationships between strangers, a form of coexistence that Young calls 'oneness to assimilated otherness' (YOUNG, 1990, p.119). She mentions that power hierarchies present an obstacle to integration, but adds that the city space allows for this individuality: "This does not detract from the interest of normative ideal of city life as an alternative to both liberal individualism and communitarism" (YOUNG, 1990, p.119). Charles Molesworth in "Discourse and the City" meditates the several semantic levels associated with the portrayals of the city:

> [The city is an] intersection of private and public spaces; public space becomes the stage for private experiences and private spaces to be unfolded onto public experiences. So we can see where each poet "stages" the phenomenology of urban consciousness as itself a form of "staging," a form which causes the act of perception to take on a contested and yet patterned interlocking of awareness. (MOLESWORTH, 1991, p.22).

Lewis Mumford in "The Fall of Megapolis" argues that the city becomes the final step of a given civilization. He mentions transportation as a great example: "Very costly; congestion, (man-hours stupidly expended in the daily transportation of the human body)" (MOLESWORTH, 1991, p.215). He ponders the civilization of the barbaric and reads the city as a final contradiction in metropolitan civilization: "The city arose as a special kind of environment favorable to cooperative association, favorable to nurture and education, because it was a *protected* environment. But it became the opposite" (MOLESWORTH, 1991, p.221). Mumford presents the following conclusions regarding the phases of civilization decay as a consequence of the development of large urban centers:

1. It goes from civilization to barbaric. It cannot control its initial purpose.
2. The growth actually weakens the city. (MOLESWORTH, 1991, p. 222)
3. Urban growth penalizes itself. (MOLESWORTH, 1991, p.224).

Therefore, man himself has become the greatest of the domestic animals. Mexico City, Caracas, Guayaquil, Quito, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Santiago and Buenos Aires appear as obvious examples of Mumford's argument. Nevertheless, perhaps the most visited concept deals with the notion of Palimpsest, which allows directors and critics to view the city as simultaneously diachronic and synchronic. Although,

writers, film directors and artists have always looked at the city as source of inspiration, the late twentieth century concept of time and space has provided them with additional ways of presenting the city than those they have imagined and created. Michel Foucault explains that in Medieval times, complete hierarchy, opposition, and intersections of places constituted the stability and natural ground of Medieval space. (e.g. sacred/profane, protected/exposed, urban/rural, supercelestial/celestial/terrestrial spaces). With the constitution of an infinitely open space, the space of the Middle Ages was ultimately dissolved. Beginning with Galileo and the 17th century, location becomes a mere point in an object's movement. By the 19th century, we find ourselves in the epoch of space and simultaneity. Certain ideological conflicts come between advocates of time and the ones who favor a concept of space. They involve a certain manner of dealing with what we call time and what we call history. On a related note, in present day thought "a site" has been substituted for a broader concept of extension. Relations of proximity between points and elements define a site; formally, we can describe these relations as series, trees, or grids. (e.g. storage of data, immediate result of calculation, demography, etc.). Foucault adds the following remarks on the subject:

> In any case I believe that the anxiety of our era has to do with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time. Time probably appears to us only as one of the various distributive operations that are possible one of the elements that are spread out in space...
>
> The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not super imposable on one another. (FOUCAULT, 1986, p.23).

Italo Calvino greatly summarized the time and space paradigm in *Invisible cities* by depicting Marco Polo's cities as timeless and eternal. However, none of them could be located again because their constant metamorphosis prevents anyone from visiting them twice: "[they] are elusive, yet everywhere; all cities are one and any city contains them all" (CALVINO, 1974, p.11). The invisible cities of Calvino stand as synchronic and diachronic spaces where we must travel vertically and laterally in order to find the true essence of the city.

THE CITY: FROM PUBLIC TO PRIVATE SPACES

The movie properly entitled The City (1999) and directed by David Riker stands as a strong example of the presentation of the city as a public and private space, where the relationship between their inhabitants looms larger than the city itself. The movie

likewise attempts to create a simultaneous space that relegates time to a secondary role. Harlan Jacobson summarizes the plot as follows:

> In a stunning palette of muted gray by cinematographer Harlan Bosmajian, it paints four portraits of Hispanic immigrant life: a brick laborer whose life ends in rubble; a young man lost in the city who finds a girl from back home at a dance (my favorite of the stories); a puppeteer living in a station wagon on the East River blocked from enrolling his six-year-old daughter in school; and a seamstress in a sweatshop who finally stands up for humanity in a sequence that recalls the great moments in labor history when the lion of decency finally found courage. (JACOBSON, 2005, n.p.).

The movie uses New York City as the setting, but as the title suggests, it attempts to either present it as the ultimate city, so famous in fact, that we do not need to name it. At the same time, the film might also propose New York The City as representative of all cities where immigrants may face similar situations. The film's use of black, white and shades of gray colors reveals the director's intentions of presenting the city as anonymous or as literally dark or "colorless". The title advances the idea that the city has he primary role in the cast of characters. However, in the film we see the city as co-protagonist rather than a main character. At the end, we can identify the space as New York City because of both its famous and notorious landmarks: skyscrapers, sweatshops, for instance. But, the stories of human struggle detailed in the film could take place anywhere in the world. It could easily take place in Athens, Buenos Aires, Istanbul, Mexico City, Paris, São Paulo, or any urban center where immigrants flock in search of better opportunities.

The director proposes that the characters need the city more than the obsolete, distant and ugly city needs them. In the opening scene, using a long-range shot, the film shows a metro train weaving through the city. The camera gazes from the lower income area as the train seems to escape rapidly into the shelter of the other New York, into the more affluent areas (See Fig. 1). As it progresses, the film constantly reinforces the idea proposed in the initial shot: the skyscrapers serve as the distant backdrop to the poverty the audience sees up close.

For instance, the *mise en scène* used to design the dominant settings for the first story emphasizes the idea of the immediate urban decay present through The City. The scene's first shot shows a group of immigrants waiting on a street corner. These



Figure 1. *The City* opening scene. New York City looms distant.

unemployed men have arrived there braving the deplorable winter climatic conditions to offer their work for hire to the best suitor. The characters stand on a dirty street littered by debris. Behind them, dirty, old and broken glass windows share the backdrop with a brick wall in the process of crumbling away. When a man arrives looking for workers, the men congregate around the truck and the scene acquires Darwinian and naturalistic characteristics. The immigrants fight among each other to position themselves in the front of the line. The man selects them according to their physical fitness: strong, fast, young and tall get picked over their mates. The street becomes the background for these human beings and the self-sacrifice, regret and dehumanization that they suffer as they struggle within the parameters of the "survival of the fittest" Riker's New York appears as a jungle where people must survive. Man fights against each other as animals in a jungle and therefore the film suggests that man and animals share common traits and lack the superiority usually assigned to humans. Man become urban animals that operate as mere objects used to serve the interest of the upper classes. The workers lose their identity as human beings because they are treated as instruments in the hands of those who hire them; they act as animals themselves.

The next immediate shot uses the advantage of the panoramic camera and cinema verité techniques to display the city as a barren space. The dehumanizing concept assaults us again when we see a group of men bent over digging urban waste, the remains of a building demolition, in exchange for the ability to support themselves and their families financially, at least for one more day or week. They behave like animals fighting over the work until an accident unites them. The wounded

man dies because they cannot summon medical help. The men do not speak the language and do not know their exact location or even their remote one, for that matter. The beautiful New York, with its tall buildings and glittery lights, witness the scene from far away. Near the camera, the audience sees debris, destruction and death. The camera, using medium-range shots, exposes the hopelessness of the workers. A man has died in the jungle of the city and nothing or no one could stop it. All of the characters lose their dignity (and in case, his life) while they try "to make it there."

The movie depicts a similar city in the other three stories. In the second one, the director delivers a man and his daughter, who live in a station wagon, in front of a background that combines the far and distant beauty of the urban landscape and the



Fig 2. *The City*. Puppeteer and her daughter live in their station wagon.

immediate ugliness of the poor neighborhoods (See Fig. 2). The park where they perform puppetry, the school that denies admission to the daughter, the hospital where the man cannot receive much needed attention all share a dark, obsolete, and decadent look. The camera filters taint them with darkness and opaqueness that help to convey the meaning of decadence associated with the urban space. The stark setting very properly matches their situation's hopelessness. Similarly, contrasts sharply with their profession of choice, entertainers who make other people smile and laugh. They lack opportunities in a seemingly absurd world. The daughter cannot attend school because as homeless they do not have a permanent address. The father expresses his frustration stating that the girl has the right to go to school. However, the school district rules do not grant such privilege to homeless children. They appeared condemned to continue performing the puppetry show to survive in this unreasonable city. The station wagon parked in the abandoned lot will not transport them out of their situation. As with the other stories depicted in the film, the Puppetteer and his daughter emphasize *La Ciudad's* intended message of showing the elusiveness of the

American dream. Those who do not have documents, literally lack an identity and therefore cannot function in society. These actors cannot play their way into the system who rejects or setup obstacles for those who have entered into the county without the proper documentation. It re-imagines the idea of the American dream that posits that in the United States anyone can achieve economical success, peace and freedom by simply working hard and helping build the country. In this new version of the United States, only those who have entered legitimately can pursuit the dream.

In one of the remaining stories, the director uses long-, extremely long,- medium-range and close-up shots to present a story that marks a sharp turn from the story of the suffering illegal immigrant worker depicted in the other three. Francisco and Maria, originally from the same hometown in Mexico, meet by chance as Francisco becomes lost while looking for an address and runs into Maria. Two people live close to each other for years in a small town find each other in a huge cosmopolitan space that ordinarily devours its inhabitants. The irony that marks their encounter



Fig 3. *The City*. Francisco cannot find his way back to María's apartment.

also permeates the story's plot. They dance, visit and spend the night talking about the future, but all ends there. At dawn, Francisco goes to the neighborhood convenience store to buy breakfast and cannot find his way back to Maria's house. Francisco full of angst spends the day seeking María's apartment, but must abandon his quest defeated by the city's huge but similar space. Riker uses the camera masterfully to allow the audience share his anguish. A long-range shot shows the similarity of the many buildings that make up the living complex. The multitudes of apartments create a maze impossible to negotiate for someone foreign to the city. The tall buildings

become a thick wall within this jungle of cement that separates María and Francisco. Francisco must give up his quest for María because of the city's uniformity and lack of uniqueness prevents him from finding his way back (See Fig. 3). In this instance, the city, as Young suggests, allows for a lack of individuality. The vast city space all seems so similar that it inhibits an outsider from safely navigating it. The city literally swallows its dwellers. The romantic hero fails and must admit his defeat in arms of a force superior and stronger to him, the city.

In the final story, the city appears as a symbolic prison. Ana, the seamstress, sews all day to both support herself and to send money to her immediate family living in Central America. The director uses angles and shots to portray the idea of the enclosed space that trap Maria. The shots help in the presentation and development of her character. On the story's onset, medium shots show Ana's face as she happily works. She seems at ease. When she needs financial help due to an emergency back home, she discovers her virtual prisoner state. The shots switch to long and the angles to high to help portray her imprisoned condition. The high angles show her inferior position in relation to the sweatshop owner and her brother. As a typical lumpemproletariat (in the Marxist sense), she has dedicated her energy and effort to serve both of them but now they refuse to help her. The camera picks up the suffocating and unbearable hot space of the sewing shop suggest that her status in the city now entraps her. As a tragic heroine, Ana cannot face forces superior to her and cannot defeat them. However, of the four stories, this one does offer a comedy's ending: eventually the human condition triumphs over the animal instinct of survival. Ana's co-workers unite against the shop owner and support her demand for a salary advance so she can solve her current crisis.



Fig. 4. *The City*. The angles and shots emphasize Ana's imprisoned state.

The film portrays Ana's triumph by using medium shots that allows the audience to see her determination. She quits her role as object that employers used to their own gain to become a subject that resists the establishment's unfair rules. The lower and middle angles used to show Ana place her in a position superior to the camera and therefore to the world whom she has conquered. The final shot deliver the subversive message that Ana will be alright in the midst of so much urban turmoil.

The City offers these four stories that seem to lack a connection. Does the film actually present four stories with nothing in common? Or do they share a common thread? The movie actually answers these questions at the beginning when it presents a photographic studio as the point of convergence of each character. They all have visited the place to get pictures for their visa lottery application. The film provides the complete story behind the application, the picture and the people. This plays within the concept of simulacrum of Jean Braudillard by exposing each character as a perversion of reality. It starts with a picture and then expands on the representation of reality, the identity of that person. At the end, the film seems to propose them as stereotypes that represent a bigger group, undocumented immigrants. Furthermore, the contents of each story contribute to a bigger tale, the history of the City of New York. For example, we see the seemingly synchronic canvas where Riker, a painter rather than a film director, traces the stories stand as timeless. The City narrates stories occurring in New York repeatedly since its very origin. The city has harbored and welcomed immigrants for centuries.

During the course of time, these outsiders have built it, rebuilt it and make it the magical city that it has become in the world's imaginary. Similarly, those who arrived before have generally always discouraged and regret ted the presence of new immigrants who come to compete for jobs, living accommodations, and a place in the city. By making illegal immigrants the movie's main characters, Riker addresses these issues. All of the protagonists have come to New York in search of the same dream: to find a better life for themselves and their relatives back home. However, Riker uses the movie to deface the mythical value assigned to New York by the several millions of foreigners that built it: "If I can make it there, I will make it anywhere" (Sinatra). Riker presents a city in complete decay, similar to the one suggested by Lewis Mumford in "The Fall of Megapolis", where he labels them as the final step of civilization. The camera constantly focuses on the harsh life of the current immigrants with an old city falling to pieces behind them. These messages echo Balbuena's closing dialog in the film Nueba Yol! He looks back at New York from the safe distance of his beloved Santo Domingo and expresses that the city with street paved with gold exists, but only in his dreams. The real New York resembles hell more than paradise.

At the end, deciding if the The City tells the story of the city itself or of the people who play the main roles becomes an impossible task. The movie seems to showcase them both, as to suggest that both people and physical space make up the

city. Riker succeeds at providing glimpses of life and of people who, in the face of adversity, generally forget their survival of the fittest traits and choose to act as human beings. Whether, we read the film as synchronic or diachronic, we see the ugly city where immigrants make it in spite of it all, rather than because of it all. The movie offers that rare simultaneous message of hope and destruction. People will continue to come to New York to fulfill their dreams. The rude awakenings, the harsh life and the jungle-like environment that awaits them merely form part so of the intrinsic process.

In summary, Riker delivers a postmodern city full of dwellers that must struggle everyday to make it. The director succeeds in showing poverty and decay spreading through the city and its population like an urban cancer under the distant ignoring watch of the affluent areas and their residents. The audience very rarely sees beyond the poor areas that the director shows them. The skyline, full of architecturally beautiful and functional buildings, hides behind a foggy filter that both engulfs and distorts them. Film's spectators gaze at the jungle-like environment depicted behind the long-medium-and close-up shots that Riker uses to emphasize the disparity between the two worlds. They show the rest of us how people really live in the city and both directors hope to educate the world and promote change. The camera continues to carry out its role first received with the emergence of the New Latin American Cinema back: one of serving as a weapon for passing along social commentaries.

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