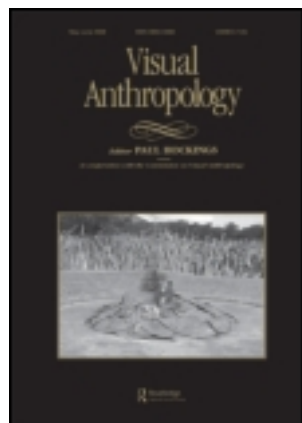


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“Are You Talking to Me?”—New York and the Cinema of Urban Alienation

James A. Clapp

New York is a city in which a substantial number of films depicting urban alienation have been set and filmed, although New York films are neither exclusively nor exhaustive of such films. The conditions for alienation derive from several aspects of urbanism also addressed in this essay. This subject deals with the social and psychological estrangement that is often reflected in antisocial behavior in the City, but may also be an expression of idiosyncratic and esoteric lifestyle choices that result in an urban menagerie of rich and varied social types and groups, among them rogues and loners, and urban cowboys.

The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life.

Georg Simmel, *The Metropolis and Modern Life* [1903]

Writing about cities and film inevitably involves a conflation of images, of the city actual and the city virtual. A particular film image that keeps insinuating itself into the subject of this essay is of a giant gorilla athwart the peak of New York City’s Empire State Building. These days, in the period now commonly demarcated as “post 9–11,” that cinematic image is likely to evoke the real terrors that can be unleashed upon cities and their proudest technological achievement, the urban skyscraper, by those who feel alienated by, or from, the values which big cities represent.

The final scene of *King Kong* (in the eponymous 1933 version), is neither as well-known, or horrific, as the searing memories of the last hours of the World Trade Center towers, but it has been screened often enough since its first release to allow a “cut” directly to the film’s denouement. In that scene, when Kong finally succumbs to the bullets of the warplanes and plunges to the streets of New York below, the showman who brought him there, played by Robert Armstrong, intones the line that is supposed to sum up the poor creature’s fate: “Oh no, it wasn’t the airplanes. It was beauty killed the beast” [RKO Pictures 1933].

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THE CITY VERSUS NATURE

There is an alternate view that giant primates seem to have a fatal attraction for pretty blondes; it is that the City killed the beast.¹ Not just New York in this case, but the City, and the urban-spawned technology that could abduct such a formidable monster from his prehistoric island, transport him to the arguably posthistoric island of Manhattan, and put him on display for the amusement of jaded urban sybarites. New York, ever on the make and ever in search of any way to make it, merely epitomizes the City's break with Nature, the City's alienation from its origins.

More than a classic tragic love story, *King Kong* is a classic antagonist conceived in the womb of an offended Mother Nature (Figure 1). The film is a part of a smaller, but still significant, genre that began with Frankenstein movies and a lineage that may be traced forward through *King Kong*, to *Godzilla*, to *Jaws*, to *Jurassic Park*, and one may confidently assume on into the future of mass entertainment.² Such contrasts allow for plots that exploit the natural against the urban, ingenuousness versus guile, simplicity versus complexity, and other dramatic dualities. It is a message that proclaims that the City is a distinctly human invention that exploits and menaces Nature with the result, these cinematic parables aver, of periodic and dramatic retribution exacted by Nature's outsized



Figure 1 *The end of Kong. Technology wins again.* © 1933, RKO Pictures, Inc. Licensed by Warner Bros. Entertainment, Inc. All rights reserved.

creations. The underlying message is that humans themselves are not immune to the negative influences of the City.³

These are, however, merely cinematic representations of a broader and deeper lineage of antiurbanism, traceable to Biblical injunctions against Babylon, Jericho, Sodom, and other biblical Gothams, to the gibes of Juvenal at Rome, and through Dickens to the American Social Ecologists of the early twentieth century. The City, especially the big city, has been indicted, tried and convicted as the destroyer of community, family, religion, and other institutions of social harmony and cohesion [White and White 1963]. Many writers and artists had long ago questioned the City as a suitable environment for humans, but with the rapid growth of cities in the late nineteenth century their concerns escalated. The emergence of great cities magnified the threats to traditional social institutions and fractured traditional social relationships. By the turn of the century, artists such as the French futuristic writer and illustrator Albert Robida were composing visual works such as his *Demolition of the Old World* in which portrayals of the old city and social order are represented by Gothic structures being demolished by dynamite, history and tradition being discarded, and old ideals consigned to museums with other “anachronisms.” Against the backdrop of a sprawling industrial city stands, ambiguously, a symbol of the messiah, or perhaps the menace, of science and technology. A few years into the new century the German Expressionist painter, Ludwig Meidner [1884–1966], was producing apocalyptic views of the big City linking human psychological turmoil with urbanism. Other German painters such as Georg Grosz, Otto Dix, and Max Beckman composed works that caricatured urban life as immoral, dissolute, and psychologically destructive.⁴ Related themes in literature came from the Russian antiutopian Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* [1924]. Even children’s literature has been found to occasionally be a vector for the virus of antiurbanism [Clapp 1973].

THE METROPOLIS AS MONSTER

It was New York City that the German director, Fritz Lang, took for his model of *Metropolis* [1926], a futuristic science fiction film depicting the giant city in the year 2026. Influential on numerous subsequent science fiction films set in imaginary cities, *Metropolis* promoted the notion of the City as some human-created, but only tenuously human-controlled *other*: the City itself as monster. The urban counterpart of the scientist gone mad, became the administrator-gone-mad with the power of his own creation. The City’s needs for endless productivity become the alienating force that divides the producing working classes from the consuming elite classes. In Thea von Harbou’s screenplay the only solution to an imminent clash between the urban worker’s netherworld and the exploitative *über*-world of *Metropolis* is not a return to Nature’s ways, but to religious ways.

This model (and its visual icons) for the overdeveloped, overcontrolled City as a place of social alienation recurs in films such as Chaplin’s *Modern Times* [1936], George Lucas’s *THX 1138* [1971], and Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* [1982], each influenced to varying degrees by *Metropolis*.

STRANGERS IN THE CITY

These portrayals of the influences of the big City are prologue to the central theme of this essay: the putative effects of urban life characteristics upon the individual and the resultant urban alienation that has come to be expressed in the American cinema. For almost all of human existence people have had some personal (biographical) knowledge of those with whom they had social contact. The great part of that existence has been spent in the small social circle known as the clan, a large, extended family, or of small groups of "families" that might not have averaged more than 20 to 40 people. In rural and small village societies as well, people tended to have some degree of biographical knowledge of those with whom they came into contact [Lofland 1973: Ch. 1].

The City changed that condition, and, as cities became larger and more socially heterogeneous, the numbers of people who were *strangers*, and literally alien to one another, increased commensurately and exponentially. These days, urbanites share their urban environments overwhelmingly with people of whom they have no biographical knowledge; people whom they scarcely and incompletely identify by the clothing they wear, the cars they drive, and other superficial variables. In urban societies urbanites are mostly alien to one another.

URBAN ALIENATION

There is perhaps a sense in which the urban personality is afflicted with alienation. Urbanites are alienated from the natural environment, which they exploit, and from which they insulate themselves. They are, by their very social diversity, socially alienated from one another except in the most instrumental and functional ways. And they are, to some extent, alienated from their very selves, by virtue of the constancy of their social change.

Urbanites have long been viewed as exceptions to the norm, especially when they were not, numerically, the norm. Such perceptions owe a great deal to biblical antiurbanism [Clapp 1978]. Biblical cities, with few exceptions, were almost always regarded as dens of iniquity. Jericho, Babylon, Sodom and Gomorrah still retain their referential and allusive use as places of sin, depravity, or godlessness. But the Bible is only the earliest course of concern that the City is inimical to what is natural and proper in human behavior [Muzzio 1996]. Serious behavioral scientists have posited that the City is to human behavior a "behavioral sink" or a "human zoo," unnatural to human biology and psychology. However, many of their conclusions have been based on studies of animal populations under conditions (such as extreme high density) that putatively are similar to urban conditions [Fischer *et al.* 1975].

The City has long blurred the line between what is normal and what is abnormal or deviant. In part, its very specialization of urban labor results in a degree of social differentiation. But the City also encourages and, indeed, to some degree, requires deviation from the *status quo* and the norm. Thus, while the City requires some level of social conformity in order to maintain its stability and orderliness, it also requires individuality and self-expression in order to progress and change.

Nevertheless, it remains a moot issue as to what the appropriate limits of individuality and self-expression should be. At one level of concern a respect for the laws and customs of the urban society, a respect for its commonweal, requires some subordination of individuality and self-expression to the public interest. On the other hand, a state of repressive conformity that limits individuality and self-expression to a narrow range of approved behavior assigns an antisocial and deviant status to such behavior.⁵

Thus, what some might regard as deviant is the manifestation of affective behaviors, eccentricities, and subcultural presentations that find latitude for freedom of expression in the City. Unusual dress, parades and demonstrations by various groups and interests, and so on, may produce behaviors that those outside and alien to such sociological niches regard as deviant or inappropriate. It has been a long quest of urban sociology and social psychology to understand more completely whether cities create or generate such behavior, or simply provide a tolerant setting for inherent tendencies toward individual and subgroup behaviors to become expressed. Does the City simply attract, because of its tolerance, openness and level of social anonymity, those individuals who are more unusual or even eccentric? Or does the City, with its many media seeking interest and novelty, simply become a setting in which what is different and unusual is given more exposure than elsewhere? These remain working hypotheses in social scientific investigation, while serving as a mine of speculation for the screenwriter, who is not tethered to the rules of research and the canons of statistical proof.

BUT WHY NEW YORK?

There is a certain obviousness as to why New York City seems to receive special attention by cinema's great monsters of urban retribution. Whether it be King Kong derailing elevated rail cars and scaling the tallest building, or the more recent remake in which *Godzilla* clomps through the concrete canyons of Manhattan, crunching yellow taxis and smashing the high-rise symbols of corporate greed and arrogance, the choice of New York seems most apt. As the song says, "If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere." If Nature can take on New York and win, it can take on any city and be victorious. In Hollywood's terms: big monsters need big cities.⁶

The reasons that New York City should also be the predominant locale for its human aliens may well derive from *the opposite scalar relationship*. The individual human, posed against the giant metropolis, is subject to different evolutionary requirements, more accommodative than adversarial with their environment. New York City presents a permutation of physical, social, and iconic characteristics that present dramatic contrasts better than lesser cities.⁷ Among them are the following.

Intensity. Social change in New York is more constant and fast-paced. These changes range from changes in styles and fashions to political and economic changes. The pace and energy of New York has been interpreted in virtually every artistic medium, from painting to stand-up comedy.⁸ Often behavioral repertoires follow, or are even seen as necessary adaptations to, these changes.

Tolerance. Big cities like New York tend to be (though not always, or necessarily) more tolerant of different lifestyles and behaviors. Social differences are part of the marketplace of the city for different talents and roles as well as the generation of new products and services. The different labor requirements of the city tend to attract people with different values and worldviews, requiring, if not always engendering, a higher degree of social tolerance.

Anonymity. The big city both generates and permits anonymity, allowing one to remain a stranger to others in a way that would not be possible in a rural or small town setting. Anonymity further allows for greater creativeness of lifestyle and "presentation of self," in which dress becomes a primary mode of communication to others.⁹

Multiple Social Worlds. The vast social heterogeneity of New York is composed of a mosaic of ethnic enclaves, bohemias, uptowns and downtowns and slums. Residents of each area can be aliens in the turf or territory of other areas. Indeed, this often forces the alien to adopt false postures and "city faces" in order safely to navigate through other areas.

Density. The compaction of these areas of the city often juxtaposes people of different values, backgrounds and lifestyles, hence heightening the sense that the city is a place of others and aliens.

Spatial Structure. New York, and particularly Manhattan, presents a spatial profile and skyline that is instantly recognizable at a distance (laterally or from above) and conveys an iconic power. From within, the physical geography created by its grid of streets and avenues, the prominence of Central Park, and the strong physical identity of its districts and neighborhoods, affords settings and visual references that can be employed to visually underscore and enhance a film's narrative.¹⁰

THE CINEMA OF URBAN ALIENATION

Travis Bickle's menacing challenge in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* has become almost an anthem for the culture of urban alienation, an abstraction of the anonymity, loneliness, social disengagement, and moral detachment for which the big City is often regarded as prime cause. It is an accusation that has been leveled at urban culture that long antedates the jeremiads of the brooding loner played here by Robert DiNiro. In the big City's wake of social flotsam lies the alienated urbanite, the spectral figure, silhouetted against the urban canyons, lurking in the City's dark interstices, the pitiful down-and-outer, and the sinister rogue.

Concerned with drama (conflict) as it is, the cinema has always found social alienation a compelling theme. The immigrant's struggle against rejection, the anticonformity of the Beat and Bohemian, the country bumpkin's victimization by the scheming urbanite, slum dwellers versus the swells, even mythical beasts such as extraterrestrials, King Kong and Godzilla versus urban exploitation, all allow for exploring behavior in the urban environment. The adventures of the individual, struggling for corporeal or psychological survival against the wiles and exigencies of the City, particularly the big city, was traceable in film to the ingenuous "little tramp" of Charlie Chaplin, who, in a variety of short films, posed

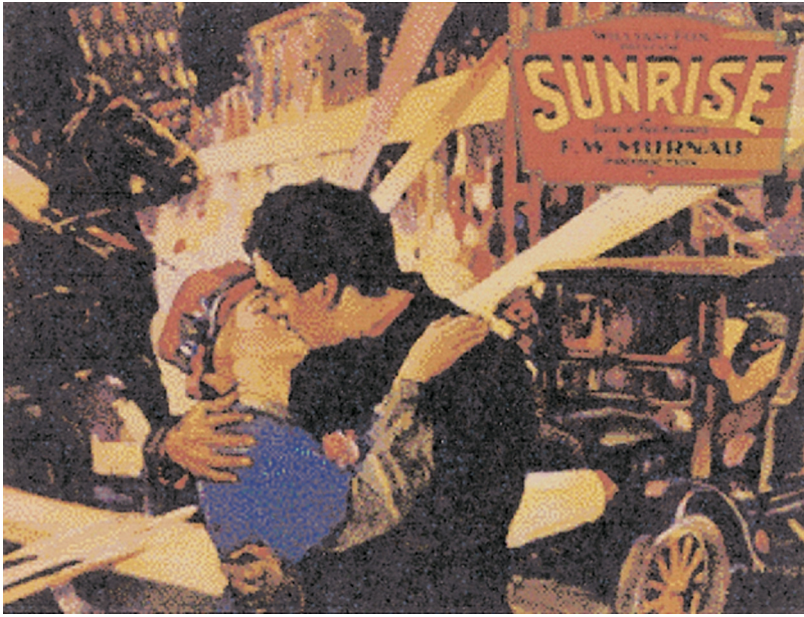


Figure 2 *The City as seductress*. (© 1927, Fox Film Corporation)

the pluck and luck of his character against riotous slum dwellers, sly hustlers, greedy industrialists, and other species in the menagerie of urban types.

In 1927, the renowned German director F.W. Murnau chose a dimension of urban alienation as the subject of his first American film. Murnau based the film, *Sunrise* (Figure 2), on a short story by Hermann Sudermann [1857–1928] in which a young man from the country (George O'Brien) is seduced by a woman from the city (Margaret Livingston) who convinces him to kill his wife (Janet Gaynor), sell his farm, and join her in the city. He plans to drown his wife in a boating "accident" but reconsiders and rows her to the opposite shore, where the movie turns expressionistic and they enter a stylized City in which everything is blown out of proportion and scaled to present the metropolis as it might look to nonurbanites. As with German expressionism in general, the City represents and stimulates an internal psychological state of being, in particular turbulent moral predicaments.¹¹

Other significant films of the period, such as the short documentary, *Manhatta* [1921] by photographer Paul Strand, and King Vidor's feature, *The Crowd* [1928], employed photographic techniques and angles that emphasized the dwarfing of the individual by New York's size and verticality.

New York's urban morphology and demography are also employed in William Wyler's *Dead End* [1937] which, drawing upon the prevailing social theory of the times, held the City to account for the creation of juvenile delinquents in New York City. In this film, the "city" is actually constructed on a soundstage. The rich live beside and above the tenement dwellers, who suffer in cramped, roach-infested quarters in the alleys behind the luxurious residences of the rich, and spend most of their time in the streets. The city's slums are regarded as the breeding ground of

the next generation of the criminal class. The sense of isolation and alienation felt by the lower classes is further emphasized by their consignment to alleys, streets that dead-end at the East River, and the social distance between them and the city of opportunity above and beyond their reach. At the beginning of the film, the camera descends into this social basement, and at the end once again rises to a panorama of the city's magnificent skyline.

New York City's streets and buildings are also employed to strong narrative effect in *A Thousand Clowns* [1965]. Adapted from a Broadway comedy, the story of a nonconformist, alienated from his demeaning work as a kiddie-show writer but also, as the exterior scenes show to great effect, from the rat race of the life of the urban workers scurrying almost maniacally through the streets to their jobs. The scenario expertly blends a view of the City, and New York in particular, that plays to both its positive and negative features. The protagonist here, Murray (Jason Robards), "retires" from his writing job to enjoy all the fascinating corners of the city—its parks, ports, junk yards and streets—in the company of his young nephew Nicholas (Barry Gordon). The plot is driven by the threat of his losing custody of the boy because he does not have a job, and the City is seen as a place that is both interesting and alienating for those who refuse to conform to its rules.

MASTERS OF THE URBAN UNIVERSE

The City is not only capable of bringing to heel the hairy and scaly aliens that occasionally amble through its streets, climb its buildings, and infest its subways. In the cinematic world at least the City, although it may not enforce social conformity to the extent implied, does not abide male hubris.

The American cowboy, icon of individuality and self-reliance, has made for an even more familiar plot driver. The opposite of the sophisticated urbanite, the cowboy's alienation from city ways is often posed as being as extreme as Kong's or Tarzan's. Two somewhat related films will serve to illustrate contrasting interpretations of the individual—in these cases represented by cowboy types, hence aliens—against the city. In *Midnight Cowboy* [1968] (Figure 3) and *Crocodile Dundee* [1986], the contrasts between Joe Buck (John Voight) and Mick Dundee (Paul Hogan), respectively, represent the cowboy as the "primitive," the non-urban. But the way in which they encounter the City (in both instances, New York City) is instructive in terms of the resolution of each of the films.¹² The principal character difference between Joe Buck and Mick Dundee as regards their respective encounters with the City is that Joe Buck comes to the City with ambitions to exploit it, to strut through the bedrooms of its lonely women, divesting them of their money. He does not consider his chosen "profession" as stud as all that dishonorable, he is not greedy, and feels that he gives good value for money. His is a spoiled innocence, justified to some extent by the film's flashbacks to his childhood, but also by his preconceptions of the City, particularly New York City, as a Babylon of immorality. But wanting something from the city, arriving in it with the intentions of a conqueror, destines him to fail.

In contrast, Dundee seeks nothing more from the City than access to the pretty young woman who has enticed him there from the environmental opposite of the

Australian outback. Indeed, the City (more specifically one of its newspapers) wants something from him, the novelty and curiosity of his non-urban story. Dundee can be insouciant, innocent, and yet formidable as a crocodile, dangerous, but unthreatening if left alone and his territory isn't violated.

Joe Buck is not looking for love in the City, and after finding little success in his chosen profession as leather-clad stud to bored Upper East Side matrons, and only slightly more successful with the SoHo psychedelic set, and hitting bottom with Forty-Second Street "fags," finds some moral redemption through his brotherly concern for the small-time hustler, "Ratso" Rizzo (Dustin Hoffman).

Mick Dundee finds himself in New York City more out of curiosity over the woman who entices him there. To him, the City is simply another environment that has its own sorts of dangerous denizens, and Dundee encounters hoods, hustlers, and hookers with the same disarming equanimity he exhibits toward crocodiles and water buffaloes in the Australian outback.

How is it that the City (and doubtless the moviegoer) finds it easier to sympathize with Dundee than Buck? Perhaps this is partly answered in their different attitudes with respect to exploiting the City. But how is it that Joe Buck is regarded by the City as a "fag," a "midnight cowboy," an alien who is unaware of how he is perceived?—Yet Dundee, in essentially the same costume, is roundly welcomed? The difference may have something to do with the people with whom they associate. Dundee is brought immediately into the world of the upper class New Yorker. He resides at one of the best hotels with someone else's compliments. Buck is in meaner accommodations that he can only temporarily afford. We enjoy watching Dundee prick the pompousness of the upper classes with his unwillingness to take them as seriously as they do themselves. It is audience-warming plotting that he forms the best relationship with an African-American chauffeur, and that he slugs the effete boyfriend in the restaurant without even causing a fuss.

Joe Buck never gets to intersect with these classes. His intent is to service the supposedly sexually-bored wives of the better-off, but the closest he gets is to a sluttish *nouveau-riche* matron and a kinky party girl, one of whom divests him of some of his money, the other of the essence of his sexual self-confidence.

The contrast in these two characters is that, in one character (Buck), the allure of the City brings about his loss of innocence; he falls and must leave the City to regain his lost confidence and self-esteem. Mick Dundee retains his innocence and self-esteem, as well as the esteem of others, because he has nothing to prove. In the final analysis, while both characters are "aliens" in the big City, Buck alienates himself from the City, and Dundee ingratiates himself to it.

Perhaps one of the ways in which this now familiar theme has retained its resilience is through the variations in its resolutions of the conflict. It is a rarity that the City is conquered. Survival of self or one's values is perhaps the best that can be achieved by those with conquest in mind. More often it is the City that has its unyielding and uncompromising way. But being composed of individuals themselves, audiences typically identify with, and root for, the individual.

If the pitfalls of the City can be especially perilous for the unsophisticated they can also be for those more familiar with City ways. In *Youngblood Hawke* [1964] James Franciscus plays a promising young author from Kentucky who has come



Figure 3 An odd couple of urban aliens. © 1969 Jerome Hellman Productions. All rights reserved.

to New York City, the center of the nation's literary world, and is told by his editor that New York "can be had if your talent's big enough." But he is also warned by a critic that the City will likely devour him, and that he should return to where he came from. Despite success for a time, Hawke loses his success and money as he sinks into urban corruption and dissipation, is seduced by a married woman, and is finally betrayed by friends. The ending is a somewhat familiar one of a return to his more rustic roots and the redemption of his innocence in the countryside.

A somewhat different result for the theme of the City as a stern and unforgiving master is played out in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* [1990], especially for the arrogant urban male who regards himself as bigger than the City that made him.

In director Brian De Palma's 1990 filming of Tom Wolfe's story of a Wall Street investor whose financial success leads him to refer to himself as a "master of the universe," the City plays a pivotal role in driving the plot. Sherman McCoy (Tom Hanks), whose millions allow him the self-bestowed privileges of a socialite-wife, a grand Park Avenue apartment, and a mistress, Maria (Melanie Griffith), may be a self-nominated "master of the universe," but that universe does not appear to include New York City. After collecting his mistress from the airport McCoy's seemingly perfect existence begins to fall apart when he makes a simple mistake anyone might make—a wrong turn off the expressway—and finds himself in the quite unfamiliar universe of the South Bronx.

That very unfamiliarity results in his and his mistress's panic and running his car into a black youth she thought was attacking them. The boy's death, with the assistance of a greedy mother and an opportunistic Black preacher, make this accident-homicide an overnight sensation. Thus begins a descent into urban hell for McCoy, in which all of the various interests in the City begin circling like carrion eaters, the wounded "master of the universe": a D.A. needing a sensational

case to spur his political campaign, various unscrupulous, ambulance-chasing attorneys; racial activists; political opportunists. Among these is a journalist, Peter Fallow (Bruce Willis), a boozy, out-of-work reporter—who also functions as narrator for the story. Fallow's insobriety nearly blows the opportunity, but a chance meeting with McCoy eventually results in his becoming a celebrated author.

McCoy, who can do nothing to prevent himself becoming the center of a publicity circus, ends up indicted for the death of the boy after trying to cover it up at the urging of his selfish, oversexed mistress. For good measure he loses his job, his wife, and is about to be thrown out of his apartment. He learns that the *real* masters of the *urban* universe, one in which he has traveled only among the planets of privilege, are cops, neighborhood activists, sleazy politicians, newspaper gossip hacks, publicity hounds, and cynical lawyers. He learns the hard way that there are different rules in this alien, dark side of the urban universe.

Such a scenario might have concluded in any number of ways, but Wolfe chooses to provide his sufficiently chastised character with a *deus ex machina*: McCoy is saved by a lucky coincidence that produces a tape recording countering perjured testimony by his traitorous mistress that would surely have convicted him—but only if he is willing to commit perjury himself. This he does without compunction; he is an adaptable alien in the underbelly of the City.

Among the “morals” that one might draw from this *Bonfire* is that the City offers no quarter to those who think they are its masters, and that survival requires that one must play by the City's rules.¹³

DESIGNING WOMEN

The alienating influences of the big modern City are most often portrayed in terms of their effects upon men. Women are, however, not completely ignored by the genre. Turn-of-the-century novels often portrayed women, particularly women from small towns and farms, as potential prey for wily urban males. Perhaps the most common theme, one that certainly lends itself well to theatrical representation, is the young starstruck girl from some small Midwest town bent on making it big in the big city theater. She often finds the competition intense, since she is of a cohort that consists of small town beauty queens who are now a “dime a dozen” in the big City, and may be required to lower herself below some or all of her small-town girl virtues in order to raise her advantage.

The archetype for the country *ingénue* morally-refashioned by her encounter with the big City is *Sister Carrie*.¹⁴ Carrie Meeber from a rural area in Wisconsin is seduced on a train on her way to Chicago, where she is seduced again by a salesman, and runs off to New York City with yet another man who eventually despairs and commits suicide. Carrie manages to create a mildly successful stage career, but is left lonely and loveless. Unmoored from the putative solidarity of rural and small-town society, young girls were required to become facile at city ways and mores, or to be destroyed by them.

Whether the City is to be held to account for the ruthless ambition of characters such as Eve Harrington (Anne Baxter) in *All About Eve*¹⁵ or such traits are pre-existing, extraurban personality attributes is debatable. Like many other starstruck

girls from small towns, Eve is consigned to the role of understudy or chorine rather than given marquee billing. In Eve's case, she proves to have what it takes in histrionic talent and employs it effectively both on and off stage. Through obsequy and conniving, she unseats and replaces the reigning prima donna of the theater, Margo Channing (Bette Davis). In Eve's case, the hard, ruthless world of New York theater seems suited to her ruthless ways and, in the end, she is alienated even from that world. *All About Eve* is, like others of its genre, a morality play in which assimilation and alienation in the City can be confusing and even conflated.

Whatever their individual moral and social choices, the City is, nevertheless, arguably the great "liberator of women" [Clapp 1993]. One need only contrast the general status of women in predominantly agrarian and folk societies for confirmation. But it might be hypothesized as well that, as women have gained access to sundry urban employment opportunities, some women have succumbed to the blandishments and abuse of economic power and authority that were once an exclusively male privilege. Although the film is primarily a comedy, Kathleen Parker (Sigourney Weaver) in the 1988 production, *Working Girl*, is a corporate boss whose arrogant, abusive demeanor and self-indulgence beg for retribution. In this case, an urban and successful woman is cast as the heavy against a young urban woman with much more working-class status characteristics (played by Melanie Griffith). While the plot is much more about power and personality, it nevertheless blurs erstwhile sharper gender distinctions in films.¹⁶

This thesis is not intended to suggest that an urban determinism is at work that has functioned to transmogrify some women from a docile, subordinate, and submissive nature or status. But clearly the big City is an environment that seems to express its own peculiar version of that nature or nurture debate. In this respect, the differences between men and women may only be differences in the time. Certain dimensions of the urban culture may transcend those of the folk cultures that defined gender and power differently. For some, the alienation of women from their erstwhile social status may be a welcome by-product of urbanization, even if some of their behavioral repertoire might seem to ape that of their former oppressors.

THE CITY'S OWN

It is two types of urban women that give the taxi driver Travis Bickle the only purpose he seems to be able to cobble together in a life of estrangement, cynicism, and inexorable madness (Figure 4). Robert DeNiro's Bickle, an ex-marine Vietnam vet, dutiful writer of letters to his parents, has nothing but contempt for the urban bottom-feeders who compose the only social milieu to which he seems to have access. Bickle tries his luck with a beautiful, educated young woman of better social standing with whom he becomes obsessed. Betsey (Cybill Shepherd) works in the campaign office of a presidential candidate, but her requited attraction to Bickle quickly turns to repulsion at his quirkiness, especially when he takes her to a porn film.

Bickle now descends into madness, trying unsuccessfully to assassinate the presidential candidate,¹⁷ and then turns his attentions to a messianic obsession



Figure 4 Travis Bickle contemplates his place in the City. ("TAXI DRIVER" © 1976, renewed 2004 Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. All rights reserved. Courtesy of Columbia Pictures.)

with a 12-year-old prostitute, Iris Steensma (Jodie Foster), one of the fallen runaways to the City who is managed by a pimp played by Harvey Keitel. He ends up perpetrating a brutal and bloody killing spree in a flop house-brothel to free the girl and send her back to her parents. At the film's end, Bickle fades back into the underbelly of the City, a place where his alienated nature is perhaps most at home.

The New York City that director Martin Scorsese conjures is mostly a nightly world of wet streets, steaming vents, and honky-tonk, neon-lit garishness, peopled with pimps, prostitutes, hustlers, and down-and-outers. The screenwriter Paul Schrader's Travis Bickle is of that cohort of socially-alienated flotsam, but is alienated even from them. He is likely damaged from his Vietnam experience, but little is made of it. Bickle is lonely, bitter, and seemingly without social or psychological resources to keep away his demons of sleeplessness except for long hours plying the streets of the city. Only obsession, first with a pretty young woman, then with the assassination of a political candidate, and finally with the rescue of a young prostitute, seems to provide for him any sense of purpose. But so profound is his alienation that he has no socially acceptable means for resolving his obsessions.

Travis Bickle is perhaps the most extremely alienated of urbanites, an urban archetype, who, when we encounter him on the screen or in the streets, seems suspended somewhere between our pity and our revulsion. Not like the country girl or the bumpkin who has come from elsewhere, or the cowboys who come in search of women, or even King Kong and other of nature's monstrosities dragged

there for the City's amusement, Bickle is *of* the City, with seemingly no place to go back to if he could.

"Are you talking to *me*?" has made its way into movie lore alongside "I coulda been a contenda" and "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn," the words of other alienated males. Even non-movie buffs are able to identify its cinematic provenance. But fewer recall the line that followed it, a line with, in this writer's opinion, more signification and power.

"Well, I'm the only one here," Bickle says to the camera.

In New York City, America's biggest, most dense, most heterogeneous, most populous city, the sense of being alone, alienated, estranged, and inclining towards madness, is more potent and incontestable than in perhaps any other American urban place. It is a theme that moviemakers will continue to find irresistible, and a condition that some urbanites will doubtless continue to find unavoidable.

NOTES

1. Having improved the process for making two-foot models look like giant apes RKO reprised the theme in 1949 with *Mighty Joe Young*. This time the beast's weakness is for actress Terry Moore and the relationship closer to that of Lassie than Kong's ardor. Kong turns up again in the Dino DiLaurentis remake with blonde Jessica Lang as the object of his desires. So far the only blonde to go *chasing* apes was in *Gorillas in the Mist* [1988] the story of the primatologist and ill-fated gorilla activist, Diane Fossey, which the film critic Pauline Kael called a "...feminist version of King Kong."
2. The visitors to the City are typically but not always outsized animals. In 1942, a *Tarzan* film plot brought the "lord of the jungle" to the jungle of the big city—in this case, as is often the case, to New York City.
3. This is a message that has been sounded in literature from the Bible to the present day. See Marx 1964 and Clapp 1978.
4. Several of these images are reproduced in Jeffry 1977. While it is not insignificant that these images are also a reflection of the social breakdown in Germany prior to WWI, the prominent use of urban images and social types reflects strong antiurban sentiments.
5. Consider the unending debate over free speech, flag-burning, and pornography, as prime examples of this feature of urban society.
6. It should not go unnoted that the T-Rex of the *Jurassic Park* sequel, *The Lost World*, was brought to San Diego, California, to give that city a good thrashing, or that most of the *Godzilla* films make a wasteland of Tokyo, Japan's equivalent of NYC. Moreover, the occasional small town provides a suitable setting for the vengeance of Nature, as in *Jaws* and its sequels. It should also be recognized that Nature's heavyweights never come out on top against the big City, or even the small town. If, as they often are, they are created by urban technology (radioactivity being the prime culprit), then they are usually dispatched with the same technological superiority of the City.
7. Idyllic urban films (at least those set in New York, such as *Top Hat*, *On the Town*, *Barefoot in the Park*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, and *The Out of Towners*, among others) always seem "stagey." Perhaps because many such films are musicals and comedies, the typical menagerie of the City is cast more in the form of the chorus and props than as drivers of plot.
8. As early as 1866 the Englishman Charles Dilke felt it appropriate in a description of his visit to New York to record the joke that, "Every New Yorker has come a good half-hour

late into the world and is trying all his life to make it up." Over a century later, according to the comedian Jackie Mason, the frantic pace of New Yorkers has not abated: "They look like they're being chased or trying to catch somebody. People never walk slowly, even if they have no place to go. There's nothing more pathetic to a New Yorker than somebody who doesn't look busy" [Clapp 1994].

9. Examine, in particular, the paintings of Edward Hopper, with their solitary urbanites posed in the stark urban void like so many insects encased in amber. Also, Donald B. Kuspit, writing about modern painting in New York City, states that: "The way the city allows isolation, as a choice—as a village would not, with its demands of communal participation and conformity—is also a confirmation, however ironic, of its belief in individuality. The much-lamented loneliness of the city is as much a symbol of its opportunity as of its oppression" [Kuspit 1977].
10. New York also affords settings ranging from some of the highest buildings in the world to subway netherworlds deep beneath the streets of the city. A notable example, relevant to the theme of this paper, is *The Taking of Pelham 123* [1974], about the hijacking of a New York subway train for a million-dollar ransom. The "city beneath the city" is also employed to an almost Dante-esque effect in *Mimic* [1997], in which a plague of giant genetically-altered insects inhabit the netherworld of the subway and prey upon humans, again employing the well-trod theme of urban-based technology turning Nature towards unexpected bad results.
11. It is significant that Murnau used panchromatic negative film, developed for color photography in the early 1920s, in shooting this black and white film, which along with incandescent tungsten lighting enhanced the psychological moods of the film with more dramatically rich *chiaroscuro*.
12. It should also be noted that what appears as the latter film's outright plagiarism of plot elements and visuals from *Midnight Cowboy* is difficult to miss. Consider the obvious similarities of the scenes in both films dealing with the "cowboy" walking down a long-lens compressed view of Fifth Avenue, the scenes with transvestites, and the Art Party scene.
13. DePalma's film did not receive the positive critical acclaim received by Tom Wolfe's book, on which the movie is based. It is also worth reading Wolfe's essay about writing the "new" social novel and about the City [Wolfe 1989].
14. Theodore Dreiser's classic novel [1900] was filmed by Paramount Pictures in 1952 simply as *Carrie* with Jennifer Jones in the title role (directed by William Wyler). Not to be confused with Stephen King's horror *Carrie*, the 1976 film directed by Brian DePalma, which has a relevant, if somewhat attenuated connection to the present theme.
15. 1950, 20th Century Fox. The picture won six academy awards. It may take something as thin on plot and upbeat as a musical to counter the theme of the ruthless understudy. In *42nd Street* [1933] a small town girl, Peggy Sawyer (Ruby Keeler), is actually the heroine, saving the Broadway show from having to close because of an injury to its star.
16. *Working Girl* might be contrasted with the earlier film, *9 to 5* [1980], also a rather simple-minded comedy, but one in which the antagonist is a corporate male. Compare also the female leads in *The Apartment* [1960] played by Shirley Maclaine, and *Desk Set* [1957], played by Katherine Hepburn.
17. There was an ironic connection between film and reality in this scene. On March 30, 1981, five years after the release of *Taxi Driver*, a 25-year-old drifter named John W. Hinckley, Jr., shot and seriously wounded the President. Hinckley was no replica of Travis Bickle, but he was, before the assassination attempt and in prison to this day, obsessed with the actress Jodie Foster.

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9 to 5 110 minutes/color	20th Century Fox	1980	Colin Higgins
All About Eve 138 minutes/B&W	20th Century Fox	1950	Joseph L. Mankiewicz
The Apartment 125 minutes/B&W	The Mirisch Corporation	1960	Billy Wilder
Bonfire of the Vanities 125 minutes/color	Warner Bros.	1990	Brian De Palma
Blade Runner 117 minutes/color	The Ladd Co.	1982	Ridley Scott
Carrie 118 minutes/B&W	Paramount	1952	William Wyler
Crocodile Dundee 98 minutes/color	Paramount/Rimfire	1986	Peter Faiman
The Crowd 104 minutes/B&W	MGM	1928	King Vidor
Dead End 93 minutes/B&W	Samuel Goldwyn Co.	1937	William Wyler
Godzilla 140 minutes/color	TriStar	1998	Roland Emmerich
Jaws 124 minutes/color	Universal	1978	Steven Spielberg
Jurassic Park 126 minutes/color	Universal	1993	Steven Spielberg
King Kong 100 minutes/B&W	RKO Pictures	1933	Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack
The Lost World: The Jurassic Park 129 minutes/color	Universal/Amonn	1997	Steven Spiellberg
Manhatta Silent/B&W		1921	Sheeler and Strand
Metropolis 153 minutes B&W/Silent	Universum Film	1926	Fritz Lang
Midnight Cowboy 113 minutes/B&W	Florin Productions	1968	John Schlesinger
Mimic 105 minutes/color	Miramax	1997	Guillermo del Toro
Modern Times 87 minutes/B&W	Chaplin Productions/ United Artits	1936	Charles Chaplin
Sunrise 95 minutes/B&W/Silent	Fox Film Corp.	1927	F.W. Murnau
The Taking of Pelham 1-2-3 104 minutes/color	Palladium Productions	1974	Joseph Sargent
Taxi Driver 113 minutes/color	Columbia	1976	Martin Scorsese

(Continued)

FILMOGRAPHY (Continued)

<i>A Thousand Clowns</i> 118 minutes/B&W	United Artists	1965	Fred Coe
<i>THX 1138</i> 95 minutes/color	Warner Bros/Zoetrope	1971	George Lucas
<i>We</i> 100 minutes/B&W/Silent		1924	Yevgeny Zamyatin
<i>Working Girl</i> 109 minutes/color	20th Century Fox	1988	Mike Nichols
<i>Youngblood Hawke</i> 137 minutes/B&W	Warner Bros.	1964	Delmer Daves