

MIT Student

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Culture within the Modern City

What role does the modern city play in facilitating cultural exchange? With the increase of globalization, cities have become destinations for tourists and immigrants alike, collisions of people from different countries with different languages. From an optimistic point of view, the modern city must therefore pioneer cultural exchange as a beacon of cultural diversity. The tale told by *West Side Story* of two lovers that come together despite serious clashes between their respective clans holds within it such a promise. And yet the portrayal of the modern city a few years later in *Playtime* and the projection of the future city in *Blade Runner* show pessimistic undertones. Within the former, director Jacques Tati criticizes the modern city as a sterile environment void of culture and cultural exchange, through which tourists pass without interacting with one another. In the latter, futuristic Los Angeles sharply contrasts the Paris of *Playtime* with its melting pot of architectural styles and languages, but is still characterized by a distinct lack of meaningful exchanges between people of different ethnicities. Thus both *Playtime* and *Blade Runner* deny the hopeful future posed at the end of *West Side Story* and assert that the globalized city has little potential for bridging boundaries and facilitating dialogue among different cultures.

Despite its focus on the violent tensions between Puerto Ricans and Americans, *West Side Story* defends an optimistic view of the city as a place for resolving these tensions. Tony and Maria fall in love at first sight, which is based purely on the proximity in which New York City has forced their gangs to live and school together. Thus the existence of their romance depends on the city and suggests the ability of

the city to bring together unlikely pairings through its equalizing nature. The reactions that people have toward Tony and Maria's romance also demonstrate a willingness of city dwellers to accept change. Although their love is forbidden and condemned by Bernardo, Anita's tentative acceptance represents the potential of Tony and Maria's romance to successfully challenge and overturn the racial discrimination among their respective gangs. When she first catches Tony walking into the dress shop (1h:28m¹), she shows heavy disapproval, but after Tony politely says, "Buenos noches," she replies, "it's too early for noches; buenos tardes," symbolizing a choice she makes to engage with him in a meaningful albeit simple cultural exchange. The final scene after Tony's death (2h:27m) also epitomizes the city's potential to overcome boundaries. When three Jets begin to carry Tony away, two Sharks also step forward to catch Tony's head and share the burden—not just of Tony's body but also of the consequences of their baseless hatred and the promise of a future harmony. Thus the movie ends with a glimmer of hope for the city as a melting pot that overcomes barriers and resolves tensions through making people from different cultures realize their fundamental similarities.

In sharp contrast, *Playtime* portrays the modern city as a sterile, cookie-cutter environment that neither retains remnants of its own cultural history nor fosters cross-cultural interactions. At first glance, Paris seems to be a global city. In the airport and expo scenes, a map shows connecting lines from cities around the world to Paris and tourists groups and exhibitors speaking all different language move together through the space. These observations, however, do not hold under closer examination. Paris could be any city, with its glass façades and rigid designs, and all the destinations delineated on the map look just as generic in posters lining the airport walls. Similarly, tourists groups pass each other without interacting and pass through the city without engaging in its culture. The American tour group quickly shuffles by the "real" Paris—glass reflections of Paris' iconic landmarks and the woman who sells flowers—to view the products and technologies that they discover at the expo. But these exhibits do not

¹ Note: all time stamps were based on online versions; not 100% sure if they correspond with the DVD versions.

embody any of Paris' actual culture or history, and as a result, the group learns nothing substantive about the heart and soul of Paris. Only at the Royal Garden, after the architecture breaks down do people finally begin to engage in meaningful cross-cultural exchanges, such as when a French woman teaches Barbara the chords for a classic French song and everyone joins in to sing together. The progression suggests that only through the rejection of the modern city can cultural dialogue truly begin. Thus the modern city is actually an obstacle to fostering cultural exchange in the first place.

Blade Runner poses a completely different image of the modern city than *Playtime*, yet still asserts its inability to create meaningful cultural interactions. Again, at a surface-level, futuristic Los Angeles epitomizes the idea of a melting pot with its eclectic mix of architectural styles and its language "cityspeak," which combines a mix of languages including English, Chinese, French, and Spanish. In one of the earliest scenes (0h:8m), however, Rick Deckard struggles to communicate his order with the Japanese man behind the counter. In addition, Deckard says in a voiceover that all good cops know cityspeak, suggesting that not everyone in the city does. As the movie continues to reveal more of the cityscape, it becomes clear that the different ethnicities within the city are not actually integrated. Instead, all the non-American immigrants are clustered within Chinatown-like regions of the city, selling exoticized foods, items, and services from their own cultures. Moreover, these regions appear to be more makeshift and crowded (0h:46m) than other parts of the cityscape; peddlers occupy stalls with shabby roofs that are cramped together to allow very little walking space. Coupled with J.F. Sebastian's comment that "there is no housing shortage around here," (0h:39m:50s) the state of the immigrant regions suggests that they are still second class citizens. This lack of social and cultural integration juxtaposed by the linguistic and architectural integration provides a jarring prediction that the modern city will never successfully remove its cultural barriers and develop cohesion but rather remain only superficially diversified.

Through the rise of globalization, cities have become centers of diversity, attracting tourists and new residents from around the world with the promise of an exciting urban life. *West Side Story*, *Playtime*, and *Blade Runner* each explore the consequences of such cultural collision through different lenses. Whereas *West Side Story* portrays the city as a place where racial tensions have the possibility of resolving, *Playtime* and *Blade Runner* demonstrate in their own ways the limited cultural exchange and integration that modern cities actually achieve. Despite their contradictory conclusions and portrayals, however, all three films still share a dependency on the city as the chosen setting for each of their stories. This simple fact conveys the subtle message that despite their flaws and limitations, cities are still the only places where any type of commonplace cultural collision is even imaginable.

Epilogue

Article: <http://www.citylab.com/housing/2015/04/in-gentrifying-neighborhoods-diversity-can-be-decorative/390390/>

When I searched cultural diversity within cities in Google News, the first thing that came up was a story from the *Atlantic* called “In Gentrifying Neighborhoods, ‘Diversity’ can be Decorative,” tagline: “Often, it’s more a selling point than a social reality.” In the article, reporter Tanvi Misra argues that gentrifying neighborhoods have seemingly become centers of racial integration in recent years, but a more critical analysis of the situation shows that this “cultural diversity has become more of a decorative feature instead of a social ideal.” This article relates directly to the questions that I raise in my paper about the true depth of cultural integration within cities. In *Blade Runner* the city boasted a very diverse racial population and integrated language but still showed evidence of a discrepancy in the standard of living among different ethnicities. Similarly, the article criticizes the superficiality of the

“cultural diversity” label placed on neighborhoods that seem to embody the phrase and asks whether it really “signals equality for all residents.”

I was genuinely surprised when I found this article because when I first began taking this course, I held the perception of cities as cultural centers that advanced issues of race through overcoming ethnic barriers. But after carefully analyzing *Playtime* and *Blade Runner*, I developed a much deeper appreciation for the complexity of race, ethnicity, and culture issues within the city. The news article that I found reaffirms that these issues are present not just within film but also in real life, and in designing cities to foster more cultural exchange, urban planners need to recognize the subtle difference between superficial diversity and deeply-rooted equality and integration.

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