

MIT Student

11.139, Spring 2015

Film Notes: *West Side Story*

The directors of the film are Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins. The film was released in 1961 and takes place in the mid-1950s. It was set and shot in the West Side of New York City.

Five adjectives or phrases to describe the sense of the city portrayed in the film: rectangular, towering, forgotten and neglected as very few people other than the film's main characters appear, gray and drab in comparison to the blue/yellow and red/purple worn by the Jets and Sharks, respectively. It is the human elements (graffiti, clothing hanging from clothes lines, cars) that color the city and infuses it with visual interest rather than any distinct personality of the city itself. In general, I felt that because the film was a musical, it lent to the sense of the city being partitioned into large "sets" for the musical numbers. Everything was locked down and rectangular with the dancers on the streets in front of very tall brick buildings, or on large abandoned lots or in abandoned warehouses.

Two remarkable scenes are the musical number "Gee Officer Krupke," which uses humor to cleverly outline the issues of the systematic social neglect of "problematic" youths, and the musical number "America" which catchily and pithily outlines the immigrant struggle of the Puerto Ricans and the racism they experience on a day-to-day basis. Both songs deal with issues that are considered a result of an urban environment but are addressed in a way we hadn't seen yet in film.

Two questions I have are: would the tone of the film have changed if there were more extras present in the film to give NYC more of a sense of a lived-in city? Would the story (not *Romeo & Juliet*, but the actual musical version of *West Side Story*) have worked if it had taken place in any other city?

One parallel with another film we have seen is *Bicycle Thieves*. Both films use the vastness of the city to portray how larger social institutions have failed individuals or marginalized groups. Though De Sica constantly engulfs Ricci in large crowds, there are also moments where it's just Ricci and Bruno meandering along streets, walking past towering buildings, and they are alone in the camera frame. Similarly, the characters in *West Side Story* are also unnaturally isolated given the size of the city and the population that inhabits it.

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11.139 / 11.239 The City in Film  
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