

# Advanced English: The city on screen: exploring urban identities in American films

Claire Caddeo

Academic year 2025-2026 - **Language Department** - Autumn semester.

**This course is meant for students of the advanced C1 and C2 levels. Theme-based language classes aim at developing written and oral skills through the study of a specific topic.**

## Course Objectives

This is a 12-week course that introduces students to how film directors represent American cities on screen.

The main objectives of this course are:

- Introducing students to film analysis and criticism (both oral and written)
- Expanding the students' knowledge of American movies and cities.

## Course Description

American cities have long served as literal and symbolic backdrops in American films, reflecting shifting cultural values, social conditions, and cinematic trends. This course will examine how directors represent urban environments on screen and the political commentary these portrayals often carry. Truly capturing the complexity of cities such as Los Angeles, New York, or Chicago in a single film is nearly impossible. By analyzing what aspects of city life are highlighted, and what is deliberately omitted, we will discuss the social and political commentaries embedded in these narratives. We will also explore how a city's geography and infrastructure become essential elements of the plot.

We will mainly focus on Los Angeles, a city that resists representation. How could a film director represent such a sprawling city, that lacks a single, dominant center? Since 1930, Los Angeles has appeared in over 700 films, including almost 250 feature films since the 2000s. It combines a massive presence in cinema with an elusive aspect. Very few films offer a realistic image of Los Angeles: most films use it merely as a backdrop and do not attempt to capture its atmosphere and the diversity of its neighborhoods. L.A. is less recognizable and photogenic than New York, and it functions as a cinematic "non-place," a "nowhere city,"<sup>1</sup> which allows for myth-making and unrealistic depictions.

Nevertheless, some directors have offered alternative visions of L.A., providing social and political commentary on a city that is too often reduced to Hollywood. We will analyze scenes from those specific films and see how they challenge our usual view of L.A.

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<sup>1</sup> Alison Lurie - The Nowhere City, 2016

We will also broaden our scope to include depictions of small-town America and the suburbs. We will analyze how science fiction films depict imaginary spaces. Finally, we will consider how cinema reshapes the geography of a city, from the influence of the studio system to the rise of film-related tourism.

Here are a few themes that will be discussed:

- **Los Angeles** and the nightmarish Hollywood (David Lynch)
- The **neo-noir** city in crime films (Martin Scorsese, Michael Mann)
- **Small-town America** and the **suburbs** in horror films (*The Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Halloween*)
- **Blaxploitation**: examining how directors like John Singleton (*Boyz n the Hood*) and Spike Lee depict urban struggles and systemic oppression
- **Utopia and dystopia**: exploring futuristic or alternate urban landscapes (*Blade Runner*, *The Matrix*)
- **Dark alternatives** to Chicago and New York: the Dark Knight Trilogy
- Cities on the verge of **destruction**: comparing disaster and action films before and after 9/11, to see how depictions of urban cataclysm have changed.

Students will be given a film syllabus and are expected to watch movies from home to foster class discussion and give them arguments for their final essay.

## Organization

**Prior knowledge of American films is not required for this course.**

Activities will cover the four language skills:

- Speaking: film presentation and participation in class discussion
- Writing: film reviews, article synthesis, and final essay
- Listening: understanding scenes taken from the syllabus and video essays
- Reading: most of the reading will be done at home to prepare for class discussion.