

MIT Student
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Film Notes: *Berlin*

1. The director of *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* is Walther Ruttmann.
2. The film was released in 1927, and was set in that time.
3. The city the film is set in is Berlin, and was shot on location.
4. Five adjectives or phrases to describe the sense of the city portrayed in the film: alive, as though it bears witness to the lives of the people who interact with it, finding order within the chaos of city life, tactile, sentimental, surreal.
5. It is difficult to pinpoint one particular scene that is more remarkable than another, especially since the narrative of the film is structured into five acts that more or less resemble what the city looks like as it transitions from dawn until night. I thought the fourth act was the most interesting, and included the most shots that were shown in such a way that left me confused and unsettled. It was the only portion of the film that I thought the director deliberately wanted to expose the “seedy underbelly” of Berlin, with intercuts between lions eating and dogs fighting with people eating and the newspaper headlines flashing at the screen. I think what the director is implying with this act is that cities are unique in that they bring together a wide variety of people from different backgrounds who must depend and compete with each other in a way, and despite the industrialization of society (or because of it), people’s behaviors can still be barbaric.
6. Do you think the director wanted to give an unambiguous impression of the city, especially given the film’s ending (of fireworks)? What do the motifs of opening and closing doors and windows accomplish other than as transitions between the scenes in the film? Do you think the director wanted to make this “symphony” about Berlin in particular, or about cities in general, given that he did not focus on specific notable monuments or buildings?
7. This film reminded me of a lot of the late 1960s musicals, particularly the beginning of *Hello, Dolly!* where the incoming train gradually “animates” New York City and Barbra Streisand sings the film’s opening song. Like *Berlin*, the opening shots focus on the minutiae of city life (various people’s feet as they walk past each other and go about their own business). It also really shows Dolly integrating herself into other people’s personal lives in a similar way to Ruttmann’s camera in *Berlin*, catching people in intimate moments as they navigate through the intricacies of city life.

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