



## A STUDY OF EUROPEAN METROPOLISES IN URBAN SYMPHONIES

VÍCTOR MANUEL BARBERA HERNÁNDEZ<sup>1</sup>, ALMA LLERENA FERNÁNDEZ<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rey Juan Carlos University, España

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### KEYWORDS

*Experimental cinema*  
*Avant-garde cinema*  
*Film space*  
*Chronotope*  
*Urban identity*  
*Representation of the city*  
*Urban topology*

### ABSTRACT

*Urban symphonies, a film subgenre that emerged in the 1920s, combine artistic experimentation with documentary to poetically represent life in the city. These films are characterised by portraying the urban dynamism, spaces and daily routines of the cities of the time. The present study focuses on the representation of European metropolises in the 1920s, employing a proprietary methodology that analyses the city as an autonomous filmic space. The study is divided into two phases: a content analysis of four representative works of the subgenre, followed by a filmic textual analysis. Each film constructs a unique urban identity based on the geographical and social characteristics of its city, avoiding iconic monuments and focusing on everyday space. The development of a narrative is evident in these works, with the course of a day and urban routines creating a specific chronotope that structures the cinematic narrative.*

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## 1. Introduction

Urban symphonies, also referred to as city symphonies, emerged within the avant-garde cultural and intellectual movements of the early 20th century, coinciding with the modernisation and transformation of the urban landscape of Western metropolises. This period also saw the emergence of new means of communication that facilitated greater speed, such as trains, cars and aeroplanes, while simultaneously fostering immediacy and proximity through technologies such as the telephone and radio (Sánchez Vidal, 1997). Within this context, cinema emerges as a novel technical medium, capable of capturing and reflecting these prevailing trends.

This type of audiovisual work constitutes a subgenre of filmmaking that emerged in the 1920s, fusing the artistic experimentation characteristic of the avant-garde and documentary movements with the poetic and visual representation of urban life. These films are distinguished by an effort to capture the dynamism, spaces and routines of the cities of this period. The notion of employing the camera as a tool for documenting reality has been a fundamental aspect of cinema since its inception, with the city often serving as a pivotal subject in this endeavor (Carrera and Talens, 2018; Kracauer, 2019). The rapidly expanding European metropolises emerged as symbols of modernity, embodying the integration of technology, industry, transportation networks, and bustling crowds, captivating the artists and filmmakers of that era. The format of the urban symphonies, aligned with the aesthetic concerns of the avant-garde movements of the time, sought to represent this change experienced by European cities in the modern age.

Urban symphonies do not utilise acting performance, careful staging or a script; rather, they seek to record the facts as they are, prioritising montage and its technical possibilities, following the theories of Dziga Vertov. These films are structured according to a predefined syntactic scheme. This approach to the cinematic portrayal of urban environments imbues these audio-visual compositions with a profound visual dynamism, endowing them with the capacity to capture reality, and enabling the creation of a distinct urban topography (Sánchez Vidal, 1997).

City symphonies, therefore, utilise the articulation of the real space of the metropolis to create a cinematic space of their own, working with the filmic space to construct their own filmic space, without the need to be faithful to their referent (Sancho Rodríguez, 2012, Gómez and Urbizu, 2021).

According to Lorente Bilbao (2003), Burch (2004), Sánchez Biosca (2007) and Sancho Rodríguez (2012), the most significant cinematographic works framed within the urban symphonies movement are the following:

- *Manhattan (Manhattan, 1921)* by Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler.
- *Paris Asleep (Paris qui Dort, 1923)* by René Clair.
- *Ballet Mécanique (Ballet Mécanique, 1925)* by Fernand Léger.
- *Nothing But Time (Rien que les heures, 1926)* by Alberto Cavalcanti.
- *Twenty-Four Dollar Island (Twenty-Four Dollar Island, 1927)* by Robert J. Flaherty.
- *Emak-Bakia (Emak Bakia, 1927)* by Man Ray.
- *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis (Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt, 1927)* by Walther Ruttmann.
- *H2O (H2O, 1929)* by Ralph Steiner.
- *Man with a Movie Camera (Chelovek s kinoapparatom, 1929)* by Dziga Vertov.
- *Autumn Fire (Autumn Fire, 1929)* by Herman G. Weinberg.
- *The Bridge (De Brug, 1928)* and *Rain (Regen, 1929)* by Mannus Franken and Joris Ivens.
- *À Propos de Nice (À Propos de Nice, 1930)* by Jean Vigo.
- *Labour on the Douro River (Douro, faina fluvial, 1930)* by Manoel de Oliveira.
- *A Bronx Morning (A Bronx Morning, 1931)* by Jay Leyda.

In the context of research centred on urban symphonies, studies that prioritise rhythm emerge as notable contributions. A seminal example is the research conducted by Lorente Bilbao (2003), who analyses urban symphonies through the lens of musical metaphor or optical symphony. Other thematic aspects, such as time, are addressed in works such as the study by Cuvardic García (2012). Furthermore, studies that focus on the image of the city as a European metropolis in the 1920s tend to adopt a fictional approach rather than a documentary one, as evidenced by the work of Lus Arana (2020). Alternatively, they may concentrate on individual films, as highlighted by Sancho Rodríguez (2012), resulting in a deficiency of global perspective. Conversely, other research, such as Manuel et al. (2022), or Martínez

Puche and Castro (2022), propose methodologies that explore the relationship between city and audiovisual, but from a contemporary perspective.

The relevance of this research lies in its specific study of the representation of the European metropolis during the 1920s, approached through the subgenre of city symphonies. By developing its own methodology and an analytical model focused on the city as an autonomous cinematic space, this study provides a unique understanding of the particular topology these films project onto the cities they represent. This approach also opens up new possibilities for applying the methodology to works centred on other continents or geographical contexts, which form part of the global corpus of urban symphonies.

## 2. Objectives

Taking into account the proposed conceptual framework and the fact that our object of study is the representation of the European metropolis in city symphonies, we proposed to investigate the cinematographic techniques predominant in this type of film work and how they contribute to the construction of a visual topology of the city. In addition, we focused the analysis on the modes of representation of urban life and the underlying narratives conveyed in this type of audiovisual work. To this end, we posed the following research questions:

- How is urban life represented in city symphony documentaries?
- Which specific elements of urban life, such as spaces, transport, daily rhythms or social interaction, are emphasised and how are they visually represented?
- Which cinematic techniques are predominant in city symphonies and how do they contribute to the visual construction of the city?
- What underlying narratives about the city are conveyed through the images and structures of city symphony documentaries?

## 3. Methodology

The methodological proposal for the study of the representation of the European metropolis in city symphonies necessitated an approach that would facilitate the breakdown and analysis of different aspects of these films, thereby enabling the acquisition of a comprehensive perspective on their formal, thematic and stylistic characteristics. To this end, a sequential mixed methodology was proposed in two phases. In the first phase, a content analysis of the four most representative works of the city symphonies subgenre was conducted, followed by a filmic textual analysis in the second phase.

This sequential approach facilitated a holistic perspective, wherein the initial phase provided a quantitative empirical basis for the recurrent elements in the films, while the subsequent phase enabled a more profound qualitative exploration of how these elements contribute to the aesthetic experience and meaning of the works, in terms of mapping out a topology of European cities from this period. The targeted sample was meticulously selected, in alignment with a European spatial framework, and comprised the following four pieces, which are representative of the object of study:

- Cavalcanti (1926), with a runtime of 45 minutes. City: Paris.
- Ruttmann (1927), with a runtime of 62 minutes. City: Berlin.
- Franken and Ivens (1929), with a runtime of 14 minutes. City: Amsterdam.
- Vigo (1930), with a runtime of 25 minutes. City: Nice.

The pieces excluded from the exhibition were left out for the following reasons: they did not fall within the European spatial framework (Strand y Sheeler, 1921; Flaherty, 1927; Herman y Weinberg, 1929; Steiner, 1929; Vertov, 1929; Leyda, 1931); they were less representative of our subject of study as they focused on themes not exclusively related to the city (Franken and Ivens, 1928; De Oliveira, 1930); they portrayed the city itself (Clair, 1923); or they belonged to the surrealist avant-garde cinema, which was more concerned with experimenting with technique and the dreamlike expression of movement than with capturing the city (Léger, 1925, Ray, 1927).

The present study was approached by means of Deleuze's (2018) film theories on the manipulation of filmic time and movement to construct complex spatial narratives, as well as Bordwell et al. (2020) approach to examining narrative structure and montage in film as a way of organising cinematic space and time. Consequently, the content analysis focused on identifying specific elements surrounding three recurring tropes in film studies: time, space and movement.

The purpose of this initial phase of the study was to identify and quantify recurring patterns related to the representation of the city and its constituent elements, as well as the embodiment of temporal rhythms and social dynamics present in the themes of urban symphonies. This methodological approach enabled the establishment of the manner in which urban symphonies construct their visual and thematic discourses.

Following a comprehensive review of the four films, the analysis focused on specific sequences where the city was present. These sequences were then coded using a series of variables and categories, which were divided into the three proposed groups: space, time and movement. The data were then measured using a Likert scale: never, occasionally, frequently and very frequently. An emergent variable, designated 'Types of spaces', was also included in the study, as it had not been previously categorised. This was studied on the basis of content analysis. The analysis model applied is illustrated in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Analysis model

| <b>Group</b>                   | <b>Variable</b>             | <b>Category</b>                    |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>Treatment of time</b>       | Order                       | Linear                             |
|                                |                             | Circular                           |
|                                |                             | Cyclical                           |
|                                |                             | Anachronistic                      |
|                                |                             | Investment                         |
|                                | Duration                    | Normal                             |
|                                |                             | Accelerated                        |
|                                |                             | Ellipsis                           |
|                                |                             | Slow motion                        |
|                                |                             | Freeze frame                       |
|                                | Frequency                   | Singularity                        |
|                                |                             | Multiple singularity               |
|                                |                             | Repetition                         |
|                                |                             | Iteration                          |
|                                |                             |                                    |
| <b>Treatment of space</b>      | Types of spaces             | Trails                             |
|                                |                             | Transport                          |
|                                |                             | Industrialists                     |
|                                |                             | Inhabited                          |
|                                |                             | Commercial                         |
|                                |                             | Monumental and architectural       |
|                                |                             | Natural                            |
|                                |                             | Immersive position in space        |
|                                |                             | Distant observational position     |
|                                |                             | At ground level                    |
|                                | Camera positioning in space | High                               |
|                                |                             | Fixed with depth of field          |
|                                |                             | From inside another space          |
|                                |                             | From a confined space              |
|                                |                             | Position embodying the environment |
| Spatial density                | High spatial density        |                                    |
|                                | Low spatial density         |                                    |
| Verticality of camera position | Chopping                    |                                    |
|                                | Neutral                     |                                    |
|                                | Counterpoint                |                                    |
| Field scale                    | Very long field             |                                    |
|                                | Long field                  |                                    |
|                                | Medium field                |                                    |
| <b>Mobility treatment</b>      | Image mobility              | Total                              |
|                                |                             | Film movement                      |
|                                |                             | Effective camera movement          |

|                    |                           |
|--------------------|---------------------------|
|                    | Still image               |
|                    | Dynamic descriptive space |
|                    | Dynamic expressive space  |
| Movement and space | Mobile static space       |
|                    | Fixed static space        |

Source: Own elaboration (2024)

Following the coding of the elements, an interpretation of the data was conducted, which facilitated the identification of common patterns and stylistic divergences in the representation of the city. This process provided an initial overview of the object of study.

With regard to the variable *Order*, it was observed in the pieces whether the syntactic structure followed a linear order, where the beginning and end of the piece are identical; a circular order, where the beginning and end of the piece are similar but not identical; an anachronistic order, if it does not follow any pattern or temporal order; or an inverse order, where time goes backwards.

In relation to the variable *Duration* of the recorded action, the following categories were analysed: normal, accelerated, ellipsis (where parts of the action are suppressed), slow motion and freeze frame.

In relation to the variable *Frequency* of the recorded action, the following categories were examined: singularity, where the action is shown only once; multiple singularity, where the action occurs only once but may involve several elements that share common characteristics, such as people walking; repetition, where an action is reproduced more than once without significant variations; and iteration, where a process is repeated with small variations without implying accuracy.

In the section addressing the variable *Types of spaces*, the categories of travelled, transport, industrial, inhabited, commercial, monumental and architectural and natural spaces were reviewed in the pieces.

With regard to the variable *Positioning of the camera in space*, the following observations were made: firstly, whether the position was immersive, where the camera's presence was perceptible and close to the referent; secondly, whether the position was distant observational, where a position was adopted that was alien to the action and far from the referent; thirdly, whether it was at ground level; and fourthly, whether it was an elevated position. Whether it was fixed with a wide depth of field showing simultaneously different planes of the urban space. Whether it was from inside another space, such as inside a building or vehicle. Whether it was from a confined space, such as alleys, tunnels or narrow spaces. Whether the position embodied the environment, where the camera is fully integrated into the urban environment as if it were part of the physical space and the action.

Regarding the variable *Spatial density*, it was analysed whether the urban images showed a high or low spatial density, depending on whether many or few actions were taking place simultaneously in the recorded space of the image. With regard to the variable *Verticality of camera position*, the categories of high angle, neutral, and low angle were coded.

Regarding the variable *Shot scale*, and based on the framework outlined by Casetti and Di Chio (2017), observations were made to determine whether the amount of space represented in the image and the distance to the subjects corresponded to an extreme long shot, where the view encompasses an entire environment, and the subjects are barely recognisable; a long shot, which captures a complete environment while keeping the subjects recognisable; a medium shot, where the focus is on the action and the environment is relegated to the background; or a full shot, which is more specific than a medium shot and where the action is fully captured, including camera tracking.

Regarding the variable *Image mobility*, the analysis focused on whether movement in the image was shown through the cinematic, specifically the movement occurring during the recording of the profilmic scene, through effective camera movements, or whether the image remained static.

Finally, concerning the variable *Movement and space*, and also drawing on the framework outlined by Casetti and Di Chio (2017), the study examined the following categories: descriptive dynamic space, where both the camera and the recorded subjects move; expressive dynamic space, where the camera moves but the subjects remain static; mobile static space, where the camera remains fixed but the subjects move; and fixed static space, where both the camera and the subjects remain static.

The second phase of the applied methodology, the textual analysis, concentrated on studying the films as cohesive, structural wholes that confer meaning to the communicative act, as well as conducting an intertextual analysis of the films within the sample. This phase focused on identifying common

patterns and stylistic divergences that emerged from the coding of elements and data interpretation undertaken in the first phase. These patterns were holistically interpreted in relation to their integration within the narrative and aesthetic construction of each work, aiming to understand how these previously analysed cinematic components contribute to meaning-making and the depiction of the cities' topologies.

The aim of this second stage of our research was, therefore, to examine the cinematographic mechanisms employed by the authors of the analysed pieces to construct a representation of urban life. Particular attention was given to the narrative structure, recurring symbols or themes, the editing style and its influence on rhythm and tension, the movement and positioning of the camera to create atmospheres, and the ways in which social, political, or cultural themes and identities are addressed, constructed, and represented.

#### 4. Results on the content and textual analysis

Regarding the treatment of time and the order in the communicative construction of the analysed pieces, we observed a predominance of a linear structure, where the narrative time corresponds to the passage of an entire day. The exception to this trend is Vigo (1930), which adopts an anachronistic syntactic construction.

Concerning the duration of the actions shown, all the works predominantly feature a normal speed representation, with few instances of accelerated or slowed-down manipulations of actions. In terms of the frequency of actions, singularity is a recurring feature, where actions or spaces are presented only once, alongside multiple singularity, exemplified by sequences of people walking or cars driving.

However, in Cavalcanti (1926) and Franken and Ivens (1929), there is also a recurrent use of iteration, with repeated shots of elements such as rooftops, balconies, chimneys, or the city's reflection in puddles of rain.

Regarding the treatment of space, it is important to highlight the frequent combination of the camera positioned at ground level and close to the action or filmed subject, except in Ruttmann (1927) and Franken and Ivens (1929), where the representation of the city is complemented by elevated shots, distanced from the action or subject. In Cavalcanti (1926), although elevated positions are not commonly used, they do alternate with distant framings of the subject, likely reflecting a more narrative and detached approach to the recorded urban space.

Similarly, all the analysed pieces share a neutral depiction of the city, including medium or long shots that allow observation of both the action and the characters in relation to their surroundings—this characteristic being a reflection of the technical limitations of filmmaking at the time. The exception to this trend is found in Franken and Ivens (1929), where the spatial approach diverges from this pattern.

In reference to the established and analysed categories of spatial types, we include below a summary table of the observed urban contexts and environments:

**Table 2.** Types of spaces

|                       | <b>Frequent</b>  | <b>Occasional</b>  |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| <b>Trails</b>         | Squares, streets, avenues, alleys, transport stations, bridges.                                      | Railway level crossings, tunnels, airfield, seafront.  |
| <b>Transport</b>      | Cars, trains, horse-drawn carriages, bicycles, trams, buses.   | Planes, light aircraft, boats, horses, taxis.  |
| <b>Industrialists</b> | Industrial areas, mechanical processes - pulleys, industrial processes, factories, machines.         | Railway tracks, power lines, port areas, laundry, construction in progress.  |
| <b>Inhabited</b>      | Buildings, houses, flats, facades with windows, roofs of houses, balconies, neighbourhoods, suburbs. | Villages on the periphery,   |
| <b>Commercial</b>     | Markets, shops, shop windows, terraces, shop signs, neon lights.                                     | Painted facades of buildings adjacent to the railway tracks as advertising space, totems with billboards, hotels, casinos. |

| Monumental and architectural | Sculptures  | Sewerage                        |
|------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| Natural                      | Parks, walks, skies, bodies of water (rivers, sea, puddles), animals (cats, pigeons, horses). | Countryside, beach, palm trees. |

Source: own elaboration (2024)

In relation to the treatment of mobility in the image, the representation of subjects—both people and spaces—in motion is frequent, highlighting the characteristic dynamism of European cities in the 1920s. In the analysed pieces, these images were often captured from a fixed position, allowing the movement shown on screen to originate primarily from the profilmic subject. This approach tends to emphasise the concept of *mobile static space*, where spatial movement predominates over technical camera movement.

In this sense, the kinetopic binomial, which analyses the interaction between space and movement, leans towards the transformation of space through profilmic movement. However, in Franken and Ivens (1929) and Vigo (1930), there is also a recurrent use of camera movement, reflecting an evolving cinematic praxis. In these works, a new kinetope is established, where the filmmaker not only portrays the city but does so through camera movement as an enunciative and descriptive element, redefining the relationship between space and movement.

#### 4.1. Textual Analysis of *Nothing but Time (Rien que les Heures, 1926)*

Cavalcanti's piece (1926), with a runtime of 45 minutes, depicts the daily routine of Paris over the course of a single day. Considered one of the first urban symphonies, the film portrays the city through scenes of Parisian life from dawn to night, focusing on the activities of the working classes and placing particular emphasis on social contrasts and the rhythm of urban life.

The author presents a vision of Paris characterised by loneliness and poverty, with empty streets in the early hours of the morning. As the day progresses, a notable shift in the urban dynamic ensues, with the streets gradually filling with people after the factories have concluded their operations. This phenomenon reflects the temporal shift that is characteristic of modern metropolises. At this juncture, recreational areas, including swimming pools and newsstands, assume a prominent role in the cityscape. By contrast, the nocturnal setting is characterised by its propensity for entertainment, as evidenced by the rapid, sweeping camera movements employed in scenes such as the carousel sequence. These movements effectively capture the vibrant energy of the nightlife, juxtaposed against the more tranquil atmosphere of the morning. However, Cavalcanti (1926) also portrays the hidden side of Paris at night, showing empty streets full of mystery and unease, inhabited by other types of characters such as policemen and assassins.

The subjects depicted within the Parisian metropolis in the piece fulfil symbolic and representative roles within Cavalcanti's visual discourse (1926), serving as icons in their own right to represent the city of Paris. In their symbolic function, the captured citizens acquire a broader meaning, such as the relationship between the human factor and the industrial factor represented in the departure of the workers from the factory or the opening of a station by an employee.

The symbolic montage employed by the author, exemplified in associations such as automobile-horse-drawn carriage, flowers-bunch of vegetables or man eating steak-image of the slaughterhouse, seeks to represent the transition to a modern city, in which the social mass migrates from a rural to an industrial environment. Consequently, these associations introduce a political discourse that contrasts the divergent urban realities by exhibiting two contrasting cities from the perspectives of the bourgeoisie and the working class. Furthermore, the employment of expressive montage in evoking emotions and sensations is notable, as evidenced by the following of an elderly woman through the city streets, thereby fostering an emotional connection with the urban space and its social dynamics.

The director also presents empty alleyways and streets, with no human presence, or, when a figure appears, it is shown in general shots that avoid focusing attention on the specific referent. The streets of Paris are captured in medium shots, in a constricted and oppressive manner, which generates a sensation of isolation or confinement, as the spectator can only perceive a limited portion of the space, without access to a complete view of the surroundings. The incorporation of framed images of the city

is also notable, characterised by limited and deep spaces, with the camera positioned at interior points that record outwards, suggesting a distanced gaze, akin to that of a silent and omnipresent observer.

The director of this piece, in contrast to the other films analysed, makes his presence in the cinematographic narrative explicitly evident. At the commencement of the film, the director in fact freezes a frame and disrupts the image, thereby emphasising the innovative exploitation of the expressive potential of cinematic language that was being explored during that period. The innovative visual style of the work is notable for its combination of documentary and avant-garde cinema techniques, offering a poetic and critical vision of Parisian modernity.

#### **4.2. Textual Analysis of Berlin, Symphony of a Metropolis (Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt, 1927)**

This 62-minute urban symphony captures a day in the life of Berlin, from dawn to dusk. Through images of streets, factories, trains and people going about their daily routine, the film creates a visual symphony that depicts Berlin's transition into an industrial European metropolis, highlighting both urban life and the growing impact of modernisation.

The camera, placed on a train at the beginning of the piece, symbolises the speed and acceleration characteristic of the modern city in contrast to the rural way of life. This filmic device reflects the process of social change as the population moves from the periphery to the great metropolises, highlighting the growing urbanisation and the changing dynamics of everyday life associated with the industrial and technological development of the time.

Ruttman (1927) then presents the crowds of workers passing through the squares and streets in the morning, using a symbolic montage that manifests itself in visual associations such as: workers going to work - cows walking - military parade, workers entering the factory - cows entering the slaughterhouse, or the routine of telephone communication compared to monkeys and dogs fighting. Through these associations, the director seeks to depict the loss of individuality in the modern city and to highlight the accelerated pace of life in the metropolis.

Similarly, and as a visual convention, the director shows industrial and commercial spaces in the city of Berlin as recurring figures to illustrate the social changes of the time that influenced the transformation of urban space, such as the use of advertising posters on the facades of buildings near the railway.

The author also depicts people riding out on horseback, as opposed to the workers who were forced to go to the factories or perform their daily tasks. While for the former Berlin's urban space is configured around green spaces such as parks, for the latter the city's topography is defined by the neighbourhoods, the train and the factory, underlining the spatial segregation and social differences within the metropolis.

At night, the city is transformed by the illumination of shop windows, and the social concentration shifts from the factories and stations to the avenues, where shop windows and leisure spaces such as theatres, bars and cabarets predominate. This change reflected a reconfiguration of urban space, associating night-time activities with consumption and entertainment.

#### **4.3. Textual Analysis of Rain (Regen, 1929)**

This piece, directed by Franken and Ivens (1929), with a runtime of 14 minutes, captures the transformation of Amsterdam under the rain, illustrating how this phenomenon alters the dynamics of the city and its inhabitants. Through a poetic visual structure, Franken and Ivens (1929) employ detailed shots of water, reflections on the streets, and passers-by, emphasising the contrast between stillness and movement in urban life.

The movement captured in the city is articulated through elements such as water, rain, hurried passers-by and the tram, a representative symbol of urban modernity. The director uses the tram not only as a means of transport, but also as a key cinematographic device, positioning the camera inside the tram to capture urban spaces through a misty, wet window. This visual resource generates a diffuse image of the city, creating a particular aesthetic in which the city is perceived through the blurriness and distortion caused by the atmospheric conditions.



The montage used in the piece is predominantly expressive, with the aim of capturing a city whose identity is inextricably linked to water. Amsterdam is presented as a city surrounded by and immersed in this element, in constant interaction with it, in which the canals play a fundamental role. The visual register emphasises the presence of rain and wind, reinforcing this symbiotic relationship between the city and the water. In addition, the port and boats play a prominent role, becoming key symbols of the city and its economic and cultural dynamism.

The city is reflected in the puddles of rain, and Franken and Ivens (1929) use this phenomenon to depict it, emphasising how the rain transforms the routine of the metropolis, altering both its rhythm and the aesthetics of its streets. The camera is placed among the passers-by, who walk with open umbrellas, even in a zenithal shot that floods the entire image, and who become key elements in the visual configuration of the city. Observing the reflections of the facades of the buildings on the ground, the citizens look down and hurry, creating a dynamic that reflects how rain affects urban behaviour.

There is no great variety of characters in this work, as the water acts as a unifying element. The dockers and passers-by with umbrellas along the avenue are practically the only human figures to be seen. The structure of the piece, both at the beginning and at the end, is centred on the water, and although there is a linear continuity in the montage, it is mainly marked by the progression and development of the storm.

#### **4.4. Textual Analysis of *A Propos de Nice (À Propos de Nice, 1930)***

This 25-minute piece by Vigo (1930) offers a social critique through the director's perspective on life in the city of Nice. From the outset, the film portrays this city with panoramic views that reflect the development of a coastal city, which is subsequently juxtaposed with images of the upper social class enjoying luxury and leisure, in stark contrast to scenes of the daily life of workers and the humble neighbourhoods.

The director portrays the façades of hotels and casinos as emblems of Nice's opulence, and places the camera predominantly at ground level, immersed in the urban environment, in order to capture the dynamism of the city, centred on the promenade, the terraces and the parades on the avenue. Through these perspectives, an aesthetic image of life on the beach is configured as a characteristic visual reference of the city, symbolising its identity.

Vigo (1930) employs a predominantly descriptive montage in his depiction of citizens on the promenade, and a symbolic one, exemplified in the juxtaposition of images with contrasting themes, such as the juxtaposition of images of women dancing with images of statues or a funeral procession. This methodological approach enables the director to unveil social inequalities, showcasing the city from perspectives that accentuate its surface beauty and underlying tensions. Through this structure, the director invites critical reflection on modernity and capitalism, thereby demonstrating the contradictions inherent in urban life in Nice at the time.

A notable distinction from the other works analysed is the absence of a clearly defined temporal pattern in the montage. However, the opening sequences depict the awakening of the city, with images of workers inaugurating establishments such as restaurants and terraces along the seafront. This initial sequence appears to imply a discernible temporal relationship, though the subsequent development of the montage does not adhere to such a pronounced chronological sequence.

The film establishes a stark contrast between social classes through its cinematic and visual construction of the city. For instance, shots depicting members of the high society sunbathing on exclusive terraces are juxtaposed with those depicting washerwomen or workers in shady streets where the sky can be seen from below, constrained between buildings. The former images, therefore, create a powerful visual metaphor: the sun, a symbol of privilege, is reserved for the upper social class, while the working class remains in the slums, away from the light. This urban duality reflects the socio-economic segregation posited by the author, showing two coexisting filmic cities, one of opulence and enjoyment, the other of work and precariousness, exposing as a background to the piece a political discourse that glimpses the inequalities inherent in urban life in Nice.

## 5. Conclusions

In terms of the representation of urban life, the citizens portrayed in the works are intimately linked to the spaces they inhabit and, as a whole, create an urban iconography. The city, as a space of transit, work and leisure, becomes a canvas on which human figures act as visual and symbolic codes representing the social and cultural dynamics of each city filmed. Through these codes, the filmmakers explore and communicate the urban modernity of the metropolises of the 1920s.

The films under scrutiny offer a distinctive portrait of the geography and character of the metropolises they depict, employing the language of cinema to capture the specificities of each environment. In Cavalcanti (1926), the complexity of Parisian streets and nightlife is documented, revealing a bohemian and chaotic urban fabric. Ruttmann (1927) accentuates the rapid pace and industrial development of the German city, symbolising mechanical progress and urban alienation. In Franken and Ivens (1929), Amsterdam is depicted through its canals and incessant rainfall, emphasising the interrelationship between the city and its aquatic environment. Finally, Vigo (1930) explores the duality of the city, contrasting the quotidian life of the working class with the tourist image of sun and palm trees. Each of these films constructs a unique identity for its city, drawing on its geographical and social characteristics to reinforce the distinctiveness of urban life in Europe during the 1920s. However, as Cavalcanti (1926) himself remarks at the end of his piece: "We can fix a point in space, freeze a moment in time, but space and time are beyond our control".

In relation to the specific elements of urban life that are highlighted and presented in the urban symphonies. The works Ruttmann (1927), Franken and Ivens (1929) and Vigo (1930) are notable for their deliberate omission of monuments representative of the cities they depict, except in the piece Cavalcanti (1926). While this piece does exhibit some monuments, they do not function as reiterative or principal elements for the narrative of the work, nor are they sustained for a protracted period. This approach appears to be a deliberate response to the objective of eschewing the glorification of specific symbols, favouring instead a more abstract representation of the modern European metropolis of the 1920s.

The urban topologies presented in the city symphonies are intrinsically tied to spaces representative of the daily routines of a modern European metropolis of this era, such as stations, trains, factory exits, and leisure and rest areas. Emblematic locations such as monuments, museums, or churches are notably absent, thereby outlining a topography of the city grounded in routine and the triad: inhabited space, transport space, and working space. Leisure areas, in contrast, are frequently associated with the night and, in some cases, carry negative connotations, as seen in Cavalcanti's Cavalcanti (1926). Furthermore, the city, crisscrossed by railway tracks and power lines, is depicted as a modern and functional urban space, prioritising mobility and efficiency over its aesthetic dimension.

In the context of the analysis of cinematographic techniques prevalent in city symphonies and their contribution to the visual construction of the city, the examination of the pieces reveals a predominance of a linear temporal structure, encompassing the course of a full day, with the exception of Vigo (1930), which exhibits an anachronistic structure. Consequently, these films establish a distinct chronotope, whereby the temporal and spatial elements are intricately intertwined, culminating in the depiction of a day's routine. By encapsulating the dynamic nature of the city -morning, afternoon, and night - these works not only document the city's rhythm but also establish a symbiotic relationship between time and space. This chronotope underscores the cyclical and shared nature of urban existence, illustrating how the European metropolis of that era articulated its own routines and behaviours within delineated time frames, thereby reinforcing its modern and mechanised character.

With regard to the duration and frequency of the actions, there is a tendency to depict them at normal speed, with few temporal manipulations. The employment of singularity is recurrent, exhibiting the actions in a single instance; however, it should be noted that Cavalcanti (1926) are also noteworthy for the reiteration of specific urban elements, such as chimneys and reflections in puddles, a reflection of the prevailing mechanisation of the era.

In terms of the depiction of space, the films generally adopt a ground-level perspective, positioning the camera in close proximity to the action. However, with the exception of Ruttmann (1927) and Franken and Ivens (1929), there is an occasional use of elevated shots, with the camera adopting an omniscient point of view in relation to the city. The depiction of mobility in the images is another constant, with a focus on the cinematic movement of people and objects rather than on camera

movement, thereby highlighting the interaction between space and movement. However, Franken and Ivens (1929) and Vigo (1930) break this pattern by employing dynamic camera movement, integrating it as an enunciative and descriptive element.

In relation to the underlying narratives referring to the city and conveyed through the images and structures of the city symphony documentaries, urban symphonies choose to show those parts of the city that are less touristic, more common or even suburban. This approach serves to underscore a political discourse on social inequality, diverging from the documentary style of cinema that prevailed in the early 1920s. In that era, numerous films were characterised by their depictions of distant lands as a means of evasion and exoticism.

Finally, it is important to note that the audiovisual works analysed present a differentiated urban topology according to social class. While for the high society, the city is characterised by green, open, sunny or beachy spaces, for the working class, the representation focuses on industrial environments. This approach underscores an underlying discourse that reflects the antagonistic nature-industry binomial, a concept previously addressed by contemporary philosophical currents. This concept explains how the modernity of the European metropolis of the 1920s brought with it an increasing alienation of the average citizen from nature.

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