

Documentary Film Review Essay

Films on Gentrification

Miriam Greenberg

University of California Santa Cruz

Films Reviewed:

“Boom! The Sound of Eviction.” **Directed by Francine Cavanaugh, A. Mark Liiv, Adams Wood**, for Whispered Media, 2001. Available through AK Press and on Youtube.

“My Brooklyn,” 2013. **Directed by Kelly Anderson**. Available through New Day Films.

<https://www.newday.com/film/my-brooklyn>.

INTRODUCTION

For *City & Community*'s second review of urban documentaries, I focus on a genre that has exploded on the scene during the last decade: documentaries on gentrification. From independent films to oral history projects, digital shorts to photo documentaries, gentrification is fast becoming one of the most prevalent and relevant topics in urban nonfiction. (For a partial listing of projects by city, see the end of this article.)

The current focus on gentrification extends themes of neighborhood change and territorial conflict long present, if not dominant in urban documentaries and community and urban sociology generally. Earlier processes of urban restructuring—from suburbanization and urban renewal to fiscal crisis and planned shrinkage—were powerfully portrayed in films like “Crisis in Levittown” (1957), “Metropolitan Avenue” (1966), and “Style Wars” (1979), to choose just three prominent U.S. examples of documentaries made over successive decades.

Today, across much of the Global North and South, gentrification is an increasingly powerful force of neighborhood change and source of territorial conflict. Not surprisingly, documentarians are again picking up their cameras. As in earlier generations, these visual accounts do more than text alone to capture the emotional and experiential nuances of reactions to large-scale urban change and to make sense of the complex and often opaque social and political forces behind it.

But of course gentrification documentaries, like gentrification itself, are not simply a modern iteration of an earlier form. They require that we get to know a different cast of characters and a new plot line, as distinct from common narratives—whether those involving top-down urban renewal driven by overzealous urban planners, or bottom up, quasi-ecological neighborhood change driven by cyclical in-migration and out-migration. While its pioneers may have had other ideas, gentrification has always been the quintessential story of urban exchange value trumping urban use value. Especially in its current

City & Community 13:4 December 2014

doi: 10.1111/cico.12083

© 2014 American Sociological Association, 1430 K Street NW, Washington, DC 20005

globalized form, it is a process of capitalist urban development driven by powerful and often unseen private actors—including real estate investors, developers, and corporations—and coordinated by economic development agencies and public private partnerships, which create the zoning, tax, and regulatory environment that incentivizes speculative urban development and facilitates eviction and displacement.¹

These are shadowy and contentious urban processes that are far from easy for urban scholars and students to research. Many of the major players are not as accessible as government officials, and the minutes of their closed-door meetings are typically not archived. Meanwhile, the surface dynamics of gentrification are highly cultural and affectual, and tricky to convey in writing alone. They involve changes in the products in corner stores, the aesthetics of building codes, the vibe on the street at night, the spread of surveillance cameras, or the image of the community found in ads for new luxury buildings. Race and class are ever present in these representations and experiences, but never named. Then we have the antigentrification movement, with its many forms—from graffiti to legal contest to protest marches—and wide range of “right to the city” groups—from tenant advocates and community based organizations to urban gardeners. The diversity and passion of their voices can be a challenge to capture on the page. By aiming their cameras at all of these dynamics—on the surface, in the streets, and behind the scenes—documentarians play a vital role in exposing and interpreting gentrification for a broader public. They also provide an invaluable resource for teachers and scholars in urban sociology.

URBAN GENTRIFICATION DOCUMENTARIES AS A GENRE

After viewing some twenty documentaries on the theme, I would argue that these films and media projects constitute an emerging “genre”—complete with codes, conventions, and dominant motifs. One convention is that of first person narration, with many filmmakers documenting gentrification processes in their own communities and reflecting on their own role in it. This reflexive approach can be illuminating as well as jarring at times. We see these two sides in films like “7th Street,” in which prominent director and actor Josh Pais documents and walks us through the 1990s era gentrification of New York City’s East Village, the neighborhood where he grew up as a teenager. We see and feel with him the successive blows to memory and community when, one by one, mom-and-pop stores, gardens, and key neighborhood institutions are lost, and his friends on the street are pushed out. Yet toward the end, when Pais takes his shirt off and talks into the camera about a sidewalk conflict he had with a “gang member,” we are left to wonder about the goals of the film—psychological catharsis or social critique?—and about the different version of events that might emerge were we to change this rather self-absorbed narrator’s race, class, age, gender, sexuality, or years living in the community.

Another common motif might be that of the “good old-timers” versus “bad newcomers.” While most of the films work to uncover political and economic forces behind gentrification, they tend to elevate certain individual protagonists and emphasize their conflict with others. Doing this without demonizing “gentrifiers” is a challenge—for documentarians as for scholars and activists—and some films succeed at this more than others. We witness this uncomfortable balance in a film like the award-winning “Flag Wars,” directed by Linda Goode Bryant and Laura Poitras (2003). Shot *cinéma vérité* style in the Olde

Towne neighborhood of Columbus, Ohio, the film does a remarkable job of tracing the slowly rising tension between two historically marginalized groups: working class African Americans, who are longtime residents in the neighborhood, and new LGBT homebuyers and real estate agents. The latter seek to renovate old, often derelict housing and prop up real estate values—such as by creating a new historical district designation. Yet the former group, many of whom live on fixed incomes, can't afford to upgrade their homes to meet the new housing codes and so are threatened with displacement. While the filmmakers strive to portray both sides, the focus on “war” between the groups may reproduce stereotypes about LGBT outsiders and interlopers, an issue that is never explicitly addressed in the film, while distracting from broader social forces.

Yet, despite the risk of cliché and stereotype (found in all genre films), many common qualities of urban gentrification documentaries helpfully reveal dynamics of gentrification across regions and historic periods, allowing us to analyze similarities and differences. Most are low-budget films shot over many years in neighborhoods in the midst of gentrification, and as such provide invaluable visual records of slow transformations often associated with collective amnesia and depoliticization. They also shine the spotlight on class inequality and market pressures in the contemporary city. Many make creative use of graphics and animation to illustrate obscure dynamics—like maps and timelines of evictions and displacement, flowcharts of complex policies and financial instruments, and diagrams of the intricate networks of the private and public actors behind redevelopment. Most are good at finding a diverse range of informed, impassioned “talking heads” and consultants—including many of our CUSS colleagues—and bringing their work to a wider audience. And, through the art of editing and montage, many are adept at what we might call demystification, bringing into clear focus and juxtaposition competing visions of the future of the city and who belongs there, while unpacking elaborate efforts at marketing high-end redevelopment.

In what follows, I highlight two films that do all of this particularly well, and conclude with a list of films and media projects to consider for urban sociological research and teaching. While the two films I focus on are U.S.-based, the list at the end includes a more international selection.

“BOOM! THE SOUND OF EVICTION”

Produced by the grassroots video collective Whispered Media in 2001, *BOOM!* documents the impact of tech-driven gentrification in San Francisco's Mission District, a historically working class, immigrant neighborhood that, since the 1960s, has been the heart of the city's Latino community as well as home to a sizable community of artists and non-profit groups. This is actually the first film I came across (back in the early 2000s) to represent the gentrification phenomenon for my urban sociology students, and may be considered a pioneer for the genre. Screening it in classrooms today provides interesting prehistory for what is arguably an even larger wave of gentrification sweeping San Francisco—sparked by the move of Silicon Valley firms, employees, and transit networks into the city, and accompanied by a new crop of documentary projects undoubtedly inspired, in part, by this film.

BOOM! opens with archival footage of a public housing block being demolished by wrecking ball in 1999, and with it, the deafening sound referenced in the film's

in-your-face title. Immediately clear is the filmmakers' view that gentrification is no abstract or superficial phenomenon, but a force both real and violent, particularly for mid-century visions of the inclusive city that public housing represented. With the aid of campy clips from old Technicolor travelogues intercut with contemporary scenes of new transplants living the high life, we learn of the title's other referent: the "dot.com boom" of the late 1990s, celebrated for bringing about San Francisco's rightful return to global city status. We see the dramatic physical and demographic manifestation of this boom: working class mixed-use neighborhoods giving way to luxury lofts, hip offices for tech start-ups, gourmet eateries, and the influx of hip, young, upwardly mobile, tech-savvy residents.

Thus we are led to understand: One should not believe everything one hears about booms. Rather than the miraculous result of tech and finance wizardry, we see public policy, including lax rent laws and strong tax incentives, propping up a speculative bubble. As capital floods the area, Internet start-ups move in, buildings are razed and renovated, rents soar, and eviction papers are served. Rather than producing a widely dispersed bounty of jobs and profits, the film shows how a boom can benefit a small group of entrepreneurs, investors, and developers while disadvantaging many more. One interviewee estimates the eviction of 15,000 people in 3 years. While hard numbers are not provided, we are shown evidence of the displacement of hundreds of longtime residents, businesses, social service organizations, and community-based arts groups.²

BOOM! then takes us on a bumpy, depressing drive along the back roads of the New Economy. A large Latino family is given three days to get out when a new neighbor complains about noise. A vibrant dance studio holds its final class. Across the bay in lower cost Oakland, a no-cause eviction notice leaves a mother of five camping out with her family in a friend's cramped apartment. The contrast between virtuous Mission residents and the invading yuppie army, lounging in tony bistros, sipping strange, neon-hued cocktails, can feel a bit heavy handed. Yet as Mayor Willie Brown, developers, and dotcom CEOs celebrate the newcomers as evidence of urban revitalization, while ignoring or denying the fate of evictees, their boosterism comes off as both heartless and starkly at odds with the reality faced by many if not most low and middle income people in the city.

Nowhere is this clash more extreme than in an arresting segment in which an octogenarian Mission resident is served with eviction papers. Having lived in her apartment her entire adult life, with nowhere to go, disoriented and distressed, she appeals to landlords, the media, and the city, but to no avail. Shortly before she was to be forced out, she passed away. Enraged housing advocates argue that the stress of eviction led to her premature death, and she becomes a charged symbol in the antigentrification struggle.

The movie hangs on until the tech bubble bursts in 2000, exposing the abandonment and waste left in its wake. We are left wondering about the true nature of "booms," the ultimate fate of San Francisco, and broader questions about the right to the city in our time.

MY BROOKLYN

If "BOOM!" covered San Francisco's Mission District during the bubble and crash of the late 1990s/early 2000s, "My Brooklyn" picks up soon thereafter, covering the pre- and postcrash bubbles of 2006–2012 that turned Brooklyn into "the hippest city in the

United States.” In this forceful combination of investigative journalism and personal memoir, filmmakers Kelly Anderson, the director, and Allison Lirish Dean, chief researcher (with background in city planning), open with a tour of the gentrification of various Brooklyn neighborhoods Anderson has lived in. The latter’s concern is that, as a white, middle class, nonnative Brooklynite, she is the cause of the problem. Yet suspicion that this doesn’t tell the whole story drives her to create a film that uncovers gentrification’s political and economic roots and moves beyond the oft-told tale of yuppies and brownstones. Instead, it focuses on the massive, developer-driven plan for the redevelopment and commercial gentrification of Downtown Brooklyn.

The emotional and political heart of the film is Downtown’s Fulton Mall. Over Jamel Shabazz’s black and white photos of life on the street in the 1970s, we learn of the Mall’s historic role as the leading shopping street for New York’s African American and Caribbean communities. It was a destination for young people and families and a key source for the fashion, hairstyles, and music video backdrops of early hip hop. Emblematic of downtown decline and resurgence in the United States, it offers a classic tale of the entrepreneurial spirit albeit made possible by affordable real estate. Store-owners interviewed recall how they turned around a street that had been abandoned and left for dead in the 1960s and 1970s, with remarkable results: As of 2004, the Mall was the third most successful shopping area in New York (after Fifth and Madison avenues), attracting 100,000 consumers a day. This was aided by the concentration of government buildings and large utilities in the area.

But then came the Downtown Brooklyn Plan. Along with its vision to rezone the area for high end office and residential development the plan called for “revitalizing” the Fulton Mall. Apparently the street’s bustling sneaker stores, bagel bakers, book vendors, barbershops, snazzy suit emporia, and soul food restaurants weren’t vital enough for the new targeted demographic. The film reveals how this very partial vision became a reality. With generous subsidies from the city, tens of luxury towers would indeed rise on the Brooklyn skyline. Meanwhile, the majority of the mall’s small-business owners, after years of organizing, would be evicted. In contrast with the big-box stores moving in, they got no subsidies to relocate, nor even the courtesy of posting “We’ve Moved” fliers with their phone numbers for their decades-old clientele.

Like the genre of which it’s a part, *My Brooklyn* makes certain arguments. First it attacks the notion that gentrification is simply a natural process, in which “some people move in and others move out,” as historian and interviewee Craig Wilder puts it, and as the developers and planners featured would have us believe. Rather, as planning scholar Tom Angotti underscores, it is a choice, and a highly political one at that. The film shows us the creative destruction unleashed as a result of this choice, with tragic consequences for local culture, community, and livelihood. The filmmakers link the plan to the 100-plus rezonings and multibillion dollar tax abatements for market-rate developers the Bloomberg administration championed. They then follow the money, explicating the role of growth machines like the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership and quasi-public city entities like the Economic Development Corporation. We witness how, together, these entities draft and push through the plan outside the community review process.

A second argument is about the powerful, unspoken role of race and class bias in this mode of redevelopment. In one scene, the documentarians conduct interviews with white and black shoppers at a Brooklyn farmers market to gauge people’s opinions on

the fate of the mall. Blacks may or may not frequent the mall, but speak of it with respect. Whites are either perplexed, never having visited or heard of it, or disparaging, wrinkling their noses at the very thought of it. In other scenes, as outraged activists howl over the displacement of their community, planning officials nod condescendingly, repeating the mantra “change is always difficult.” It is clear that those in power see little of value in this majority Black, working class space and identify more with the aspirations their affluent, majority white constituents.

Unable to afford an apartment near downtown Brooklyn, Anderson moves further out in the borough to Sunset Park—knowing full well that she is likely part of the first wave of gentrification for this relatively affordable, Asian-American and Latino neighborhood. This leads to her final argument: There should be another way. Cities should be able to develop and grow without destroying the diversity and inclusivity that make them great. To illustrate this—and in an effort to detract from the extensive focus on her identity as filmmaker and gentrifier, to which many who see this film will not relate—the film concludes with a diverse array of residents speaking to the camera about what “my Brooklyn” means to them. As in *BOOM!*, the final scenes leave us wondering (perhaps another motif of the genre): How can ordinary residents define the city in their own terms, and how can they achieve the power to make their visions a reality?

We know that the history of the modern city has always been one of displacement and struggle, and that class, culture, and political organizing have always played a decisive role in determining the winners and losers of urban development. Films like *BOOM!*, *My Brooklyn*, and those in the list below help us understand the role of both gentrification and anti-gentrification resistance in this history. Thus, they provide a valuable tool for the classroom and our own research on these subjects.

Notes

¹Classic literature on gentrification includes: Neil Smith, “Toward a Theory of Gentrification: A Back to the City Movement by Capital, not People.” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 45 (4): 538–48, 1979, and “New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy,” *Antipode* 34 (3): 434–57, 2002; Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989 (soon to come out in its 25th anniversary edition). For a very useful overview of the field, see Japonica Brown Saracino, *The Gentrification Debates: A Reader*, New York: Routledge, 2010.

²For well-documented and up-to-date information on evictions in San Francisco, see the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, mentioned in the list at the end of this article.

DOCUMENTARY FILMS AND MEDIA PROJECTS ON GENTRIFICATION, BY CITY

AMSTERDAM

“Creative Capitalist City: The Struggle for Affordable Space in Amsterdam.” Directed by Tino Buckholz, 2012.

A broad, historically rooted critique of the “creative-city” model of urban regeneration focusing on Amsterdam, where the development of new creative districts has produced existential struggles for affordable housing and working space. www.creativecapitalistcity.org

ATLANTA

“The Atlanta Way.” Ajay Reeves and King Williams, directors, 2013.

Focuses on Atlanta’s controversial, 20-year effort to purge the city of its low-income housing projects, completed between 2008 and 2010, and the impact of subsequent gentrification on local communities, schools, art and culture, social scene, and public life. <http://www.theatlantaway.com/>

BERLIN

“Mietrebellen” (Rent Rebels). Gertrud Schulte Westenberg and Matthias Coers, 2014. <http://rentrebels.tumblr.com/film>.

A kaleidoscope of tenant struggles against displacement and for affordable housing in Berlin.

BOSTON

“Holding Ground: The Rebirth of Dudley Street.” Mark Lipman and Leah Mahan, directors, 1996.

A decade-long chronicle of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative as it guides redevelopment plans away from gentrification and toward affordable housing. www.holdinggroundproductions.com/

CINCINNATI

“We Will Not Be Moved.” Community Media Productions, 1980.

Perhaps the first film on gentrification, focuses on planned redevelopment of Over the Rhine neighborhood of Cincinnati, and resistance by long-time African American and Appalachian residents determined not to be pushed out. <http://vimeo.com/78467561>

COLUMBUS

“Flag Wars.” Linda Goode Bryant and Laura Poitras, Directors, 2003.

An account of tension between two communities—long-time African American residents and LGBT newcomers—in the Old Towne neighborhood of Columbus, Ohio. <http://www.praxisfilms.org/films/flag-wars>

HAMBURG

“Empire St. Pauli.” Directed by Irene Bude and Olaf Sobczak, 2009.

Traces the transformation of one of Hamburg’s most famous and historical working class neighborhoods—St. Pauli—into an entertainment district and tourist destination, with a wide array of neighborhood voices: residents, artists, brewers, investors, social

workers, hotel owners, lawyers, and leaders of the district authority. <http://www.empire-stpauli.de/>

HOUSTON

“Third Ward, TX.” Andrew Garrison, 2007.

Explores dilemmas facing artists and neighbors of Project Row Houses, who creatively revitalize their disenfranchised black neighborhood, yet attract real estate speculation in the process. www.thirdwardtx.com

ISTANBUL

“Ekumenopolis.” Directed by Imre Azem, 2011.

Frames gentrification as the glamorous, modernizing face of a corrupt and ultimately devastating process of urban development on a massive scale, and which pushes out the very people who build and maintain the city. <http://www.ekumenopolis.net>

LOS ANGELES

“Save the Farm.” Directed by Michael Kuehnert, 2011.

Latino families, city politicians, a wealthy developer, environmental activists, and celebrities collide over the fate of the largest urban garden in the U.S. <http://www.cinematolibrestudio.com/savethefarm/>

MONTRÉAL

“Montreal: Tales of Gentrification in a Bohemian City.” Directed by Adam Bemma, 2011.

Explores the multiple effects of condo development on formerly working-class and low-income communities, the environment, and public life across the city. <http://www.cultureunplugged.com/play/11330/Montr-al-Tales-of-Gentrification-in-a-Bohemian-City>

NEW YORK

“El Barrio Tours.” Andrew Padilla, Director, 2012.

Features a local Congressman, famous writers and artists, and a host of neighborhood activists, residents, and small business owners, as they debate the past, present, and future of their beloved Barrio, East Harlem, the largest Puerto Rican neighborhood in the United States. <http://elbarriotours.tumblr.com/>

“Bowery Dish,” Kevin R. Frec, Director, 2005.

Observes how trendy restaurants and bars spearheaded the transformation of America’s most notorious skid row, using interviews and rare archival photography and film.

http://cinemaguild.com/mm5/merchant.mvc?Screen=PROD&Store_Code=2127TCGS&Product_Code=2127

“7th Street.” Directed by Josh Pais, 2007.

A white middle class boy grows up in the majority Latino and Black low-income East Village in the 1970s, then documents the impacts of 10 years of its gentrification and cultural transformation in the 1990s on his friends and family. <http://7thstreetmovie.com>

“Gut Renovation.” A film by Su Friedrich, 2012.

A film essay/requiem for a neighborhood and an entire way of life, also providing a closely studied account of the rapid gentrification of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. <http://www.outcast-films.com/films/gut/>

NEW ORLEANS

“Land of Opportunity.” Luisa Dantas, Director. 2010-present.

In post-Katrina New Orleans, a film and experimental web platform document and explore the ongoing, contentious process of redevelopment, and threat of gentrification, in the face of crisis/disaster. <http://landofopportunityinteractive.com/#/info>

PHILADELPHIA

“Precious Places.” Scribe Video Center, 2008–present.

An oral history project documenting Philadelphia’s public spaces that in some way have anchored a neighborhood or community, and exploring the impacts of the alteration or disappearance of these spaces due to gentrification and other social forces. www.scribe.org/about/preciousplaces

TORONTO

“East Side Showdown.” Robin Benger, Director, 1999.

A documentary of the increasingly fractious relationship between the poor and more affluent residents in the rapidly gentrifying neighborhood of Dundas and Sherbourne. http://www.nfb.ca/film/east_side_showdown

SAN FRANCISCO

“Anti-Eviction Mapping Project.”

A data visualization, data analysis, and digital storytelling collective documenting the dispossession of San Francisco Bay Area residents. <http://www.antievictionmappingproject.net/>