The idea of the city is not a simple thing. Of his attempt to photograph Pittsburg, Eugene Smith said, “To portray a city is beyond ending: to begin such an effort is in itself a grave conceit. For though the portrayal may achieve its own measure of truth, it still will be no more than a rumor of the city . . . no more meaningful, and no more permanent.”

In Eugene Smith’s hands the rumor of a city could be a very powerful thing indeed. Similarly, many notions of the city and urban that are woven into the conventions of everyday life have generative force on policy and cultural practices. In this class we will explore presentations of the city from a perspective that asks about the “careers” of different portrayals of urban life.

That is to say, rather that take idea of the city for granted we will explore the contexts out of which different conceptualizations of the “city” and “urban” come, the type of space they assume exists and help construct, and the relationship between experiences of urban life and representations of it.

The course concentrates on modernity because many of the assumptions that are foundational to contemporary thinking about urban processes originated with the birth of the social sciences and other attempts to come to terms with the upheavals of industrialization and the creation of the modern metropolis.
I. To portray a city ---- An over view of the conceptual approach taken in the class, a visual introduction to what the city meant in early modernity, an introduction to the notion of urban experience as an ethical moment. We will next consider two astute observers of their age, Michel Foucault and WEB DuBois. In the pieces we read, both begin by examining the conventional wisdom and practices of their day, then analyze them in terms of the relations of dominance they set up and continue. Next both consider modes of presentation and experiencing that are also made possible by systems of visibility they explore. Our reading of these pieces sets up a pattern that will continue: Theory/Practice/Ethical intervention. Of each mode of conceptualizing the city we will take “its own measure of truth” and its claims to be “meaningful” in the world.

Questions for consideration. How does film think? (In Deleuze’s Sense of conceptualize) What does public space mean?

“What surrounds us daily, what is inseparable from us, what is usual, only a deep, great, unusual talent can notice”  (Nikolai Gogol, Notebooks p.21 in Jukes)
The class will use written material and visual evidence and assume a high level of student participation and engagement. Some of this material will be handed out in class; some will be available online. During the first half of the class students will be expected to attend class, and prepare responses to questions. (Written formally for urban college students) During the second half of the class all students will prepare a paper plan for analysis of the career of one of the theoretical approaches discussed in class. This analysis will examine aspects of contemporary urban practices in light of the conceptualization the students chooses. The paper will begin with notions of continuities and discontinuities in the theoretical perspective deployed. Finally, the paper will be presented (in summary) and handed during the final week of class. (For urban college students)

Class participation and questions 50%
Paper 50%