

**Stanley Corkin:**  
***Starring New York:***  
***Filming the Grime and the Glamour of the Long 1970s***  
**New York: Oxford University Press. 2011**

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Stanley Corkin makes a valuable contribution to the still evolving field of cinema and the city scholarship by examining the close relationship between New York City and New Hollywood cinema in the 1970s. In its seven chapters, *Starring New York* examines more than twenty representative films, set and shot in New York, in relation to the profound economic, political and cultural changes that transformed the city from a declining, industrial metropolis into a “global” capital of finance, corporate capitalism and gentrified consumer culture during “the long 70s”. As in much recent work on the city and cinema, however, Corkin is not simply interested in treating films as mere records of urban history. He is interested in examining films as tools of urban discourse in their own right, that is to say, as cultural documents that make urban transformations visible and connect “the relative spaces of city, nation, and world” (p. 8). To that end, Corkin relies on an (aggressively) interdisciplinary methodology, situated at the nexus of film studies, human geography and urban history. The book’s most fundamental resource, though, is provided by the spatialised Marxism of scholars such as Lefebvre, Jameson, Harvey, Brenner, Sassen and Smith, whose theories are combined with close readings in a remarkably transparent writing style.

The bulk of *Starring New York* is divided into six sections, each of which examines a group of films in relation to specific urban themes and historical developments. In the first section, Corkin considers the nadir of New York’s urban decline in the late 60s and early 70s, a period in which the material and supposed moral deterioration of New York was a hot topic in urban debates, as well as in films set in New York. Focusing on *Midnight Cowboy*

and *Klute*, Corkin emphasises how these films advance a serious critique of post-industrial development by depicting the city's marginalisation of the unskilled working class, exemplified by protagonists who are forced into the sex industry in Manhattan's decayed – yet soon-to-be gentrified – districts. The next two chapters investigate transformations in New York's ethnic and racialised geographies through films set in Little Italy and Harlem. *Godfather I and II* and *Mean Streets* are explored as ambiguous urban texts that, on the one hand, nostalgically seek to recuperate the "lost" ethnic community, while they, on the other hand, reveal the futility of this project at a time when the globalisation of migration, economic restructuring and demographic shifts spelled the end for Little Italy as a distinct ethnic community. Corkin then looks at the ways in which the blaxploitation cycle represents urban space as central to the production of race-based identities and structures of exclusion. He finds that blackness in these films is defined largely by its negative relation to the city's political economy and that "race seems to articulate a space outside the system of globalization" (p. 78).

Chapters five and six examine films concerned with urban crime in relation to the emergence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism. Corkin details how the police movies *The French Connection*, *Serpico* and *Prince of the City* begin to re-conceptualise New York as a de-centred, sprawling and centrifugal global city. As the protagonists in these films are forced to navigate in a more transitory and fluid urban world, they are also confronted with an increasingly neoliberal urban order of transnational crime, uncontrollable market relations and changing scales of commerce. Next, anxieties about uncontrollable street crime and random violence are brought into focus through readings of three vigilante narratives (*Death Wish*, *Taxi Driver* and *Marathon Man*), which, Corkin argues, anticipate the neoconservative revolution. The final, particularly provocative section of the book turns to a cluster of relationship movies from the late 70s (such as *Annie Hall*, *Manhattan* and *Kramer vs. Kramer*), in which Manhattan's Upper East Side is reconfigured as a "lifestyle enclave" that allows the characters to reproduce their class position, pursue their fetish for self-fulfilment and embrace their narcissism of sameness. Corkin deftly unravels the political implications of the "gentrification aesthetics" embedded in these films, as well as the liberal blindness that accompanies it. He emphasises how the class-specific notions of the city advanced here are contingent upon the exclusion of urban inequalities from the field of vision, and how these urban representations effectively eradicate traces of the city's history of class and race struggle. In the words of Corkin, "[t]hese films participate in the conjoining of the postmodern and post-Fordist regimes, offering history flattened to aesthetics, and aesthetics flattened into taste" (p. 193).

My main reservation about Corkin's otherwise compelling book concerns its spatial hermeneutic, which does not always clarify – or attempt to clarify – the relationship between different, and sometimes contradictory, levels of urban discourse at work in the films under scrutiny. To be more precise, I believe that a more careful, interpretive distinction between what is going on at the level of plot and character and what is revealed metonymically

through the visualisation of particular locations and profilmic particularities would have strengthened some of the readings. Corkin himself is certainly aware of this distinction, which is discussed in the introductory chapter through the notion of “the plasticity of the image’s meaning” (p. 10). Here, Corkin observes that “particular scenes” in a film often “visually isolate moments and locales”, and that these “bear a different relation to the historical ‘real’ than does the film as a whole, as they create a more direct association between the historical moment, isolated in time and space, and the photographic representation of it” (p. 10). At times, Corkin’s readings nevertheless have a tendency to downplay the degree to which such distinct “moments and locales” might enact different urban critiques and histories than those presented at the level of plot and character. In the chapter on blaxploitation cinema, for example, Corkin argues that this film cycle “views race, for the most part, through a normatively white lens” (p. 74) and, consequently, participates “in the culture of racial exclusion that proliferated in New York City” (p. 102). I would argue, however, that some of these films reveal a quite profound material critique – through their attention to Harlem’s urban fabric – that exceeds “normatively white”, pathologised or commodified notions of Black urban America. One thinks of *Superfly*, a film Corkin discusses in detail, in which Harlem’s dilapidated streetscapes and urban blight seem to provide a rather ambiguous site of historical negotiation that complicates the film’s otherwise racialised discourses. One may say that the cinematic background here bears traces of different kinds of agency exactly because the profilmic particularities and urban “fragments” registered by the camera are autonomous to, or resist, the politics of cultural difference foregrounded at the level of plot and character.

With regards to the thorny issue of agency, the section on vigilante films also deserves mention given its emphasis on the ideological implications of these narratives. To be sure, it is scarcely controversial to read *Death Wish* as a neoconservative “treatise” on the right to self-defence and tough punishment. But it becomes slightly more problematic, I think, when Corkin insists that *Taxi Driver* likewise “asserts the efficacy of neoconservatism” and anticipates “the more formal coalescence of that political trend” (pp. 134-135). This is not to reject the legitimacy of Corkin’s interpretation – of course, the argument is not entirely new – but rather to question how much justice it does to the complexity of *Taxi Driver* when “neoliberalism” and “neoconservatism” provide the principal analytical coordinates.

Yet regardless of one’s take on the films discussed by Corkin, it remains to his credit that he provides a forceful account of the ways in which post-industrial political economies produced their own urban shape in New York films of the 1970s. Furthermore, *Starring New York* never reduces New York’s “fall-and-rise story” to a simplistic narrative of neocapitalist development, but demonstrates a thorough engagement with urban history; a history that is both informative and vital to the argument, not least because New York’s post-war development, as often noted, differs markedly from the pattern of other rust-belt cities that experienced similar processes of economic restructuring. Still, one is struck by certain omissions. One wonders, for example, why pivotal urban planners and politicians such as Robert

Moses and Governor Nelson Rockefeller do not rate a mention in a study so invested in the post-industrial remaking of New York. Both arguably played key roles in the radical – some would say brutal – refashioning of New York’s urban fabric that gave the city a head start in the era of neoliberal globalisation.

In the end, however, these comments do not intend to minimise the force of Corkin’s inquiry; they should rather be taken as an indication of the many vistas opened up by the book. *Starring New York* manages, hands down, to shed new light on a number of well-known films, and its interdisciplinary approach yields exciting and provocative results that will reorient our knowledge of this often-studied period in American cinema. *Starring New York* deserves a wide readership, in and outside the academy.

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