

Scott Jordan Harris (ed.), *World Film Locations: New York*. Bristol: Intellect, 2011, 128pp.

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World Film Locations: New York is part of a collection of a series celebrating the part played by famous cities, in film. New York – to the mind of editor Scott Jordan Harris, “the most storied, photographed and...filmed [city] on earth” (p. 5) – is (as are the other texts in the series) used as a space with which one can uncover a unique approach to film. Academics such as Michael Shapiro and Tom Conley have recently pursued the cartography of the filmic space in order to consider a political dimension in a film’s aesthetics. But, unlike the aims of those authors, the writers in *World Film Locations* are concerned solely with evoking a moment in a film which has since come to irrevocably tie the area represented, to the cinema.

This format – around 400 words to discuss one specific moment in a film which depicts an area of New York City – is effective inasmuch as it implicitly challenges the canonisation of certain films which happen to take place in New York: albeit, perhaps, accidentally. The inclusion of refreshingly interesting analyses of more minor depictions of New York works to displace more high profile films, which have been presented poorly here. One is struck by the familiarity of Simon Kinnear’s description of East 13th Street’s place in *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) (to this

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day perhaps, the strongest and most biting of all city-pictures) – the moment when De Niro’s Travis guns down Keitel’s pimp. Grace Wang’s description of *Manhattan* (Woody Allen, 1979) suffers not only from a sense of the familiar, as it does from mundane plaudits. Instead, highlights appear with Omer M. Mozzafar’s thoughts on *Malcolm X* (Spike Lee, 1992) and *Man Push Cart* (Ramin Bahrani, 2005) which are enlightening and original; and perhaps most of all with Omar P. L. Moore’s comments on *Mo’ Better Blues* (Spike Lee, 1990). Moore locates, not just through New York but with an object locatable in any urban space (a bridge) a mode of connectivity between one place (America) and another (Africa: at the time of apartheid): a seemingly essential feature of the contemporary, multicultural Western city.

It must be said however, one might be somewhat unsure about the credibility of such a collection. Contemporary films (from 2001 onward) which depict New York are intrinsically bound to the issue of September 11th, i.e. how and why the urban space should be explored. The analyses of films post-9/11 consist mainly of escapism and nostalgia. The only attempt to articulate the issue head-on comes in the guise of Wael Khairy’s summary of *25th Hour’s* (Spike Lee, 2002) allegorical relationship with the site of Ground Zero. However, since the writer is confined to around 400 words, the potential for serious engagement with the themes is all but dissolved.

Besides the mini-analyses which form the bulk of the text, several longer-form articles are included, which are effective, but – due to the minimal space – perhaps work only as a nudge towards further reading/viewing. The most interesting of these is perhaps Scott Jordan Harris’s profile on Woody Allen’s New York films.

“Here, Alvy Singer obsesses not simply over his self-image,
but over New York’s.” (Harris, p.60)

Harris’s argument, summarised in this micro-observation on *Annie Hall* (Woody Allen, 1977), is that, through his first-person, self-reflexive narratives, Allen embodies both the everyday “New Yorker”, and the city itself, as it is self-consciously perceived by the rest of the world. This is, I would argue, a somewhat dated and problematic idea of Allen, since not only his hiatus from New York locations, but the length of his stay in Europe. He is no longer a *New Yorker* looking out, but a *foreigner* looking out, which is the feeling throughout his European films. There has been a progression in his authorial persona, and this tying down to a spiritual home ignores this.

Nevertheless, irrespective of his contemporary state, Allen is one of the foremost New York filmmakers, making his prominence – along with Scorsese, Lee, and Cassavetes – imperative to the volume. At best, the *World Film Locations* series is a challenge to *the canon*: still highly influential and operative today. It realigns the academic approach to film towards a study of places, via their particular representation in specific films. Observations range from the historical (*King Kong*’s (Cooper and Schoedsack, 1933) satirical relationship to the erection of the Empire State Building) to the personal (escapist sensibilities in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (Blake Edwards, 1961). Significantly, these books are a celebration of the prevalence and importance of location shooting. The fact that a feature like this is unsurprisingly omitted, presumably due to the easy-going tone of the text, discredits much potential for

serious intellectual engagement with the series: a problem underlined as a positive in Elizabeth Weitzman's review for *New York Daily News*: "do you keep it on your desk, atop a coffee table, or on a nightstand?" In other words, this is a text with leisurely, diversionary qualities, outweighing much else.