

T2 books

Nicholas Wapshott

The Big Apple caught on the silver screen

The American movie industry began in New York and in many ways never left it. In 1927, when synchronised sound arrived, the New York studios' primitive microphones picked up so much ambient noise made by the rest of the city that film-makers were obliged to move their studios elsewhere.

The small Californian city of Los Angeles, still mostly made up of soft fruit farms, was the beneficiary, and to continue making stories about New York replicas of the cityscape were built in wood. The real Manhattan of skyscrapers and speakeasies, night clubs and nautch girls, was miniaturised and idealised along the way. An archetypal New York neighbourhood was built in every back lot in every Hollywood studio. And the audiences were so discerning that art directors were obliged to copy the tiniest details of New York's street furniture to ensure everything looked just right.

The talkies also demanded screenplays. The only way to lure writers to make the three-day railway journey across the Rockies to the cultural desert of Los Angeles was to pay them absurd amounts of money. Herman Mankiewicz wrote a telegram to Ben Hecht: "Millions are to be grabbed around here and your only competition is idi-

CELLULOID SKYLINE
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ots." The Algonquin Round Table was quickly disbanded as the wisecrackers joined the gold rush to Tinseltown.

When they arrived, the cream of New York's wits soon discovered that the gold was real but the work was not. Hollywood squandered the talents of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Paul Gallico, Lillian Hellman, S. J. Perelman, Damon Runyon, Nathanael West, Preston Sturges and others, but enough of their intelligence reached the screen to make the thirties and forties the golden years of Hollywood writing.

The best of Manhattan was

transplanted and, repotted, took root in a parallel New York of the West. The writers in self-exile enjoyed an ambiguous love affair with their palm-fringed paradise and pined for the fic-

tional New York they had invented. The city never tasted as good to them again. As Mankiewicz complained on his return to Manhattan: "Oh to be back in Hollywood wishing I was back in New York."

More waves of New York talent were to go West, trainloads of Broadway actors and comics like the Marx Brothers, an endless chorus line of singers and hoofers from Broadway musicals, a whole academy of New York composers and, in the Sixties, the best of the new wave of writing and directing talent hatched in the early years of New York's television industry: Paddy Chayevsky, Sidney Lumet, John Cassavetes and Arthur Penn.

Eventually technology and Mayor John V. Lindsay made it easy for film-making to return

to New York. Independents like Woody Allen found it possible to film hymns to the city he loved without setting foot in Hollywood. As he said of California in *Annie Hall*, "There must be more to civilisation than turning right on a red light". Martin Scorsese etched the dark side of the city in *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*, though when it came to re-creating the 19th-century Lower East Side for *Gangs of New York* he remade his beloved city in Cinecittà in Rome.

James Sanders, an architect, collaborated with the American Civil War documentarist Ken Burns to make *New York: A Documentary Film*, which charted the city through cinematography. In this admirable illustrated survey he returns the favour, tracking the history of Ameri-

can cinematography through the ways it has portrayed New York. He meticulously logs moving images of the city from *King Kong* through *Superman* and *Batman* to *Metropolis*, the Kingdom of Oz and beyond with few omissions: the gay underworld of Central Park from *Cruising* is absent, as are Andy Warhol's movies.

And, writing before last September's terrorist attacks, Sanders reveals a rare caustic pre-9/11 view of the twin towers. In the 1976 remake of *King Kong* he dismisses the buildings as "an uninspiring sight" with their "cold, empty plaza" on to which Kong finally falls. It would be interesting to see again this awful film to gauge whether, as he claims, the lamented towers really "fought the story all the way".



Ginger Rogers, as movie star Irene Malvern, steps onto the terrace of her thirty-ninth-floor suite in *Week-end at the Waldorf* (1945)

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