

6-2007

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Recommended Citation

Bernstein, Jay H. (2007). New York placenames in film titles. *Names*, 55(2), 139-166.

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New York Place Names in Film Titles

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New York Place Names in Film Titles

Abstract

From 1914 to 2006, 396 feature films with titles containing New York place names were released. This pattern emerged during the silent era, peaked from the late 1920s to the early 1940s, and then dropped off steadily before rebounding in the 1970s. This article discusses the cinematic representation of cities and urban life in the movies and the special place of New York as an “imagined city” and a cultural icon. New York’s associations in the popular imagination help explain the frequent occurrence of themes of negativity, violence, nightlife, and grandiosity (royalty or divinity) in these titles. The use of New York place names in titles creates guideposts in a socio-cognitive map of the city.

The titles of theatrical films reveal certain patterns. Recent years have brought us *New York Minute* (2004), *Brooklyn Bound* (2004), *Union Square* (2004), *Autumn in New York* (2000), *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), *Love at Times Square* (2003), and many others containing New York place names. Far from being a recent phenomenon, references to New York places have been a familiar trope in movie titles since the dawn of the film medium. Between 1914 and 2006, 396 different feature films were released with titles containing New York place names—either the whole city or one of its constituent boroughs, neighborhoods, streets, or locations. What is encoded in the mention of New York or a New York place name that could account for its popularity in movie titles?

The study of titles brings together problems of language, representation, and meaning as they apply to an aspect of products of human imaginative creativity. The titles of primarily creative or entertaining (as opposed to informative) works are not required to indicate directly the contents of the works they name, but they must contain some kind of information that can be analyzed and contextualized.

Titles are kinds of names, and thus the theory of names ought to comprehend titles. Zelinsky (2002) includes titles of artistic creations in his taxonomy of names, but earlier, more fully developed discussions of the theory of names (Algeo 1973; Pulgram 1951) do not mention them; nor does Nuessel (1992) cover titles in his book-length review of onomastic studies. The study of titles has developed independently from the study of names, and has been dominated mainly by literary scholars and art

historians (e.g., Adams 1987; Genette 1988; Levin 1977; Welchman 1997). In addition, there is a separate literature on titles of scholarly and scientific articles, written by information scientists (e.g., Buxton and Meadows 1977; Haggan 2004; Piternick 1991). By contrast, writings on film titles are found mainly in newspapers and general interest magazines. Typical is an article in *Forbes* magazine on film titles that contain the word “millionaire” or otherwise suggest millions of dollars (Brown 1999). Only three academic articles (Degler 1976; Frey, Piernot, and Elnhardt 1981; Tarpley 1985) have studied titles of motion pictures. The most extended and serious (but non-specialist) treatment of movie titles is by Leslie Halliwell (1986), famous as the creator of standard, annually-updated reference guides on film. His essay, “Curiosities of Film Titles: What’s in a Name?,” considers the many facets of movie titles, covering their derivation from the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, songs, nursery rhymes, and other sources, including place names. He specifically singles out New York as having the “most appeal” as a place name mentioned in movie titles (Halliwell 1986, 334), and notes that “London provides a comparatively meagre list” (Halliwell 1986, 336).¹

Places of all kinds are a common motif in movie titles, occurring in nearly 30 percent of all film titles (Tarpley 1985). By referencing a known location, place names set the stage for the story and establish a tone, thereby bringing it into a field of recognition; their well-established cultural associations resonate with the public. As Tarpley (1985, 79) has written,

“feature films, probably more than any other influence, have formed public impressions of places never visited in person.”

New York and the Movies

It cannot be a coincidence that New York and its iconic places are a recurring theme in titles. With few exceptions, film titles, like slogans (cf. Lagerwerf 2002), are extremely concise expressions, containing a few words to convey the subject matter or “essence” of a film in order to create some kind of intrigue and to persuade potential audience members to view it. The reason most film titles are short is that such titles are more powerful, and more likely to stick in the memory than long titles. Kellman (1975, 166) has commented about titles that “the more shrunken they are, the more effectively they function as titles.” Individual words chosen in a title are selected very carefully. The documentary film *Brooklyn Lobster* (2005), about a lobster farming company, could have been called something else, yet Brooklyn was deliberately mentioned in the title. It may be inferred that the name *Brooklyn* was thought to help promote the film. New York and its constituent locations are clearly places on the psychological map, tapping into some collective consciousness, perhaps even a kind of fabulous imaginary landscape.

New York City has been a theme in motion pictures even before film was used as a narrative medium, and the pattern of capitalizing on the city’s glamour, panache, or romance through

titles started before the advent of feature-length silent films. Rather than fading away after an initial fluorescence, the trend continued. Once certain early titles, such as *Broadway Rose* (1922), became established cinematic landmarks, they could be recycled and quoted in later titles, such as *Broadway Danny Rose* (1991).

As a cultural icon and emblem, New York City is part of what may be called America's "mythology." Many myths of American culture, such as Horatio Alger's archetypal "rags to riches" stories, take place in New York. Historian Thomas Bender (2002) has described the city's resonance as a city of movement and street life; a center of culture and power; a "center of difference"; a center of modernity in thought, fashion, and architecture; a place whose ethos is captured in a "skyline"; and a cosmopolitan world center, not just a center for the United States. As such, its cultural meaning transcends that of "America," even as it both exemplifies and in no small measure created "America."² New York evinces complex and conflicting attitudes and feelings about social power and the dangers of urban life, as well as passions about ideals, yearning, ambition, belonging, and other themes in the modern human drama. The city's image is one of extreme contrasts: impossibly high glossiness, chic, and allure on the one hand and gross depravity, griminess, and danger on the other hand. The commercialism of Wall Street and Madison Avenue has its antithesis in bohemian Greenwich Village and SoHo; the high culture of the Metropolitan Opera is countered by the low culture of Coney Island; and the fabulous wealth of penthouse life on Fifth Avenue is countered by

the dire poverty of tenement life on the Lower East Side (before gentrification). At its core, New York cannot be defined by any single pervasive quality, but enigmatically, must embrace its contradictions.

The city's density and compactness make it especially suitable to cinematic portrayal. These qualities also create a claustrophobic environment that can make the city a pressure cooker, contributing to the personality traits associated with the stereotypical New Yorker: snobbery, neurosis, street smarts, outward toughness and assertiveness (if not downright rudeness), a fast pace of speech, and a belief that New York is the center of the universe. In the popular imagination and in cultural iconography, New York, with its compressed, crowded spaces, is the dialectical antithesis of the West, with its open spaces.

Cinematic Representations of Imaginary Cityscapes

The portrayal of New York in motion pictures is a prime example of what Welchman (1997, 28) calls "imaginary geography." Cities are places in the mind. People's mental images of cities combine memories and fantasies, and often the memories originate in the watching of movies. The drama of the city is a mainstay of cinema, providing iconic images that furnish the mental landscape with internalized landmarks, routes, and vistas. New York's imaginary geography is particularly well-embedded, since the city is persistently and abundantly portrayed in film.

In his book *Imagining the Modern City* (1999), Donald considers "the city" a category of thought and experience. The ethos of the city as a place of anonymity, impersonality, and even heartlessness (McArthur 1997, 29) has consequences in loneliness, alienation, and social disorder. At the same time, the city is steeped in narratives about success and excitement. Unlike the small community, where people know each other personally and family histories are known to all inhabitants, the urban encounter is with strangers. In the absence of a social bond, the urban stranger may treat you brusquely and impersonally. But he could change your life. The encounter with a stranger, so typical of city life (especially as portrayed in film), is full of possibilities that can lead to adventure and perhaps romance, or to exploitation and potentially violence or doom. These themes are common tropes in the urban film narrative.

Another theme discussed by Donald is that of the urban man as a *flâneur*, a sophisticated, well-dressed "man about town" who strolls the city streets. The perspective on cities in literature and film is characteristically that of the pedestrian. In contrast to the modern-thinking urbanite, the person from the small town is naïve and tradition-bound. But perhaps this description of the dichotomy is stacked in favor of the city person. McArthur (1997, 23) presents the opposition between the metropolis and the small town as portrayed in classic films as one of hypocrisy versus honesty, cash relations versus human relations, individual versus community, and excess versus modesty. The sophisticated man about town could be a con man, or

worse. The attitude to cities presented in cinema, taken altogether, is ambivalent.

The Present Research

The present article does not undertake an analysis of film content, only titles. The research covers the representation of the city and its parts in movie titles, patterns over time, and aspects of the film titles. Its scope is limited to the 396 movies released between 1914 and 2006 identified by the author as meeting the following criteria: (a) they were theatrically released; (b) they are feature-length, with a minimum duration of 60 minutes or, in the silent era, six reels; and (c) their titles clearly mention New York or a part of it.

By these criteria, films that were either made for television or released directly on videotape are excluded, as are short features. Documentaries are included, as are foreign language and foreign-made films. In the case of street addresses and generic terms like *Chinatown*, *City Hall*, *The Ritz*, or *Uptown*, the reference must clearly be in New York. Nonstandard names were dealt with on a case-by-case basis. *Alphabet City* (1984) is included because it is a clearly understood and accepted (especially at the time the film was made) nickname for a specific part of New York City in the Lower East Side.³ *Crooklyn* (1994) is excluded because even though the title is an obvious play on Brooklyn, the term is not to the author's knowledge an accepted nickname for that borough. Another

potential entry excluded in this study is *The Panic in Needle Park* (1971), since *Needle Park* is not known to the author, a native New Yorker, as an authentic nickname or slang term for a real place.⁴ Other borderline cases would include *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* (1974) and *Moscow on the Hudson* (1984). Numerous films had to be excluded because of the criteria imposed. The author compiled a separate list of 66 such titles before realizing that further investigations on short and independent films might reveal this second list to be the tip of the iceberg. Also, film titles such as *The Manhattan Project* (1986), which use the same words as New York place names without referring to a location in New York, are omitted. The 396 films forming the material for this study have only 376 unique titles among them, due to remakes and other instances of films issued with already existing titles.⁵

The City and its Parts in Film Titles

While the name of the city *New York* appears in 72 film titles, that is only 18.5 percent of all New York film titles. The other titles name parts of the city: the boroughs, sections, neighborhoods, and other locations in the city. Table 1 diagrams the various parts of the city named in titles by level of specificity and frequency of use. Some ambiguity adheres to the analysis of the parts of the city by name, since place names can have multiple levels of reference. For example, *Brighton Beach* refers to both a beach and a neighborhood.

[Insert Table 1 here]

The most common New York place in movie titles is not New York but Broadway, with 104 titles, which is 26.6 percent of the total. Compared to the term *New York*, which has numerous and complex connotations, the appearance of *Broadway* in a movie title has a relatively distinctive meaning. There are many Broadways in the United States and other English-speaking countries. In fact, each of the five boroughs of New York City has a street called Broadway, but there is no ambiguity about the location and significance of cinematic Broadway.

Broadway itself is an unusual name for a New York street, since it is a one-word name unqualified by "Street," "Avenue," or another such term. Manhattan's Broadway is a remarkable street indeed. It begins at the borough's southern end at Bowling Green and follows its own eccentric path northward, defying the conventions of Manhattan's grid pattern. It extends not only to the to the borough's northernmost tip, above West 220th Street, by Columbia University's Baker Field, but further north through the Broadway Bridge into the Bronx, where it continues as Broadway through Yonkers, at which point it becomes US Route 9. (The road continues, after another name change, up to the Canadian border!)

In movie titles, *Broadway* refers not exactly to Broadway as a street and certainly not to the whole length of Broadway in Manhattan but to New York's prime "theater district" focused around Times Square at the juncture of Broadway, Seventh Avenue, and 42nd Street, extending about a block or so on either side of Broadway, from about West 40th to West 50th streets. (Indeed, Times Square and 42nd Street, mentioned in eight other titles,

refer to the same place in the movies as does Broadway.) The so-called Broadway district has dominated the production of stage theater in the United States since the end of the 19th century (Bloom 2004, xiii). As a trope in movie titles, Broadway is synonymous with stage performance and its professions and crafts in the way that Hollywood is synonymous with the motion picture industry and Washington is with national politics and the work of government.

Throughout the history of film, "Broadway" movies have both promoted and reflected on Broadway theater, including the performers and their occupations, along with other personnel (producers, directors, managers, agents, etc.) and others, such as hangers-on and hustlers. The incidence of Broadway titles has risen and fallen with the fortunes of the theater, peaking early, with ten titles in 1929.

The City of New York has consisted of five boroughs since its incorporation in 1898, only slightly postdating the advent of motion picture technology, but Manhattan is unquestionably the center—except in the sense that no borough is directly west of it—and the other boroughs are called outer boroughs. Only Manhattan is in New York County, with the postal designation, "New York, N.Y." The extent to which the boroughs are named in movie titles suggests their relative salience. Manhattan leads with 45, but Brooklyn is not far behind, with 30. Next is the Bronx, with 10, and only one film title mentions Queens.

The representation of the boroughs in movie titles can also be observed by looking at the titles that name more specific neighborhoods, streets, locations, and addresses. Seven

Manhattan neighborhoods are mentioned in film titles, as are four Brooklyn neighborhoods, and one Queens neighborhood. Some areas named in movie titles are better thought of as sections than neighborhoods. Sections, like Broadway, are less specific and generally larger than neighborhoods, though the dividing line between a neighborhood and a section is indistinct. The sections of Manhattan found in movie titles are East Side, West Side, Off Broadway, and Uptown. Additionally, three separate movies are titled *East Side, West Side*. By including both sides of the dichotomy, these titles do not merely name sections of Manhattan but suggest that they are about the whole city in general, as if to say "everything from beginning to end." Indeed, Charles B. Lawlor and James W. Blake's immortal song, "The Sidewalks of New York," has the lyric: "East Side, West Side, All around the town." "The town" is Manhattan; the other boroughs do not register. This song was written in 1894, before the incorporation of the five-borough City of New York, but the sentiment persists to this day.

Combining all place names by borough, Manhattan leads with 260 titles (65.7 percent of all titles), followed by Brooklyn, with 45 titles (11.4 percent). The Bronx is far behind, with only 13 titles (3.3 percent), while Queens has only 3 titles (0.8 percent). Staten Island is the only borough not mentioned in the title of any feature-length film.

Brooklyn's presence in so many movie titles is noteworthy given that it is an outer borough. Perhaps this is due to the fact that a large number of Americans trace their ancestry through Brooklyn, which was a self-sufficient city on a par with

New York before its incorporation in 1898. As a result, many titles of Brooklyn films seem nostalgic and wistful, as epitomized in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1945).⁶ Even those titles mentioning vampires and gorillas seem benign and silly rather than menacing. At the other end of the spectrum are the Bronx films, the titles of which are characteristically tough (e.g., *South Bronx Heroes* [1985]) and dysphoric (e.g., *Bronx Executioner* [1985]). Probably the most iconic Bronx film is *Fort Apache, the Bronx* (1980), whose title draws an explicit Hollywood analogy between the beleaguered borough and the Wild West.

Interestingly, several foreign made and foreign language films name Brooklyn and the Bronx in their titles. *The Brother From Brooklyn* (1995) is Hungarian, but *The Uncle From Brooklyn* (1995) is Italian, as are *Anna From Brooklyn* (1958), *Un Gangster Venuto da Brooklyn* (1966), and *From Corleone to Brooklyn* (1979). *An Angel Passed Over Brooklyn* (1957) is Spanish, and *Murderers Club of Brooklyn* (1967) is German.⁷ Meanwhile, *1990: The Bronx Warriors* (1982), *Escape from the Bronx* (1983), *Endgame - Bronx Lotta Finale* (1983), and *Bronx Executioner* (1989) are Italian, while *Rumble in the Bronx* (1995) is Hong Kong Chinese, and *Quackser Fortune Has a Cousin in the Bronx* (1970) is Irish. Clearly, these places outside the central city have resonance beyond American shores: some from kinship and immigration, others through nightmarish visions of a Hobbesian future.

Perhaps the popular image of the Bronx in film, fantastical at least to the extent that occurs in science fiction, has a basis in reports on news television and in photojournalism; perhaps it is grounded in first-hand experiences or eye-witness

accounts of acquaintances. But though the Bronx itself resonates as an icon, the finer details of its geography are relatively obscure, as observed in film titles. The only section of the Bronx found in a movie title is the infamously dangerous and bleak South Bronx, whose name includes the name of the borough, as does the only Bronx street name used in the movie title, Cross Bronx, an expressway with un-scenic views driven on mainly to go *through* the Bronx without stopping anywhere *in* it.

New York films tend to accentuate a sharp divide between Manhattan and the outer boroughs. Even when outer-borough life is depicted nostalgically, as with Brooklyn, these boroughs are seen as places one leaves behind if possible.⁸ Singer (2003, 53) comments that people in Brooklyn are depicted in cinema as “struggling, déclassé, [and] entrapped by the social order of the immediate milieu, the neighborhood.” By contrast, “many contemporary films set in Manhattan depict a class-based social milieu of privilege and purpose” (Singer 2003, 52). In movies, protagonists from outer boroughs yearn to leave their parochial neighborhoods for the big city—a classic example being Tony Manero in John Badham’s *Saturday Night Fever* (1977). But according to urban anthropologist Roger Sanjek (1998), residents of New York’s working and lower-middle class neighborhoods in the outer boroughs generally prefer to move not to the central city but to the suburbs as they gain a foothold on middle class life. Those who gravitate to Manhattan to live are more frequently upwardly mobile suburbanites, out-of-towners, and members of “a segment of global elites from other countries” (Sanjek 1998, 35).

Several films mention the names of neighborhoods and sections. Second only to Broadway, the most popular section or neighborhood by far is Harlem, with 21 titles. Harlem, located far uptown from the city's commercial centers in midtown and downtown Manhattan, is famous as the center, even the "capital," of black New York (if not black America), with both positive and negative connotations—positive because of its urbane sophistication and its "exotica" quotient from the standpoint of "white America," and negative because of poverty, blight, and the dangers of crime, gangs, and street violence. Harlem titles display the most extreme range of attitudes possible, from *Hell up in Harlem* (1973) to *Paradise in Harlem* (1939). Besides Harlem itself, two films are named after Sugar Hill, which is a section of Harlem.

After Harlem, the next most commonly named part of New York is the Bowery (also a street in the Lower East Side). This area, more a sub-neighborhood than a full-fledged neighborhood, has long been known as New York's "skid row," a hangout for winos and panhandlers. Fourteen film titles contain the word *Bowery*. This high number is due mainly to the famous *Bowery Boys* film series, which consisted of nearly 50 titles made between 1946 and 1958, including four containing the word *Bowery*. *The Bowery Boys* grew out of another series, *The East End Kids*, with 23 movies from 1938 to 1945, including three with the word *Bowery* in the titles. These titles do not pick up on the "skid row" connotation but rather the mentalities, experiences, and living conditions of immigrant and first-generation American communities, especially Irish, in Manhattan slums during the years surrounding World War

II. The *East End Kids* film series unsentimentally portrayed juvenile delinquents in living in rough and often unhealthy conditions, but as the Bowery Boys they were no longer good kids gone bad, even though they still “engaged in raucous horseplay” while hanging out on the sidewalk. On the contrary, “they would somehow manage to save an orphanage or accomplish some other worthy deed” (Sanders 2001, 168). The Bowery has not figured in a movie title since the 1957 slice-of-life documentary, *On the Bowery*.

Another salient neighborhood is Greenwich Village, mentioned in five titles. This neighborhood in lower Manhattan is famous as a hotbed of political radicalism and bohemian lifestyles, a place where eccentricity and free expression were tolerated (and gawked at by out-of-towners) when conformity was expected elsewhere, including the rest of New York. But only two of the five titles appear to capitalize on this stereotype of “the Village” (as it is known): *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* (1975), about a young man who leaves Brooklyn to pursue his dream of making it in show business, and the lesser-known *Greenwich Village Story* (1963), also known as *Birthplace of the Hootenanny*, about a struggling young writer and his live-in girlfriend, a ballerina. Another film, the musical *Greenwich Village* (1944), is also about show business, but, set in the prohibition period, it does not pursue the bohemian angle. Two other films, *The Pope of Greenwich Village* (1984) and *Murder in Greenwich Village* (1937), concern crime rather than bohemianism or the arts.

Six Brooklyn neighborhoods occur in film titles, including three mentions of Coney Island, a beach and recreation district

besides being a residential area, famous for decades beyond New York as an amusement park with breathtaking, state-of-the-art rides. Coney Island's amusement park also featured gambling, sideshows, and other provocative entertainment, considered lowbrow and low-class in New York's status hierarchy. Most of the other neighborhoods mentioned in film titles (see Table 1) are fairly average, generic urban neighborhoods.

Twenty different New York streets are named in 34 movie titles. With four exceptions, all streets are in Manhattan. The most common streets named in titles are Tenth Avenue, with six titles, followed by Fifth Avenue, with five titles. The salience of Fifth Avenue is easily understood. For two and a half miles, from Washington Square Park (in Greenwich Village), where the avenue begins, up to 59th Street, the southern boundary of Central Park, it is the hub of the city, the central spine dividing the East Side and the West Side, featuring many expensive stores and other internationally-known destinations. From there on up to the famous Mount Sinai Hospital, which extends from East 98th to East 102nd Streets, it is the primary habitat of New York's jet set, associated with elegance and opulence. More difficult to explain is the occurrence of Tenth Avenue, an obscure and mainly dingy street running through the meatpacking district and Hell's Kitchen from West 14th to West 59th Street. The six films containing the name of Tenth Avenue were made from 1928 to 1957.

A few of the other New York streets named in movie titles are famous—Wall Street, Madison Avenue, and Park Avenue—but most are not.⁹ All the streets just mentioned have unique and iconic personalities. Wall Street, named in four titles, is synonymous

with the world of finance and investment, and Madison Avenue has equal stature in the world of advertising. While both have the status of "capitals" in their respective domains, they should now be considered symbolic or "imagined" places, like the Bowery's synonymy with "skid row," since many agencies and firms have relocated to other areas in New York or the suburbs. Park Avenue, like Fifth Avenue, is known as the residential neighborhood of the rich and famous. The other streets named in movie titles may have distinct cultural associations, but they are not world-famous.

Most of the 16 specific locations named in film titles are significant as nodes, "strategic spots in a city into which an observer can enter" (Lynch 1960, 47), often "convergences of paths" as in Times Square, or other points of concentration, such as Central Park, Grand Central Station, or various well-known hotels and theaters. But none of the three addresses mentioned in movie titles are internationally known or significant, and it can be argued that the 1961 film *Breakfast at Tiffany's* lent the Fifth Avenue jewelry store of that name more fame than vice versa; indeed, the girls' name *Tiffany* went from obscurity to great popularity in the United States following the film's release. The plethora of these titles suggests that New York locations are crucial to the stories, themes, and selling points of a great number of movies. Even the subway system, long an iconic and distinctive aspect of New York life, is picked up on in two film titles.

It will be noted that the usage of place names in titles calls up the mental map of a pedestrian or subway rider rather

than that of a driver.¹⁰ The phenomenon is similar to that in which a series of games between the Yankees and the Mets is called a "subway series." While residents of outer boroughs commonly own cars, most Manhattan dwellers do not, due to the difficulties involved in parking (and indeed driving) there. As a result, Manhattan lifestyles, which dominate the depiction of New York in film, are anathema to a "car culture." Otherwise we might see references in film titles to the FDR Drive, the Lincoln Tunnel, and other such roads, not to mention the George Washington Bridge, arteries known well to commuters living in the outer boroughs and beyond.¹¹

Manhattanites frequently travel on roads outside Manhattan, such as the Van Wyck and Grand Central Expressways, to go to airports in Queens, which themselves are places on New York's cognitive map. But since they generally ride in taxicabs, they do not give much thought to the route. A script written by a taxi or limousine driver might introduce a different point of view, which could be reflected in the title. But would it be produced?

Among the many New York place names yet to be deployed in film titles, some that seem ripe for such use are SoHo, Tribeca, Central Park West, Riverside Drive, and Lincoln Center in Manhattan; Dumbo, Williamsburg, Park Slope, and Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, Jackson Heights and the Rockaways in Queens; Riverdale and Yankee Stadium in the Bronx, and Riker's Island. Some of these places are already engrained in popular culture and the national consciousness, while the others are well known to New Yorkers who come in contact with local media.

Themes, Feelings, Resonances

Kaplan and Bernays (1997, 127) observe that “a name pulses with all sorts of overtones and undertones, shimmers with lights and darks, shadows, speaks with flickers of meaning and half meaning.” However true this may be of personal names, which is the subject of their book, it is even more the case for titles of creative works, and eloquently sums up the polyphony of tones, references, and qualities that infuse titles. Consider the moods evoked in the titles of films containing the name of the city: *The Darling of New York* (1923); *Escape From New York* (1981); *Happy New York* (1997); *The Killer that Stalked New York* (1950); *A King in New York* (1957); *Little Old New York* (1940); *Naked in New York* (1993); *Sheila Levine is Dead and Living in New York* (1975); *Tarzan’s New York Adventure* (1942).

Only 39 New York film titles (9.8 percent of the total) are purely nominal, naming nothing but a place or location.¹² With few exceptions, the rest combine place names with other words that often suggest a theme or emotional tone. Even titles that just name places can convey a mood: *Hell’s Kitchen* is not just the widely accepted name of a neighborhood more politely referred to as Clinton but expresses a distinctly ominous tone. Similarly, *Alphabet City*, a nickname for the portion of Manhattan’s Lower East Side where avenues are named with letters rather than numbers, conveys a certain flavor for those who know the city firsthand (see Allen 1993b).

Several general themes emerge from a study of New York film titles. In terms of sentiment or emotion, we can distinguish those titles with a positive tone from those with a negative tone. Kelly (2000) has pointed out that culture and language are skewed heavily toward the positive even though life itself presents (at best) an even balance of positive and negative.

For example, "happy" occurs almost three times more often than "sad" in American written texts. "Good" outnumbers "bad" by almost six to one, and "beautiful" more than "ugly" by the same margin. Even when people mention positive and negative words together, they give top billing to the brighter side of life . . . [as in such phrases as] "happy and sad," "good and bad," "rich and poor," "life and death," and "sweet and sour." (Kelly 2000, 4)

In light of these observations, the predominance of negative as opposed to positive tones in New York movie titles is striking. Seventeen titles (4.3 percent) use negative words, compared to ten (2.5 percent) using positive words.

Positive titles use words like *Love*, *Gold*, *Happy*, *Darling*, *Heroes*, *Champs*, *Pride*, and *Romance*. *A Great Day in Harlem* (1994) is obviously a positive title, and *Rainbow over Broadway* (1933) can also be considered positive, because rainbows have fortuitous connotations. By contrast, negativity in titles is expressed not only in words such as *Bad*, *Damage*, and *Dead*, but also in terms like *Broke*, *Drifter*, *Prisoner*, *Slaves*, *Madness*, and *Broken*

hearts. Negative connotations are also found in *The Case Against Brooklyn* (1958) and *2019: After the Fall of New York* (1983), even though the negativity cannot necessarily be pinned on a certain word. But negative words may not necessarily have purely negative meanings. *Fever* and *Rage* can mean passion, and the expression *Burning up Broadway*, which on the surface is negative (and is the title of a 1923 film), can mean huge success on Broadway. And it is well known that in vernacular English, *Bad* can mean *Good*, although the film *Broadway Bad* (1933) seems to antedate such a connotation. Nevertheless, negative tones certainly figure at least as much as and probably more than positive tones in New York movie titles, contrary to Kelly's findings about supposedly universal preferences in naming. Of course, it should be no surprise that place names and all the more so personal names should be positive: there is an understandable motive on the name giver's part to celebrate and demonstrate affection and pride in one's place and offspring. A negative title for a creative work is not necessarily a suggestion of worthlessness or a sign of disrespect. To the contrary, it can create allure. New York's reputation for hostility, danger, and the toughness New Yorkers need to manage them, are part of the city's romance in the popular imagination, although few of these titles seem to capture these qualities. Of the titles seen as having negative tones, nine name Broadway, two Brooklyn, and two Harlem. The relatively few positive titles name several different parts of New York.

Besides simple negativity, violence is a theme in 25 titles, (6.3 percent of New York movie titles). Violence is seen

in the use of terms such as *Murder* (used in eight titles, along with *Murderer* and *Murderers*, as well as two occurrences of the near-synonym *Slaughter* and one of *Killer*), *Gun*, *Bombshell*, *Blitzkrieg*, *Bullets*, *War*, *Battle*, and *Gangster*. A classic example of a violent title is *Bronx Executioner* (1989). Although no individual words in the titles *Rumble in the Bronx* (1995), *Gangs of New York* (2002), or *The New York Ripper* (1982) are violent, the overall import of each of these titles is sinister and violent. These titles capture the sense of New York as a dangerous place. Violent titles are given to films naming a range of New York places: Harlem (and Lenox Avenue, which is in Harlem), Times Square, Tenth Avenue, Greenwich Village, Grand Central (Station), and the Bowery, as well as Brooklyn and the Bronx. Just as a negative word in a title is not necessarily negative, a violent word in a title can have a nonviolent and indeed positive connotation: a *Bombshell* can be an attractive woman, and a comedian who *slays* an audience is one who wins them over by making them laugh.

Several other qualities are regularly found in New York film titles. Themes of heroism (e.g., *The Colossus of New York* [1958]), intellect (e.g., *Queens Logic* [1991]), the risqué (e.g., *Manhattan Gigolo* [1986]), and weirdness (e.g., *New York Vampire* [1991]) all occur in multiple instances.¹³ But another quality, the sacred, is a far more prominent theme, found in 17 titles. This quality can be detected in the use of the terms *Angel*, *Bishop*, *Heaven*, *Madonna*, *Miracle*, *Paradise*, *Pope*, *God*, and *Saint*. A related connotation is suggested in the use of terms for royalty, such as *King*, *Emperor*, *Czar*, etc. Royal themes occur in

13 titles. The use of these kinds of motifs seems mainly cynical, ironic, sarcastic, or at least emphasizing the unexpected juxtaposition of the sacred or royal on the one hand and the mundane and pedestrian on the other. Even where the connotation is not ironic, as in *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947) or *A King in New York* (1957), the apparent out-of-place quality of nobility or the miraculous in real life in a down-to-earth city calls attention. The use of sacred themes (which seems related as well to the positive theme), seems to play on the unexpected presence of angels, saints, and so on, in New York. These terms, of course, need not refer literally to angels or saints but to earthly personages who, through their kindness or heroic deeds, can be likened to angels and saints. The royal theme, on the other hand, has no necessary connection to benevolence or heroism, but seems to connote power, as in *The Czar of Broadway* (1930) and *Emperor of the Bronx* (1988). But the terms can have other implications. *Prince of Central Park* (2000) refers to a teenage runaway who becomes the protégé of a homeless eccentric who has appointed himself King of Central Park. *The Prince of Broadway* (1926) refers to a heavyweight boxing champion dubbed with that sobriquet because he trains by drinking and dancing all night.

An even more noticeable motif in movie titles that lends to their tone is the nocturnal theme, found in 23 titles. Besides words like *Night* and *Midnight*, expressions like *After dark* and *While New York sleeps* are patently nocturnal. References to the moon and comets are also nocturnal, since these objects are only seen at night. These titles refer to the important association

of New York with nightlife: clubs, shows, dancing, and other kinds of recreation and entertainment that occur at night. The salience of night in New York, resulting in its cultural iconicity, is the subject of a recent book by Caldwell (2005). Besides manifestly nocturnal titles, references in movie titles to nightlife can be found in other titles, such as *Manhattan Cocktail* (1925) and *Bright Lights of Broadway* (1923). After all, cocktails are usually served at night, and bright lights are turned on for performances at night. (The Manhattan is also the name of a cocktail.) In addition, certain neighborhoods, particularly Harlem and Greenwich Village, featured in many movie titles (see above), are historically associated with New York nightlife (Caldwell, 2005, 232-239). The nocturnal theme also plausibly extends to most of the 15 titles referring to music and dance (e.g., *Harlem Aria* [1999], *El Tango en Broadway* [1934]), since the performance of these arts take place mainly at night. References to literature, found in 10 titles (e.g., *Brighton Beach Memoirs* [1986] and *Tales of Manhattan* [1942]), seem related to the intellectual motif, however. In contrast to the profusion of nocturnal connotations in titles, only two New York film titles have diurnal connotations: *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) and *A Great Day in Harlem* (1994).

Many of the themes commonly found in the titles New York films seem typical of film (and probably literary) titles of all kinds, rather than specific to the New York film. These include the mention of a person by name (*Broadway Jones* [1917]), occupation (*New York Cop* [1995]), or other defining characteristic (*Times Square Playboy* [1936]); events (*It Happened*

in Flatbush [1947]); direction (*'neath Brooklyn Bridge* [1942]); travel (*Headin' for Broadway* [1980]); and time (*Autumn in New York* [2000]). Another theme regularly found in New York film titles, the occurrence of which is probably widespread in many kinds of narrative films, is that of children (e.g., *Tenth Avenue Kid* [1938]). This is because the use of an expression for a youth (child, boy, girl, baby) need not refer literally to a child, but may suggest that someone is a native of a certain place. Such titles also suggest affection, diminutiveness, and proximity, similar tones to those expressed in such titles as *Little Miss Broadway* (1947) and *Little Old New York* (1940).

Patterns over Time

The presence of New York place names in movie titles has waxed and waned over time, but it peaked from the late 1920s to the early 1940s. In the 17 years from 1926 to 1942, 152 films had New York titles, accounting for over half of all such titles—an average of 8.9 titles a year. Of these films, 70 titles named Broadway, 20 named New York, 16 named Manhattan, and the rest named other places. Only two titles from this period named Brooklyn, though the Brooklyn Bridge and Coney Island were named in other films, as were Blackwell's Island (now Roosevelt Island) and Ellis Island.

Figure 1 illustrates the changing status of New York place names in movie titles over time. It shows that New York's presence in film titles developed rapidly over the last years of

the silent era, dipping slightly in the early 1930s only to bounce back in the second half of the decade, but then dropped steadily downward throughout the 1940s and 1950s, reaching a low point in the period from 1956 to 1960. The year 1956 was the first since 1921 in which no titles with New York place names were released. From then until 1968, only 19 such films were released, including the all-time classics *West Side Story* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, both released in 1961. As New York place names had previously become popular, even fashionable, in movie titles, the practice outlived its charm and had become stale through repeated use over time. Perhaps the city itself had not gone out of fashion in the movies, but the practice of including its place names in movie titles had. From the low point of the late 1950s, the usage of New York place names in movie titles has unsteadily increased over time, as seen in Figure 1, reaching a height of only 27 titles in the years 1991 to 1995, as compared to 45 in the years 1926 to 1930 and 46 from 1936 to 1940.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

The rapid rise of New York's popularity in film as the medium became established can be explained in part by the growing significance of the city during the first 30 years of the twentieth century. Historian Bayrd Still (1956) calls the period from 1900 to 1930 in New York "the golden generation" because of the city's ever-increasing affluence and sophistication (despite the persistence of slums). The city dominated the cultural scene, becoming a "cultural capital," in Still's words, by the mid-1920s. Though the move to Hollywood had begun, the city remained important in film production.

Why, then, did New York places continue to dominate film titles as the “roaring twenties” gave way to the “threadbare thirties,” dipping only slightly in the first half of that decade? Films during this time were meant to provide escapist entertainment from the hardships of real life, both in New York itself and in the larger world outside the city that was the audience for movies. Under the circumstances, stories involving glamorous lifestyles and well-heeled people provided welcome diversion. The turn toward grittier, more realistic urban scenarios beginning in the later 1930s also favored New York as a setting for movies. It was only during World War II that New York’s appeal in movies—or at least their titles—peaked and began to recede. In the late 1950s, the nadir of New York’s popularity in film titles coincided not only with the decline of several major studios which had previously exerted vast control over the motion picture industry, but also with the decline in popularity of both the musical and film noir genres (Lev 2003, 216–255), genres intimately linked to the representation of the city in film (Christopher 1997; McArthur 1997).

New York place names resurged in popularity in movie titles in the 1970s, when filmmakers used New York both as a trope of nostalgia for the lost pleasures of a remembered life in a more innocent city and to reflect nightmares of dystopian New York in the popular imagination: a financially and morally bankrupt city overrun by drugs, violence, and decay summed up in images of firebombed buildings and subway graffiti, and in the headline, “Ford to City: Drop Dead.” The zeitgeist was perhaps captured most exquisitely in Michael Winner’s *Death Wish* (1974), but

numerous 1970s films expressed this negativity (Sanders 2001), including *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, *Hell up in Harlem*, and *Escape from New York*, all negative titles featuring New York place names. At the same time, however, Woody Allen created *Manhattan* (1979), his classic paean to the city. Other nostalgia-tinged films from the period include Martin Davidson and Stephen Verona's *The Lords of Flatbush* (1974), Paul Mazursky's *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* (1976), Mark Rydell's *Harry and Walter Go to New York* (1976), and Joan Micklin Silver's *Hester Street* (1975).

With New York making another resurgence in the 1990s, even as the city distanced itself from the depressing years of fiscal crisis, a diverse range of themes emerged, from *Rumble in the Bronx* (1995) and *Vampire in Brooklyn* (1995) to *All the Vermeers in New York* (1992), *Little Manhattan* (2005), and *Went to Coney Island on a Mission from God . . . Be Back by Five* (2002). *World Trade Center* (2006), named for a New York location heretofore unmentioned in movie titles, premiered in September 2006. *Motherless Brooklyn*, based on the novel by Jonathan Lethem, in production at the time of writing, continues the established tradition of negative associations in film titles featuring New York place names. Future titles will likely refer to neighborhoods that were previously viewed with disdain but which are suddenly emerging as next chic and trendy spot, such as Red Hook or the Meat-Packing District, as well as new place names, perhaps including the sobering Ground Zero.

Conclusion

Vehicles of creative expression and entertainment, movies are also part of the cultural landscape, the knowledge base with which people view and interpret the world around them. They imprint upon the popular memory with iconic images, scenes, characters, styles of hair and clothing, and verbal expressions that may in turn be further recycled in other products. Far more than literature, they are a mass art form, penetrating consciousness not just nationally but in many cases globally. Representations of places in film create imaginary landscapes-- places in the heart and mind for cogitating, speculating, and fantasizing about sites one has not otherwise visited. Cinema provides entire sets of iconic images, stereotypes, and mental maps for world cities such as New York, along with London, Paris, Rome, and San Francisco.

The pattern of including New York place names in movie titles ebbed in the late 1950s, though it never disappeared, and has slowly resurged. Recent evidence suggests it is on an upswing. This bounce back to popularity after a long slide into decline could be due in part to the recycling of old cultural materials, including existing film titles, reprocessing them into new formats, and internal cultural mechanisms whereby an element returns to popularity after a period of dormancy—a process that can be observed in popular music, hairstyles, children's first names, and other fashions. The first wave corresponded to the growth of the city's cultural importance in the first half of the 20th century; the second wave comes at a time of new kinds of

immigration, unprecedented globalization, and unprecedented anxieties about security, whether the foreign other or the enemy within. Film titles can invoke old meanings in a generic way, as in *Uptown Girls* (2003), or they may introduce new reference points, as in *West Bank Brooklyn* (2002).

Among the motifs found in New York movie titles, the most pronounced are negativity in general and violence in particular; nightlife; and grandiosity in the use of terms for royalty and the sacred. These associations are salient facets of New York's character in the popular imagination. The grandiosity theme may also suggest a sardonic view of self-importance that needs to be taken down a peg and a sense of ironic contrast between the cosmic and high-and-mighty on the one hand and the prosaic and down-to-earth ordinariness of real life in the city.

Titles convey images, emotions, flavors, and tones in very tight textual spaces, with little room for rhetorical flourish. Each individual word used is likely chosen with the utmost care, and in the case of a commercial movie, probably vetted by teams of executives. A title must sum up what a potential viewer is intended to know before seeing the film. The fact that New York place names occur in so many movie titles over the entire course of film history, extending through the foreseeable future, suggests the many ways that the city's image is inscribed in the consciousness of all consumers of American popular culture.

Endnotes

¹ Degler (1975) and Tarpley (1985) both conducted systematic studies and found more titles naming Paris than any other city, including New York. By contrast, Halliwell's (1986) essay, though drawing on the author's encyclopedic knowledge of film history, is unsystematic, and cannot be considered more than off-the-cuff. But perhaps he recognized that not just the whole city of New York but its various parts and locations figured in many titles.

² Even though the term "America" should properly apply to all parts of the North and South American continents, as well as offshore archipelagos such as the Caribbean islands, natives of the United States call themselves Americans, and think and speak of their homeland as America. Many patriotic songs and sayings name America rather than the United States. The term "America" is used here in this emic sense.

³ See Allen 1993a. Films with other nicknames in titles ("Gotham" and "Big Apple") were excluded from the main list not because of

their titles but because they did not meet length and theatrical release criteria.

⁴Allen (1993a, 1993b) does not mention the expression, but the term appears to refer to Sherman Square, a traffic island at Broadway and West 74th Street, described as “a small public area with benches, bushes, etc., where drug addicts are known to gather” (Leiter 1997, 646).

⁵For present purposes, some nearly identical titles, e.g., *Gangs of New York* (2002) and *The Gangs of New York* (1938), are separated.

⁶The exception is a German film, *Murderers Club of Brooklyn*, a.k.a. *Body in Central Park* (1967).

⁷Some of these films were released in the United States with different, non-Brooklyn titles.

⁸On the cable television series *Entourage*, when fictional up-and-coming actor Vincent Chase boasts about his starring role in the new film, *Queens Boulevard*, his agent Ari Gold scoffs at the film’s significance by asking him sardonically what’s next--the Belt Parkway? Outer-borough roads and locales may be brushed off as inconsequential compared to cosmopolitan centers of action in Manhattan.

⁹ As with Broadway, only certain sections of Park Avenue, Madison Avenue, and Fifth Avenue are cultural icons.

¹⁰ Lynch (1960, 48) observes that an individual's mental map of the city is liable to shift depending on one's perspective as a driver or a pedestrian.

¹¹ *Over the GW*, about a rehabilitation center in New Jersey (across the George Washington Bridge from Manhattan), premiered in limited release in June 2007, after this essay was completed.

¹² A title like *15 Maiden Lane* counts as a "nominal" title (one that straightforwardly names a location), but *The House on Carroll Street* and *West of Broadway* go beyond the purely nominal, and are relatively elaborate and "rhetorical."

¹³ The word *Dirty* on its own could be read as negative, but in the context of the whole title, *Dirty Gertie From Harlem, U.S.A.* (1946), the connotation is risqué.

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Acknowledgments

I thank Bruce Bernstein, Jeffrey Kroessler, Miriam Laskin, Robert Singer, and Lisa Tappeiner for their helpful comments.

Table 1. Taxonomy of New York Places by Level of Specificity and Incidence in Film Titles

New York (72)				
Boroughs	Manhattan (45)	Brooklyn (30)	Bronx (10)	Queens
Multiple levels	Broadway (street and section) (104) Bowery (street and neighborhood) (14) Chelsea (hotel and neighborhood)	Brighton Beach (beach and neighborhood) Sunset Park (park and neighborhood)		
General	East Side, West Side (3)			
Sections*	Uptown (3) East Side (i.e. Lower East Side) (2) Off Broadway West Side		South Bronx (2)	
Neighborhoods	Harlem (21) Greenwich Village (5) Hell's Kitchen (2) Sugar Hill (2) Alphabet City (Lower East Side) Chinatown Washington Heights	Coney Island (3) Flatbush (2) Bensonhurst Gravesend		Astoria
Streets	Tenth Avenue (6) Fifth Avenue (5) Wall Street (4) 42 nd Street (2) Avenue A (2) Lenox Avenue Madison Avenue Park Avenue Second Avenue 34 th Street 52 nd Street 92 nd Street 110 th Street Hester Street South Street Park Row	Metropolitan Avenue 29 th Street Carroll Street	Cross Bronx (Expressway)	
Locations Bridge	Times Square (6) Central Park (2) Union Square Washington Square City Hall World Trade Center Madison Sq. Garden (arena) Fort Washington (armory) Plaza (hotel) Waldorf (hotel) Tiffany's (jewelry store) Cotton Club (nightclub) Carnegie Hall (theater) Minsky's (theater) Grand Central (train terminal)	Brooklyn Bridge (2)		Hellgate
Addresses	13 Washington Square			

15 Maiden Lane
15 Park Avenue

Islands Blackwell's Island (now Roosevelt Avenue, part of Manhattan)
Ellis Island (now part of Hudson County, N.J.)

Subways IRT
Subway

* Less specific and often larger than neighborhoods

Figure 1 New York Place Names in Film Titles over Time, 1921-2005

