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The Essential New York City Films

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THE ESSENTIAL NEW YORK CITY FILMS

by

NIKOLA DURKOVIC

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Nikola Durkovic

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

The Essential New York City Films

by

Nikola Durkovic

Advisor: Professor William Boddy

Films play significant part in the creation and preservation of the New York City’s image and must be consulted by anyone interested in exploring the City’s history and character. The essential New York films tell stories about New Yorkers and how they deal with their reality of extreme diversity and competition. In my opinion, there are six essential New York City films: *Shadows* (1959), *The Panic in Needle Park* (1971), *Mean Streets* (1973), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Manhattan* (1979), and *25th Hour* (2002). My goal is to explore the essential New York films and demonstrate how their content and form reflect the character of the City. By doing that I hope to understand my own New York experience better and to help others reflect on their own days in the Gotham. The essential New York films combine love for film as art and love for the City of New York. They represent a symbiosis between film, as the most powerful tool for myth making, and the legendary metropolis. That is how these films accomplish their historical mission: they preserve the knowledge and educate viewers about an important and unique place and times, inspiring others to think, create and search further in the progressive spirit of the City.
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Introduction

There is no place like New York City. The City’s history tells the story of the place where people from all parts of the world, like nowhere else, come and interact in their pursuit of happiness. According to the New York: A Documentary Film by Ric Burns, the City has come a long way from a small trading post in its early days, to the unique metropolis around the end of 1800s. New York has been the undisputed capital of the world during the 20th century.

James Clapp, in his essay “‘Are You Talking to Me?’: New York and the Cinema of Urban Alienation,” stated that “New York City presents a permutation of physical, social, and iconic characteristics that present dramatic contrasts better than lesser cities.” According to Clapp, the dramatic contrast that the city offers attracts storytellers: “Social change in New York is more constant and fast-paced. These changes range from changes in styles and fashions to political and economic changes. The pace and energy of New York has been interpreted in virtually every artistic medium, from painting to stand-up comedy.” In addition, “different labor requirements of the city tend to attract people with different values and worldviews, requiring, if not always engendering, a higher degree of social tolerance.” Clapp also noted that “the big city both generates and permits anonymity, allowing one to remain a stranger to others in a way that would not be possible in a rural or small-town setting.” Explaining multiple social worlds and density of the City, Clapp wrote that “the vast social heterogeneity of New York is composed of a mosaic of ethnic enclaves, bohemias, uptowns and downtowns and slums…The compaction of these areas of the city often juxtaposes people of different values, backgrounds and lifestyles, hence heightening the sense that the city is a place of others and aliens.” Clapp emphasized the importance of the spatial structure of the city: “New York and particularly Manhattan, presents a
spatial profile and skyline that is instantly recognizable at a distance (laterally or from above) and conveys an iconic power.” He concluded that “the strong physical identity of its districts and neighborhoods affords settings and visual references that can be employed to visually underscore and enhance a film's narrative."

Films play significant part in the creation and preservation of the New York City’s image and must be consulted by anyone interested in exploring the City’s history and character. Often, the New York in the movies is represented as fantastical version of the real place. There are many examples: King Kong (1933), West Side Story (1961), Superman (1978), Escape from New York (1981), Ghostbusters (1984), The Muppets Take Manhattan (1984), King Kong (2005) …

On the other hand, films that I call “the essential New York City films” do the opposite. Their representations of New York life experience feel real, documentary. These films can be best understood by viewers who lived in and experienced the City.

In my opinion, there are six essential New York City films: Shadows (1959), The Panic in Needle Park (1971), Mean Streets (1973), Taxi Driver (1976), Manhattan (1979), and 25th Hour (2002).

The essential New York films tell stories about New Yorkers and how they deal with their reality of extreme diversity and competition. Generations of New Yorkers, from all parts of the world, brought with them their cultures, world views and dreams. The forces of business and political competition, together with social factors such as race, class, gender and their interconnections, determined the City’s character and continue to make its destiny.

The films’ directors created the feeling of realism by using mostly similar, but also sometimes different approaches and techniques. In most cases, they did it by their choice of
stories to tell and by their documentary-style representations of characters and events in those stories. Sometimes the films deal with only a few specific aspects of the New York living, but all of the films capture many unique New York moments. The choices of the real shooting locations and its representations accurately capture the moods of the City. Mostly hand-held camera work, ambient sound recording, and the mix of nonprofessional and professional acting derive organically from the stories themselves. In the essential New York films, the highly manipulative art of filmmaking has been skillfully used to create the illusions of truth.

My goal is to explore the essential New York films and demonstrate how their content and form reflect the character of the City. By doing that I hope to understand my own New York experience better and to help others reflect on their own days in the Gotham.

According to Caleb Carr, author of *The Alienist*, "the influx of wealth and the super-wealthy from around the world has meant the exodus of those creative New Yorkers who gave the city its own unique romance - and heart. This is part of the “cleaned up crime” aspect of (Mayor Michael) Bloomberg’s legacy: for it was the city’s seedy, crime-ridden neighborhoods that could offer cheap housing not only to the middle and lower classes of workers and business owners, but to artists, writers and musicians." (New York Times Online, August 16th, 2013, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/08/18/nyregion/bloomberg-voices.html?mcubz=1.)

Patty Smith agrees. In conversation with Jonathan Lethem in May 2010 she said: "New York has closed itself off to the young and the struggling. But there’s always other cities. I don’t know—Detroit, Poughkeepsie, Newark. You have to find the new place because New York City has been taken away from you. It’s still a great city, but it has closed itself off from the poor and creative burgeoning society. So, my advice is: Find a new city.” (Moss,
http://vanishingnewyork.blogspot.com/2010/05/find-new-city.html). I feel that the City’s character has changed for the worse, simply because it seems that only the rich can afford it now. And that is another reason why the essential New York films are important: they serve as time capsules and preserve the life in the City as it was.

The essential New York films combine love for film as art and love for the City of New York. They represent a symbiosis between film, as the most powerful tool for myth making, and the legendary metropolis. That is how these films accomplish their historical mission: they preserve the knowledge and educate viewers about an important and unique place and times, inspiring others to think, create and search further in the progressive spirit of the City.
Shadows (1959)

*Shadows* is an essential New York film because the film explores and preserves what it meant to be young in the 1950s New York. For its time, it was shockingly progressive on race and honest about sex. It looks and feels like a documentary, with jazz playing throughout the film. *The New York Times*’s film critic Bosley Crowther called it "fitfully dynamic, endowed with a raw but vibrant strength, conveying an illusion of being a record of real people" (Levy, 2001, p. 103). The film’s portrayal of life in New York, the life of competition and diversity, is relevant even today, almost sixty years after the production.

New York was the epicenter of independent film production in the mid 1950s. As a result of technological development, with the Nagra portable tape recorder for location sound recording and the 16mm Arriflex for hand-held camerawork, low budget and original films were made. Cassavetes, influenced by Italian Neorealism, liked to tell stories about ordinary people, on real locations and with nonprofessional actors. He was also influenced by New York scripted-documentary filmmakers such as Shirley Clarke, Lionel Rogozin and Morris Engel. Scripted-documentary looks and feels like documentary film but portrays fictional events. For example, *On the Bowery* (1956) by Rogozin and *Lovers and Lollipops* (1955) by Engel, made a big impression on Cassavetes. These films provided not only aesthetic models, but also examples of how to independently, financially and technologically, complete a film (Carney, 1985, pp. 26-29).

Cassavetes, already a well-known actor, strongly disagreed with how films were made in Hollywood. He found the screenplays he was offered were false, weak, unauthentic. He also felt
that studio film production methods did not allow actors to develop emotionally complex performances. All in all, he thought that Hollywood made films the way Detroit made cars (Carney, 1994, pp. 28-29). In a 1992 special issue of PostScript: Essays in Film and the Humanities, Cassavetes is quoted as saying: "Films today show only a dream world and have lost touch with the way people really are. In this country, people die at 21. They die emotionally at 21, maybe younger. My responsibility as an artist is to help people get past 21."

As the guest on Jean Shepherd’s radio show Night People, where he came to publicize the film he acted in, Edge of the City (1957), Cassavetes proclaimed that if each listener contributed little money, he’d make a better film, “a movie about people.” Approximately $2000 came in. That same week, with a group of his actor friends in New York, without a script, with borrowed equipment and using the money received from the radio show, Cassavetes started the production of Shadows. It took him three long and turbulent years to complete the film (Carney, 1994, pp. 29-33).

Shadows depicts two weeks in the lives of three African American siblings on the margins of society: two brothers and their white looking sister Lelia. Hugh is a jazz singer hunting for a job, finally landing a gig at a sleazy club. Ben is a trumpeter who hangs out with his friends, tries to pick up girls, and gets in fights. Lelia is a flirtatious and insecure aspiring artist. The film opens energetically: we see a band performing and young people dancing. A crazy New York party is in progress. Everyone seems happy, enjoying themselves - drinking, dancing. Everybody except Ben, one of the protagonists. He seems to be unsuccessfully trying to connect with the party. He seems disconnected and confused – in limbo. In my experience and in the experience of many other New Yorkers I have spoken to, being in a limbo is a typical state of
mind in New York. Whether someone is a new-comer, or simply looking for a new job, place to stay or a friend, he or she is usually alone “against” the big city. As a consequence, person feels disconnected, lonely and confused.

In the film, New York’s atmosphere is presented truthfully. For example, when Ben is walking the streets of New York, on his way to meet friends, we see real New York of the 1950s: traffic, street demonstrations, advertisements, theaters, restaurants. The city had an energy very similar to that of today. There is a shot with Ben playing with pigeons, where street garbage is in the foreground and a Dean Martin film advertisement in the background. This scene presents an authentic, timeless New York moment. Ben meets friends in front of the legendary, and still existing, Birdland jazz club. In conversations between Ben’s friends and girls they meet, just like in real New York life, money and “cozy places” are the common topic.

Casting in the film is very innovative. Cassavetes purposely gave a role of Lelia, a black girl in the film, to white actress Lelia Goldoni. She is in visual contrast with her own brothers. By doing that, Cassavetes tried to call attention to the issue of race in America and point out how absurd it all is. For the time, that was very progressive. In the scene with Hugh and Lelia, brother and sister, on the Port Authority bus station, she looks white and he is black. A viewer is immediately alerted. There is a weird but cool feeling to it. I think Cassavetes wanted to alert and test a viewer’s perception. By doing that the director asks questions: Can’t they still be brother and sister although they do not look the same? Will our perception and opinion about Lelia change, because she looks white? Can we look at people beyond the color of their skin? Isn’t it all absurd? Another interesting moment that is loaded with progressive ideas about diversity is created when Lelia exits the bus station and wanders in Times Square. She seems like a young
beautiful dreamer observing photos from Bridget Bardot’s movie. A guy on the street harasses her. Another guy who is passing by, played by Cassavetes himself, helps her out by pushing the harasser away. Lelia walks away and disappears under an advertisement for a show in a nearby theater that reads: “She stops at nothing to get what she wants.” The director uses real locations to suggest state of mind of the character.

In 1950s New York, Cassavetes is clearly hoping that everyone will get their fair shot at the pursuit of happiness regardless of gender or race. However, it is obvious that New Yorkers at the time struggled with the idea of diversity. Cassavetes showed this very directly and, by being direct, very effectively. In the darkest scene of the film, in Lelia’s apartment, Tony realizes that her brother is black. Shocked, he wants to leave because of that. This is a very painful scene of Tony obviously lying and leaving because of her race. By presenting the scene so directly, Cassavetes makes a viewer see our world completely clearly. A viewer, who by that point saw Tony as nice, charming white guy, now sees him as a racist. In this scene, love is defeated by racism and Cassavetes wants to make us all feel ashamed because of that. Another dark scene that speaks of the race issue is when black woman flirts with Benni at Hugh’s party. He is not interested in her and acts rudely. She is persistent saying: “You have your values mixed up.” He rejects her again. She deliberately throws her drink in his face. Bennie hits her, and a fight erupts.

Cassavetes presents the New York of the 1950’s, just like it is today, as a competitive arena where hunger for status is always present. When Hugh is getting ready for the show, he has issue with “introducing dumb girls.” He feels it is beneath him. The show begins. The club owner announces Hugh casually. Hugh is obviously not happy about it, but he starts singing. The
owner does not like his singing, cuts him off and asks him to announce the dancing girls. Hugh does not want to do it. Dancing music starts, and girls come out, leaving Hugh powerless on the stage. Typical for New York, status consciousness is always present, whether justified or not. At the end, business interests always win.

Everyone always aspires to higher and greater in New York, and therefore, insecurities are constantly present. The film illustrates that in the scene when Tony, Lelia and David hang out in Central Park. In the beauty of the landmark New York location, and with jazz continuously playing, Tony and Lelia “spontaneously” lose David. They walk alone, and she tells him how she feels she should be more successful than she is: “Everything is passing me by…I feel like I’m in a cocoon.” This is a very typical feeling among young people in New York; the idea that there is always something greater around a corner is the illusion that motivates and bothers New Yorkers. New York’s romantic promise and reality are in constant conflict. Tony, knowing the feeling, guesses what she wants to say. He invites Lelia for a drink in his apartment. They start kissing. Soon we see very romantic and the signature shot of the film: the intimate and vibrant close-up of the lovers. We learn it was her first time. She asks: “What happens now? Do I stay with you?” In her insecurity and vulnerability, Goldoni as Leila looks beautiful. Tony takes Lelia home by taxi, a classic New York setting, and an essential New York moment is presented. They arrive at the destination, but the lovers are still talking. The driver objects: “Come on, make up your mind it’s my busy time… Ain’t love grand?!” The scene feels realistic.

*Shadows* looks and feels like a documentary. The film is shot in black-and-white, authentically projecting raw reality of every day New York. This is achieved with the character-
based, semi improvised, script, hand-held cinematography on real life locations, jazz influenced editing and nonprofessional actors practicing a specific style of acting.

The film does not have a clear story arc. The script is character based and free flowing. Ben’s change could be seen as the main story arc, but it is not clearly pronounced. Near the end of the film we see Ben and friends trying to pick up new girls and getting in a fight again. They get beaten up. Everybody goes their separate ways. Beaten up and alone, in an essential city moment, Ben walks the streets of New York. Night is falling, and the jazz never stops. We do not see Ben’s new life style. It is only implied that he will change or, at least, try to change. Yes, New York beats its children up and moves on quickly. That is how we learn, adapt and, perhaps, change.

In an excerpt from Cassavetes on Cassavetes, that can be found on Ray Carney’s website, the film’s author spoke about the use of hand held camera: “We used a 16mm camera, partly because it was cheaper and partly because we could do more hand-held stuff with it, and it was easier to handle in the streets. We used a Nagra tape-recorder and a hand-held boom. We rarely had rehearsals for the camera, even though Erich Kollmar, the cameraman, likes rehearsals. I encouraged him to get it the first time, as it happened. Erich found that the lighting and photographing of these actors, who moved according to impulse instead of direction, prevented him from using a camera in a conventional way. He was forced to photograph the film with simplicity. He was driven to lighting a general area and then hoping for the best. So, we not only improvised in terms of the words, but we improvised in terms of motions. The cameraman also improvised, he had to follow the artists and light generally, so that the actor could move when and wherever he pleased…I think the important contribution that Shadows can make to the film
is that audiences go to the cinema to see people: they only empathize with people, and not with technical virtuosity.”

The spirit of improvisation is supported with jazz score throughout the film. The spontaneity and unpredictability of the jazz, created by Charles Mingus and Shafi Hadi, reflects the unique spontaneous feel of the movie. The jazz discretely follows the protagonists, inviting viewers to follow them too and feel the moods of the city, including scenes when Ben wanders the streets, when Lelia explores Times Square and the scene in the Central Park.

Shadows started as an improvisation out of the Cassavetes/Lane acting workshops. These workshops were different from Lee Strasberg’s Actors Studio method acting which were very popular at the time. The “method” training involves developing an emotional blueprint, based on actor’s own personal history, as the emotional foundation for the character upon which the director and actor build. Cassavetes pushed the actors to go beyond the memory and create their characters through improvisation—often using their own names. As Ray Carney explained: “The philosophical difference between his approach to acting and that of Lee Strasberg and Elia Kazan is that Cassavetes’ understanding was that acting was a form of play. It could be zany, comical and madcap. In Strasberg’s vision, the theatre was a church; in Cassavetes’, it was a playground. While the Actors Studio specialized in moody, broody anguish, Cassavetes felt that acting was fundamentally an expression of joy and exuberance… Cassavetes drew many of his fundamental dramatic concepts from Lane, and Lane's notion that characters wear "personality masks" informs all of Cassavetes' work. Not only are there explicit references to masks in Shadows in the scene in the Museum of Modern Art sculpture garden and in the shot that begins the post-coital scene between Lelia and Tony, but it is not an overstatement to say that the fundamental
drama of the film is generated by the mask each character wears.” (Ray Carney website, http://people.bu.edu/rcarney/shadows/acting.shtml)

At the end of the film, the title card says: "The film you have just seen was an improvisation.” While the film can feel as completely improvised, it is important to note that most of the film was scripted. There was some confusion about this because the film was shot twice. The first version, disliked by Cassavetes, was indeed completely improvised. The director only outlined the basic characters and scenes allowing actors to make up dialogue. The final version of the film was shot with significantly different story and with a prepared script. The ending title card describing the film as improvisation remained there from the first version. That is how Cassavetes wanted to thank the actors (Carney, 1994, 26).

Because of Cassavetes’s celebrity status as an actor and relatively wide release of the film in 1961, Shadows was highly praised, and John Cassavetes became the most prominent auteur of the American art cinema. Cassavetes is an important figure in the genesis of the American independent film. His work was also tremendously influential for American filmmakers in the late 1960s and 1970s, during the so-called New American Cinema. At the time, young directors and actors, disillusionsed by the Vietnam War, produced work that was thematically complex, formally innovative and morally ambiguous. (Merritt, 158-159). The New American Cinema, which is today widely considered Golden Age in American and global film history, includes the next three films from my list: The Panic in Needle Park, Mean Streets and Taxi Driver.
The Panic in Needle Park (1971)

The Panic in Needle Park is a story set in the darkest side of New York City. The film focuses on Bobby and Helen, lovers who are also heroin addicts. It’s heart breaking to look at their charming love story and, at the same time, intuit that these two souls will not be able to survive. And that is an essential New York story: in the cutthroat survival game of the City, Bobby and Helen can only be the prey. Enhancing the atmosphere is the big, dirty New York City, truthfully represented in the film as it was in the 1970s. Most of the film was shot in an observational documentary style. Like Shadows, the film was shot entirely on locations in New York City, using little-known actors at the time. Unlike Shadows, no music at all was used in The Panic in Needle Park helping to create a pure documentary feeling.

The film opens with Helen in the middle of a packed subway car. She looks lost, stressed out and scared. The subway stops. Everybody is pushing her to get out. She holds onto the subway pole. It is obvious that she is having a really bad day. Her face shows agony. Being in a packed subway in New York on a really bad day, is an example of authentic, dark New York experience. Helen seems very naïve. She looks lost and confused in the City where many people are also trying to find themselves. We learn that Helen grew up with “mother, father, little brother” and that she had a lawn. But we never learn why she exactly came to the city. Was it love for her artist boyfriend? Curiosity? Ambition? Dream? Boredom? Was it something about New York? All of those things? Does she even know why she came? This is, I feel, a very important question that many New Yorkers might not have an answer to. New York attracts people, it has its own gravitation. Some people come with specific goals in mind, but many come
in hope that they will find out who they really are and what they really want. Sometimes people get lost in the big city.

In subsequent scenes in the film, viewers can see the beginning of the tragedy of two people oblivious to how lost they really are. In a scene that foreshadows dark times to come, Bobby’s brother Hank explains that Bobby’s heroin habit is “50 dollars per week”: “And this is just the beginning of a panic. Where is the money gonna come from Bobby?” Then he asks Helen: “What do you gonna do?” “Well, I am not gonna do it with you” is her response. Soon we see Helen waking up naked, in the middle of the night, to use heroin; this is followed by a scene of Bobby playing baseball on a street, to impress Helen, is contrasted with him realizing that she has just used the drug. He buys her a cake and tells her: “Let’s get married.” Do we still remember Bobby meeting Helen at the hospital and sweet-talking to her? Is Helen still the innocent girl from Indiana? Is the City still a glittering dream?

In contrast to Bobby and Helen is Hotch, the police detective. He is the story character who represents the city. He is the power, as it functions on the margins of the society, where its real nature can be easily seen. Hotch is the machine that breaks anyone who does not play by its rules. When Bobby leaves prison, Detective Hotch waits for him just to make sure Bobby hears the news: Helen is a prostitute. Hotch also stalks Helen, demanding that she betray Bobby. When she offers to rat out others, he explains: “You rat up you don’t rat down. It’s the game you are playing Helen, I did not make the rules.” At the end, Hotch, meaning the city, breaks Helen. She betrays Bobby. Everybody breaks or adapts to the city.

After Bobby’s imprisonment, represented in the film by the simple cut, only Helen waits for him. He sees her but does not say a word. He walks. She follows. Soon he turns and says:
“Well?” Helen joins him, and they continue walking together. I feel that this is an amazing ending. The series of betrayals end with forgiveness. They do not have any choice. All they have is each other in the big and cruel city.

Richard Brody, film critic for the *New Yorker*, observes that Jerry Schatzberg, the film director and native New Yorker, presents the lives of addicts realistically: “He observes the neon-lit hallways and uninviting coffee shops with fascination; he reveals the economic, legal, and moral pincers in which addicts get caught” (*The New Yorker* Online, September 9th, 2014, www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/movie-week-panic-needle-park). The film also shows how the drug trade worked, including Bobby’s bosses, shady apartments as drug distribution centers, street deals, cops and their games. It’s New York City in the 1970s, as real as it gets.

The portrayal of the decaying city in the 1970s is an ideal background for the story and it is also based on historical facts. Kim Phillips-Fein, professor of American history at New York University and author of *Fear City: The New York City Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of the Age of Austerity* explained what happened to New York City in the 1970s. In her article for *The Nation*, titled “The Legacy of the 1970s Fiscal Crisis,” published on April 16th, 2013, she noted that New York had nineteen public hospitals in 1975, university system free of charge and rent stabilization which made it possible for a middle class to inhabit the city. Professor Phillips-Fein also explained main causes of the New York fiscal crises: “Like most fiscal crises, New York’s was at once long anticipated and a complete shock. Many observers in the early ’70s had noticed that New York was entering a period of difficulty and falling tax receipts, as the city’s economy was rocked by the decline of manufacturing and the flight of the white middle class to the
suburbs… The expenses of the city climbed, particularly those for Medicaid and welfare. At first, increases in federal and state aid helped fuel this expansion. But when the economy turned south in the early 1970s, New York turned to borrowing to make up the budget gaps… By 1975, as recession enveloped the American economy, the banks that marketed New York’s debt became increasingly wary about the city, as did investors around the country. As soon as its credit was cut off, it became apparent that New York did not have the money to pay its debts—or even to continue to cover payrolls without access to more borrowed funds.” Over the next three years the number of police officers, teachers and firefighters was significantly dropped. Transit fares were raised. Tuition was imposed for the first time at the City University of New York. As a consequence, “the violence and brutality of a city in free fall was real” (The Nation Online, April 16th, 2013, https://www.thenation.com/article/legacy-1970s-fiscal-crisis/).

The actual location of the “Needle Park” is on the Upper West Side, the crossroads of Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue at 72nd street. According to Sanders, “few neighborhoods in the city have undergone more marked change over the past years than the Upper West Side. For decades, the area’s thousands of middle-class families, living in spacious prewar apartment houses, co-existed uneasily with the occupants of dozens of single-room occupancy hotels-poor, often troubled individuals who spent much of their time in the streets and a handful of decrepit public spaces” (Sanders, 2006, p. 218).

The director, a well-known former fashion photographer, decided to film almost entirely on the location with a handheld camera. He used the observational documentary style only following characters and observing events as they happened. There is a sense of immediacy and freshness as if nothing in the film was staged. We see needles in close-up, dirty living conditions,
filthy clothes and cheap food. Adam Holender, the cinematographer, remembers the production process: “We spent weeks - including the tests maybe months - and after a while we became part of the neighborhood, to the point where we knew the hookers, we knew exactly whether someone had had a successful night or not…We were shooting, for example, on Broadway – long shots of Pacino looking for narcotics that someone was supposed to have dropped off in a phone booth or a garbage can, and all we did was to augment, slightly, the existing lighting, by having permission to put some lighting units in the stores, not to make it glossy but to bring it to reality. There were some extras, but mostly people on the streets who were totally unaware that we were filming…” (Sanders, 2006, p. 218). Juliet Taylor, the casting director, remembers the same atmosphere: “The Panic in Needle Park was full of people who weren’t real actors but were talented. People who’d come in off the streets. We used some real heroin addicts. It was very gritty and exciting” (Sanders, 2006, p. 218). Contributing to the sense of realism is the soundtrack which consists of only ambient sounds. There is absolutely no added music in the film. All we hear comes from the real locations of the scenes: streets, park and rooms.

Acting is the soul of this film. Kitty Winn’s Helen, a victim of her loyalty to Bobby, and Al Pacino’s Bobby, her only friend and addict, are authentic characters. They give us an believable portrayal of the world of addiction in which dependency and betrayals rule. Winn won the best actress award at Cannes for the role, and Pacino’s next feature was The Godfather.

Joan Didion, the writer of the film, wrote in Goodbye to All That, her famous essay about leaving New York, that “New York was not mere city. It was instead an infinitely romantic notion, the mysterious nexus of all love and money and power, the shining and perishable dream itself.” In the essay, Didion also states that she “knew that it would cost something sooner or
later—because I did not belong there, did not come from there.” Didion writes a lot about broken dreams. While she loves the City, she feels that it can’t fulfill its romantic promise. It is precisely this city that “extracts a pound of flesh from swooning transplants and replaces it with anxiety, unfulfilled desire, or, in Helen’s case, heroin” (Condon, Reverse Shot Online, January 30th, 2009, www.reverseshot.org/reviews/entry/159/panic_needle_park). This view of the city is also shown in the film. For example, there is the scene where Bobby abruptly enters a room, takes cash from Helen’s client and throws him out. While he is counting the money, Helen grabs him and starts laughing: “We haven’t laughed about anything in a long time.” Bobby responds with: “How fun City…” The scene is tragic and beautiful at the same time. The New York in The Panic in Needle Park is “all shards and rot, the remnants of a glittering dream” (Condon, Reverse Shot Online, January 30th, 2009, www.reverseshot.org/reviews/entry/159/panic_needle_park).

The Panic in Needle Park opened in 1971 and failed at the box office. Maybe it was too real to sell well. But maybe it’s because of its poorly designed marketing campaign. The initial ads played up the love story in the movie and played down the tragedy. After that, The New York Times carried ads with different message, playing up the horror aspect of the film: "If you see it," the newer ad promised, "it will sear your senses forever. And that's the truth." (Ebert, “The Panic…”). Whatever the case may be, almost half century later, The Panic in Needle Park feels as an authentic New York love story and the time capsule of the New York City in the 1970s.
Mean Streets (1973)

Mean Streets is an essential New York film for several reasons. The film is set in a unique New York neighborhood, Little Italy. Although the film was only partially shot in New York, Scorsese succeeded in showing its bleak appearance during the 1970s. The protagonists are immigrants or their children, and the film reminds us that without immigrants New York would not be New York. All of the film’s characters are essential New Yorkers, hungry for status, putting their business interest above all else. The City is portrayed truthfully as an environment of unprecedented diversity, where questions of gender, race, religion and homosexuality play an important role in everyday life. In addition, Scorsese’s style, based on documentary aesthetics and influenced by Cassavetes and Neorealism, adequately represents the intense, raw reality of New York City.

In Mean Streets, Martin Scorsese examined the daily struggles of wannabe gangster Charlie to keep his morals straight on the streets of Little Italy, Manhattan. Throughout the film, he unsuccessfully tries to get Johnny Boy to pay off a debt to Michael, the local loan shark. Charlie’s business ambitions are threatened by his relationship with his epileptic girlfriend Teresa and his involvement with Johnny Boy. When Johnny Boy decides to insult Michael rather than pay him, Charlie and Johnny leave town with Teresa. They leave by car toward Brooklyn, but Michael and his hit man, played by Scorsese himself, find them. The hit man fires at Charlie's car, hitting Johnny in the neck and Charlie in the hand, causing Charlie to crash the car. The film ends with ambulance and police cars arriving at the scene, and paramedics taking them away.
The story is set in a unique New York environment, Little Italy, in the 1970s. It is the ghetto within the center of the world. As in The Panic in Needle Park, the dystopian portrayal of 1970s New York is grounded in facts. The claustrophobic location provides an ideal setting for portrayal of everyday experiences of members of an ethnic group who are still not completely integrated in American society. The protagonists, in their lifestyle and mentality, are in some hard-to-define space, which is neither in Italy nor in America. I guess that place is New York City! Where else on the planet could we find such an example of culture within the culture?

Alexandra Genser writes that “Mean Streets is grounded in, though by no means reducible to, the historical experience of Italian immigration to urban America.” This experience, according to Genser, is characterized with “the pervasiveness and durability of the social system, built on strong kinship ties among extended families, religious conformism, strong social cohesion, and nostalgia.” The protagonists are, culturally speaking, foreigners. They live by the strict rules specific not to their current home, America, but to their ethnic background. Because they are not able to become part of the society, the protagonists are forced to survive on its margins, strictly within borders of their ethnic group. Therefore, the protagonists are essentially, to borrow Michael Viscusi’s term, “eternal exiles, who could neither enter the order of English America nor return to Italy.”

Such eternal exiles have always been special kind of New Yorkers, without whom New York would not be New York. There is an old immigrant saying: “Those who cross the Atlantic Ocean once, will always be on the wrong side.” As an immigrant myself, I went through that experience. The longer one stays in America, the easier it gets. But until one gets at least minimally adapted to the new environment, he must go through, what I call the “experience of
“experience of limbo” is a process during which a foreigner learns and, one hopes, accepts rules of the new culture. In the beginning of the process, an immigrant mostly relies on his or her own ethnic group. But, sooner or later, one must go and find his way outside of the group, in the “new world.”

Paula Masood writes that “Scorsese presents New York as both utopian and dystopian - a place of family, tradition, and group identity that is also limiting and insular and where any form of border crossing is often life-threatening.” Alexandra Genser shares her view: “People who have moved away from the group are described as renegades or deserters. Similarly, Mean Streets highlights the harsh and violent form this ostracizing may take, emphasizing the potential personal and collective tragedies to follow.” The protagonists of Mean Streets are torn between their need for belonging to the group and desire to live the American Dream. They are internally conflicted, insecure and in constant conflict among themselves. Their inner and outer conflicts, within Little Italy and their ethnic group, necessarily lead some to think of possible departure from the community. Near the end of the film, Charlie, Teresa, and Johnny are forced to leave Little Italy. Charlie reached the point of no return. He must decide whether he will leave the neighborhood forever and try to discover different kind of life, or completely, and without looking back, accept the rules of Mafia. This is the moment when the specific and unique New York story ends, and more conventional life story might be about to begin. But Scorsese does not tell us what happens next. He lets us assume, think, and imagine. At the end of the film, we see the tragedy of the car accident juxtaposed with shots of some of the film’s characters continuing life as usual: Charlie’s uncle relaxing in his apartment, the black dancer smoking a cigarette in a
restaurant. This montage suggests that life continues as nothing happened. New York moves on fast. That is what the City does.

All the characters in the film are essential New Yorkers: ambition and politics on its way are the City’s defining characteristics. From the very beginning of the film, we see Charlie internally conflicted. His faith and his lifestyle are in contradiction. His duty to be loyal friend and lover conflicts with his business interests. And, in New York, business interests always win. Pauline Kael, in her review for the New Yorker magazine, titled “Everyday Inferno”, writes: “Charlie is Judas the betrayer because of his careful angling to move up the next rung of the ladder.” This could also be said for Michael and Johnny Boy, in their own ways.

In addition to business conflicts of his characters, which represent the City’s residents’ never-ending battle for achieving higher status, Scorsese injects questions of gender, race, religion and homosexuality. In other words, the City’s intense power struggle is happening within the context of unprecedented diversity. Following a bar shooting, Charlie and Johnnie Boy share a ride with Michael and two gay men. Johnny Boy insults them. One of them flirts with Charlie. In another scene, Charlie is strongly attracted to and asks out the beautiful black dancer but decides not to show up in the last second. He cannot be seen with a black woman no matter how beautiful she is. In one of the bar scenes, Charlie refers to Jewish girls as “Christ killers.” Teresa is represented as a modern woman, ready to leave the neighborhood and move up in the world. All these scenes portray the New York’s microcosm of extreme diversity.

Scorsese was influenced by Neorealism and Cassavetes, evident in his documentary visual style. *Mean Streets* was shot by Kent Wakeford often using a handheld camera to capture the gritty, restless lives of the characters. According to Wakeford’s interview with Susan Angard
for Huffpost, published on May 25th, 2011, his “vision ran with Martin’s, to create a mean, dirty visual look. Handholding the camera throughout most of the film created an unpolished, gritty feel of life on the streets of New York.” Wakeford did not use a handheld camera always: “When the main characters were in their environment, meaning on the streets or in their bar, I used a handheld camera to give a sense of instability. In scenes and locations that represented a more established lifestyle, I used dollies or a still camera to contrast the gritty movement with slow and steady camera movements. For example, there are scenes in a Church where the goal was to show beauty and stability in contrast to the inner conflicts and chaos of one of the main characters.” Handholding the camera also complements the improvisatory acting style in the film. Both the director of photography and the actors have more freedom of movement. As Wakeford explained, “actors didn’t have to hit their marks perfectly. They were able to be absorbed in the frenetic energy of their characters.” The performances in Mean Streets were semi-improvised. For example, the scene where Robert De Niro and Harvey Keitel argue over money in the bar’s back room was completely improvised, transcribed, rewritten and then recorded (Flatley). It is only possible to improvise like this with actors who know the story and its setting through experience - who lived it. All of the actors are native New Yorkers and they really walked the mean streets.

In an interview with Anthony De Curtis Scorsese said: “I just wanted to make, like an anthropological study, it was about myself and my friends, Italian-Americans on the everyday scale, the everyday level - this is what they really talked like and looked like what they did in the early 70s and late 60s. This was the life style…Mean Streets is always a favorite of mine because of the music and because it was the story of myself and my friends…But I certainly could not
watch it. I’ve watched scenes of it. I could never watch the whole thing. It’s too personal.”

Pauline Kael called *Mean Streets* “a true original of our period, a triumph of personal filmmaking.” The film was a hit at the New York Film Festival in 1973 but failed to duplicate that level of success elsewhere. Three years later Scorsese created *Taxi Driver*, another essential New York film, also set on the city’s mean streets in the 1970s.
"Taxi Driver" (1976)

The story of *Taxi Driver* revolves around Travis Bickle, an honorably discharged US marine, who is a lonely young man in New York City. Loneliness is the fundamental characteristic of life in New York City. *Taxi Driver* is, as James Clapp wrote, “almost an anthem for the culture of urban alienation, an abstraction of the anonymity, loneliness, social disengagement, and moral detachment for which the big City is often regarded as prime cause.” The unique character of Travis Bickle, his turbulent days in the realistically represented City of the 1970s and documentary-like cinematic style make *Taxi Driver* an essential New York film.

In *Scorsese on Scorsese*, the director stated that the film was strongly influenced by his growing up and living in the City (Scorsese, Christie and Thompson, 2003, p. 54). And in an interview for *Vulture*, Scorsese remembered: “It was a rough period in the history of New York - as a matter of fact, the famous *Daily News* headline ‘Ford to City: Drop Dead’ came out while we were editing. Although I couldn’t tell the difference. Apparently, the City felt like it was falling apart, there was garbage everywhere, and for someone like Travis, who’s come from the Midwest, the New York of the mid-’70s would be hell - that must have prompted visions of hell in his mind. But one thing I can tell you: we didn’t have to “dress” the city to make it look hellish” (Ebiri).

During the film’s production, several acts of random violence took place nearby. Near Lincoln Center, crew members saw a large man punch an old woman in the mouth for no apparent reason. On another occasion, when scene, in which Travis kills a mugger in an Upper West Side bodega, was filmed, somebody was murdered nearby, and crew did not know which
cops were acting and which were for the real killing. The crew shot whatever was happening around them. (Sanders, p. 113) Most of the scenes were shot on the actual city locations. According to Chuck Katz and his book *Manhattan on Film: Walking Tours of Hollywood's Fabled Front Lot*, the actual location where the campaign headquarters was created for the purpose of the production was on the southeast corner of Broadway and 62\textsuperscript{nd} Street. At the moment of the film when this location was first introduced, we hear Travis describing Betsy: “I first saw her at Palantine campaign headquarters at 63rd and Broadway. She was wearing a white dress. She appeared like an angel, out of this filthy mess.” In the book Katz also noted a few other real-life New York locations featured in *Taxi Driver*. He includes two New York hotels: the Olcott at 27 West 72\textsuperscript{nd} Street, where Travis drops of a person he picked up in the seedy Times Square, and the St. Regis, where he, after recovering from his shooting spree, picked up Betsy at the end of the film. The scene in which Travis considered an assassination of the Senator Charles Palantine, but was scared off by the bodyguards, was shot at the Central Park entrance near Columbus Circle. In addition, the adult movie theater Travis visits was located on Eight Avenue and 47\textsuperscript{th} Street of Manhattan. The famous theatrical release poster of the film shows the moment from the scene where Travis walks down the street with the Hollywood Theatre in the background (Child, 2013, p. 45). Another actual city location shown in the film is the Bellmore Cafeteria at Park Avenue South and 28\textsuperscript{th} Street, “an all-night eatery favored by New York cab drivers for decades until its closing, in the early 1980s, to make way for an apartment house.” In the cafeteria, Travis Bickle shares a late-night coffee with fellow drivers. (Sanders, p. 120)
The dangerous and dirty City of the 1970s, on the brink of bankruptcy, and with crime flourishing, is the perfect background for the emotional state of the protagonist. From Travis’s narration, we learn that he has only contempt for and is angered by sleaze, dysfunction, and prostitution around the City. Is this the country and values he was fighting for in Vietnam? We see him driving “anywhere, anytime”, observing the fallen City. He carries a small bottle with him at all times, drinks alcohol, and walks the dirty City streets in the summer of 1975.

Paul Schrader, the scriptwriter, remembers that he wrote the film during the most depressing period of his life. Because of some personal problems he completely isolated himself and wrote the Taxi Driver in just ten days. As he explained: “It just jumped out of my head like an animal.” Schrader projected his own characteristics onto the film’s main character. At the time he was suicidal, loved guns, drank heavily and was obsessed with pornography (Friedman, 1998, p. 62).

The character of Travis Bickle can be interpreted as study of pain caused by social rejection. The fact that the story takes place in New York City makes it even more believable because the city is the arena of extreme competition on every level. Painful rejections are an inevitable rule of City living, not the exception. For example, when Travis takes Betsy to see a Swedish sex education film, she feels offended and goes home alone. She does not accept his attempts to apologize. When Travis is talking to Betsy on a pay phone in an office building, the director purposely moves camera away from him to the blank hallway. In this moment of the film, the rejection Travis is experiencing is cruel. The director wants to tell us that the rejection is so painful that it should not be looked at.
In another scene that illustrates human loneliness in the big city, Travis’s customer is played by Scorsese himself, in the role of a jealous husband who is following his wife: “That’s my wife. But that’s not my apartment…a nigga lives there, and I am gonna kill him.” The subtext of the scene is love, race and power. The driver and the customer are both crazy from loneliness in the City. As Roger Ebert wrote in his review of the film: “This utter aloneness is at the center of Taxi Driver, one of the best and most powerful of all films, and perhaps it is why so many people connect with it even though Travis Bickle would seem to be the most alienating of movie heroes. We have all felt as alone as Travis. Most of us are better at dealing with it.” In Travis’s words: “Loneliness has followed me my whole life, everywhere. In bars, in cars, sidewalks, stores, everywhere. There's no escape. I'm God's lonely man.” The fact that there are many people on the City streets, only makes the loneliness feel more ironic and more difficult.

Travis Bickle was invented by the scriptwriter, the actor and the director. While he is clearly an extreme example, it is possible for anyone who experienced loneliness and New York to identify with Travis: “He is a projection of all our nightmares of urban alienation, refined in a performance that is effective as much for what Mr. De Niro does as for how he does it” (Canby, The New York Times, February 8th, 1976). The progression of Travis’ madness is ingeniously portrayed by iconic De Niro. He starts intense physical training, practices at a shooting range and visits porn theaters. While holding a gun, he observes happy couples dancing on TV. Angry, he destroys the TV set. He also writes a letter to his parents congratulating them on their anniversary and talking about his fictional life, government job, girlfriend Betsy. He is clearly delusional. Looking at himself in the mirror he repeats the legendary sentence: “Are you talking to me?!” James Clapp wrote in his essay that “‘Are you talking to me?’ has made its way into
movie lore alongside “I coulda been a contenda” and "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn," the words of other alienated males.” Clapp also noted that “fewer recall the line that followed it, a line with, in Clapp’s opinion, more signification and power: “Well, I'm the only one here” Bickle says to the camera. In New York City, America's biggest, most dense, most heterogeneous, most populous city, the sense of being alone, alienated, estranged, and inclining towards madness, is more potent and incontestable than in perhaps any other American urban place. It is a theme that moviemakers will continue to find irresistible, and a condition that some urbanites will doubtless continue to find unavoidable” (Clapp, “‘Are you Talking to Me?’: New York and the Cinema of Urban Alienation,” p. 14).

Most characters in the film, unlike Travis, are corrupt and do not have any problem with that. This is another source of Travis’s solitude. For example, a fellow taxi driver refers Travis to illegal gun dealer Easy Andy, from whom he buys several handguns. Easy Andy is the ultimate City type. For him, everything is business: guns, drugs, cars. Easy Andy, contrary to Travis, belongs in the City. Another example is shown when Travis hires Iris. Instead of having sex with her, he attempts to persuade her to leave prostitution. Opposing him, Sport, the pimp, is manipulating Iris. She believes him that he truly loves her. Sport is the character of ultimate evil. By showing us how he manipulates the 12-year-old Iris, the director prepares us for and justifies the violence that is about to come. During the film’s bloody finale, Travis kills Sport, a bouncer, and a mafioso. He also gestures the act of shooting himself in the head. At the end of the film, Travis picks up and drops off Betsy home. When she tries to pay her fare, Travis simply smiles at her and drives away. In the ambiguous final shot, Travis looks in the rearview mirror and
suddenly becomes agitated. The ending suggests that Travis will always stay Travis, and New York will always stay New York.

In addition to location filming with a documentary style of minimal lighting and hand-held camera work, Scorsese combined actual locations with a “fluid, highly expressionistic use of camera movement.” His cinematographer Michael Chapman used motorized “Atlas” crane that would “allow camera to float dreamily above the sidewalk of East 12th Street and look down, in almost godlike manner, on the aftermath of the film’s violent climax” (Sanders, 2013, p. 98). The film starts and ends with the view of the City from the point of view of a taxi driver: streets, bars, shops, people, lights, reflections. To film De Niro through the windshield of his cab as he drives, the crew mounted an Arriflex 35 BL camera to platform bolted onto the chassis of a Checker cab (Sanders, 2013, p. 98). As the taxi moves through Manhattan's streets, we see it in real time, but Travis' point-of-view shots are slowed down: he sees hookers and pimps on the sidewalks, and his perception is represented through slow motion. We also see, through Travis' eyes, the top of a taxi dispatcher's desk, candy on a movie counter, guns on a bed. As Roger Ebert noted in the review, Scorsese succeeded in transferring Travis’ state of mind to the viewer with purely cinematic means. That is art.

When the film opened, Paul Schrader went to the theater and found huge lines. That day, while he was watching the film, he remembers, “there was a sense of exhilaration about what we had done. We knew we’d never repeat it” (Friedman, 1998, p. 87). Taxi Driver was the pinnacle of personal filmmaking in America and, according to Scorsese, the end of “the best time” when talented authors revolutionized Hollywood. The film won the Palme d’Or at the 1976 Cannes Film Festival. Taxi Driver remains the rare and important time capsule of New York in the
1970s. After this film, the legendary era of personal and critical filmmaking was finished.

George Lucas’ *Star Wars* started the age of the blockbuster which continues to this day (Friedman, 1998, p. 87).
Manhattan (1979)

Manhattan is a love story in New York: the love for the City, the love among people. Everyone who played the love game in New York can attest to the well-known fact: this is a hard city for love. That is one of the essential facts of life in Gotham, where ambitions, hunger for status and desires dominate. The choice of the theme and Woody Allen’s original storytelling, beautifully depicting many landmark City locations, make Manhattan an essential New York film.

The film presents us with only partial view of Manhattan. This New York is only about Park Avenue, the Guggenheim, the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) and other exclusive locations of the City and the people that frequent them. In Allen’s words: “While I was doing Manhattan, I was very selective, and I did the same thing on Hannah. I presented a view of the city as I’d like it to be and as it can be today, if you take the trouble to walk on the right streets” (Fox, 1996, pp.108-109). While this particular characteristic is the opposite of my definition of an essential New York film, I had to include Manhattan in this thesis for couple of reasons.

First, to the best of my knowledge, Manhattan is the most critically acclaimed and well-known film about New York, domestically and internationally. Andrew Sarris even called it “the only truly great film of the 70s” (Fox, 1996, p. 108). It is hard to find a movie where any city plays such a prominent role. It could be easily argued that the film is all about landmark Manhattan locations. The characters visit the Guggenheim, MOMA, Elaine's, the Hayden Planetarium, and Zabar's deli. They sit on a park bench at dawn beneath the Queensboro bridge.
They ride a carriage through the Central Park and drive cars down the FDR and the West Side highways.

The second reason I feel *Manhattan* belongs on my list, despite its mode of representation is far from documentary, is because the film is very well informed about its core topic. As Allen explained: “The film deals with the problems of trying to live a decent life amidst the junk of contemporary culture – the temptations, the seductions” (Fox, 1996, p. 108). I feel that *Manhattan* exactly describes the typical situations New Yorkers experience, sooner or later. For example, the film depicts sophisticated restaurants of the time, a simple taxi ride and a series of, love related, lies and betrayals.

The film opens with a montage of beautiful images of New York City accompanied by George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, with Woody Allen’s character, Isaac Mortimer Davis, narrating an introduction to his book: “…New York was his town and it always would be.” It is important to note that Gordon Willis, the director of photography, shot the film in black-and-white and anamorphic screen. Both Willis and Allen wanted to make sure New York looked great, because the City is one of the characters in the film (Allen, Bjorkman, 2005, p. 108). As Willis explained: “There are all kinds of ways to shoot the city of New York. In the case of Manhattan, the concept was to lay the picture out in what I call “romantic reality”” (Sanders, 2006, p. 116).

From the start of the film, relationships in New York City are depicted as being in a state of flux. Isaac is twice-divorced, 42-year-old television comedy writer dealing with women in his life. His wife Jill leaves him for a woman. He is dating Tracy, a high school girl he knows is wrong for him. He is also interested in Mary, the mistress of his best friend Yale. There are
forbidden loves, desires, and doubts. In the first scene after the opening montage, Isaac, Tracy, Yale and Emily enjoy conversation about art in a nice restaurant. Jazz is playing in the background. “She is gorgeous”, Yale compliments Isaac. “She is seventeen. I am 42 and she is seventeen. I am older than her father,” Isaac replies. Later, during the walk home, Yale confesses to Isaac that he recently met Mary, a journalist, and that he is having an affair with her. In the next scene, at their home, Emily asks Yale if he thought again about having kids. He sounds reluctant.

New York City is one of the main characters in the story. One of the most memorable examples is shown in the sequence after Isaac sees Mary at an Equal Rights Amendment fund-raising event at MOMA. They walk and talk and, at dawn, sit on a bench at the end of East 58th Street by the East River. The iconic shot of the scene under the Queensboro Bridge, followed with Gershwin’s composition Someone to Watch Over Me, is one of the most famous New York moments in the history of cinema. Alex Child noted in his book On Location NYC: New York City's Top 100 Film and TV Locations, that the shot was hard to get at 5am and “required the crew to bring their own bench”. The writer, producer and Roger Ebert’s correspondent, Grace Wang, wrote the following about the scene: “In one of the most atmospheric and romantic sequences ever shot, they stroll across the velvety Manhattan night, ending up on a bench facing the East River as the Queensboro Bridge stands majestically by, gesturing at the dark sky, which holds a sea of city lights, each harboring a New York story of its own. That iconic shot, drenched sumptuously in black-and-white, framed against an unforgettable skyline, confirmed not only Manhattan the film as one of Allen’s greatest, but Manhattan the place as an indelible mark in one of the greatest cities on earth” (Harris, 2011, p. 162).
The film is exact in identifying typical City moments. For instance, Mary calls Isaac on the phone saying: “It’s such a beautiful Sunday.” In the next shot, two of them are running away from the storm in Central Park. This juxtaposition feels so New York, where weather can change quickly and unexpectedly. They run to hide in the Hayden Planetarium, which is another City landmark on the Upper West Side. There are many more New York moments in the film. For example, Yale and Emily, in a cabriolet, shot from behind, driving down the West Side Highway towards downtown. The Hudson River is in the background. We hear them talking, Yale about books, Emily about kids. The mood of the scene represents their love in a limbo, so typical for the City. In another instance, Isaac and Mary visit MOMA and ride in a taxi on the FDR. Again, taxi is a must, as the cult City location. Isaac and Mary, in a clothing store, meet Mary’s ex-husband, who is in the City “for a few days, for a symposium.” The awkward moment shows an example of typical New York serendipity meeting, when our past hits us when we least expect it.

There are many moments in the film showing lies and betrayals. When Isaac comes home and complains to Mary about the situation with his ex-wife Jill, Mary tells him that she still loves Yale and that she is seeing him again. While Allen represents this moment of real betrayal as comedy, betrayals are very serious and essential part of the City living. Roger Ebert noted in the review that, after seeing the film again, he realized that “it's more subtle, more complex, and not about love, but loss” (Ebert, Manhattan. RogerEbert.com, March 18th, 2001, www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-manhattan-1979). In another example, when Isaac confronts Yale and Yale argues that he found Mary first, Isaac responds by discussing Yale's extramarital affairs with Emily. She tells him that Yale told her that Isaac introduced Mary to him. The only character in the film that seems pure and honest is the seventeen-year-old
Tracy. It’s almost as if she does not even belong to Allen’s vision of New York. When Isaac breaks up with Tracy and confesses that he loves someone else she responds with naiveté and class, “Now I don’t feel so good.” In his review of the film, Roger Ebert noted that, “she at least has what lovers need, an ability to idealize the other person, and that's his fatal lack in the relationship” (Ebert, Manhattan. RogerEbert.com, March 18th, 2001, www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-manhattan-1979). Isaac is the New Yorker, always looking for something greater around the corner.

In the finale of the film, Isaac lies on his sofa, talking into a tape recorder about “people in Manhattan that create these unnecessary neurotic problems,” and the things that make “life worth living”: “Groucho Marx, Lois Armstrong, Brando, Sinatra…Tracy's face.” He tries calling Tracy on the phone unsuccessfully, and then leaves his apartment. He is not able to get a yellow taxi when he needs it the most (another essential City moment). Isaac runs to Tracy's place and arrives at the lobby of her family's apartment just as she is leaving for London. He sees her grooming her hair. She is surprised to see him. He admits he made a mistake and asks her to stay: “In six months, you can be completely different person…I don’t want that thing about you that I like to change.” She replies that “not everybody gets corrupted…you have to have a little faith in people.” The last thought sounds crazy and beautiful after the series of betrayals and lies we have witnessed in the film. New York City is so hard for love that it, too often, destroys one’s faith in people. The City creates cynics out of idealists. The film ends with final shots of the skyline and Rhapsody in Blue playing again. The circle of the story is complete. I feel that, for Allen, the words “Love”, “New York” and “Film” are all synonyms.
Manhattan opened in New York and Los Angeles in April 1979. That same spring, the film was shown at the Cannes Film Festival. After Cannes, it had its UK premiere at the Edinburgh Festival and won BAFTA award as the best picture of the year (Fox, 1996, p. 116). Since Manhattan, many films set in New York City were made but very few of them stayed true to the spirit of the City. In my opinion, it took more than two decades, since Woody Allen’s Manhattan, for another essential New York film to be created. It is as if the horrible tragedy of September 11th inspired legendary New York filmmaker Spike Lee to create the essential New York film - 25th Hour.
25th Hour (2002)

In his book *The City’s End: Two Centuries of Fantasies, Fears and Premonitions of New York City’s Destruction*, Max Page demonstrates how “our popular culture has been in dress rehearsal for the city’s destruction for decades: in books, at the movies, in computer games.” He also concludes that “no amount of history, no rehearsals, could prepare New Yorkers for September 11th and the days, months, and, for some, years of grief and worry that followed.” September 11th was the worst day in New York history. Almost three thousand people lost their lives during the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. All New Yorkers remember the atmosphere of fear, sadness and anger. Every time someone asks me about it, I recommend the film 25th Hour. The film perfectly captured the mood in New York City at the time just after the attack and it is an important document about the period. Because of that, 25th Hour is the essential New York film.

From the beginning, the film was imagined as an authentic New York story. In 2001, the essential New York film director, Spike Lee, was approached to adapt a New York novel *The 25th Hour*, written by David Beniof. The author was happy when Lee accepted the job because he wanted “it to be a real New York movie”: “I was scared that they would get a director who had only been to New York once and stayed at the Four Seasons.” From the first scene, where we see 1970 yellow Dodge Super Bee loudly racing the City streets, we know, as Spike Lee explained, that “New York has always been about being out there on the streets. From *On the Waterfront* to Scorsese, John Cassavetes, Sidney Lumet, Woody Allen. Because what is better set than New York City?” (Aftab, Lee, 2005, p. 277).
The film revolves around Monty Brogan, a convicted New York drug dealer with only one day left before he goes to prison for seven years. Monty spends the last hours of freedom thinking about his life. He reflects on his relationships and spends his last night before prison in a club with his girlfriend and childhood friends. The opening credit sequence shows the City skyline with the powerful light beams toward sky in place of the destroyed Twin Towers. This is how Spike Lee sets the tone for the film: it’s New York right after the tragedy of September 11th, and everyone is still in denial. Charles F. Peterson argues that “Lee’s sets and cinematography represent the intimacies of collective life in New York City.” He compares the opening credits sequence of the 25th Hour, and its Terrance Blanchard’s jazz score, with Woody Allen’s Gershwin-backed opening of Manhattan (Conard, 2011, p. 102). Spike Lee did not try to avoid offending or disturbing audiences. He intentionally portrayed the City as it was. A different approach was adopted by most, if not all filmmakers at that time. For example, the poster of Spiderman was edited to remove reflection of the Twin Towers from Spider-Man’s eyes. Similar strategies were applied in films such as Zoolander, Serendipity, Men in Black II, People I Know and The Time Machine. Most of cultural producers in America did all they could to avoid reminding audiences of the horrible event (Page, 2010, p. 204).

Throughout the film New York is represented truthfully, as a very dark place. For example, when Monty walks through beautiful Manhattan streets on the prestigious Upper East Side we see images of building entrances with American flags and flowers, marking victims of the tragedy. At the time, American flags, flowers and candles could be seen near many buildings or fire houses entrances. In another example, Monty visits his father James, a former firefighter
and recovering alcoholic who owns a bar, to confirm their plans to drive to the prison the following morning. In the bar, we see many photos of the firefighters who died on 9/11.

Another example of the truthful representation of the City can be seen in a scene that takes place in Slaughtery’s apartment. We learn that even the tragedy of 9/11 did not shake his “price is right” ideology. He and Jacob stand before a large window with a view of Ground Zero and its large area of devastation. When Jacob asks if Slaughtery will move away from the site, Slaughtery says no: “the price is right.” In New York when the price is right - everything is all right. In the same scene, Slaughtery says to Jacob that he doesn't believe that Monty will survive in prison. The sad dialogue is followed with images of the pit of the destroyed World Trade Center and the scene ends with a shot of bulldozers clearing the remains. Spike Lee spoke about the production experience: “At the end of the (Ground Zero) scene you see some workers, with rakes in their hands, looking for human remains. That was their job. Some stupid journalist asked me, were those actors? Not actors. Everything we shot was real” (Sanders, 2006, p. 93). I feel that this dark moment of the film is designed to represent the dominant feeling, at the time, that was hard to accept: this is the end of the City as we know it.

Another dark representation of New York can be seen in the scene where Monty is interrogated. The way cops are portrayed feels like the interrogation takes place in a third world, almost lawless, country. Policemen are portrayed as criminals, ready to provoke the prisoner in any way without much regard for ethics or human rights. They are represented as being only concerned with getting the right testimony from Monty. For example, a policeman implies Naturelle betrayed him. The police also strongly suggest that, being a nice looking white guy, Monty will most likely be raped in prison. Cops in the 25th Hour are similar to Detective Hotch
from *The Panic in Needle Park*. In this scene, we also learn about unique and strict New York Rockefeller-era drug laws.

Interestingly, in the novel the film is based on, the four D.E.A. officers interrogating Monty are described as “four men, all white.” In the film, they are all black. Spike Lee “appropriated these stereotypes for the purpose of an inversion of popular culture stereotypes about crime - particularly drug-related crime - and class and race” (Cañadas, *Bright Lights Film Journal* Online, January 31st, 2009). This casting choice reminded me of Cassavetes’s innovative casting in the *Shadows*, where Lelia Goldoni, who is white, played the black girl. The point was to visually alert audience about racial issues in America of the 1950s. Cassavetes, I feel, tried to point out senselessness of the racial conflicts. I feel that Spike Lee tried to do something similar here. By showing the four black agents cruelly interrogating one white guy, Lee wanted to alert the audience that the racial problem is still here among us. From his point of view, while many things changed since the 1950s, many things also stayed the same. It’s amazing to see how *Shadows* and *25th Hour* have this connection, despite the fact that there is more than forty years between them.

The main character, the fallen drug dealer, is Spike Lee’s representation of the zeitgeist in New York at the time. All the characters in the film are guilty, one way or another. And they know it. For example, Naturelle did not question their life although she knew where the money came from. Monty planned to invest the money on Wall Street through Slaughtery and no one would object while “the coin multiplies.” We also learn from their conversation that Monty's drug money helped his father James keep ownership of the bar. In a rare manifestation of remorse, feeling guilty, James sneaks a drink when Monty goes to the bathroom. Jacob also feels
guilty because of his lust for Mary, his 17-year-old student. I would argue that New York, an environment of extreme competition on all levels can force people to cross the lines of morally acceptable behavior.

The 25th Hour contains great performances. Roger Ebert was impressed with Philip Seymour Hoffman’s acting and noticed something that only the most sophisticated observers can see: “I’ve seen a lot of people drinking in a lot of movies. I’ve seen them sobering up the morning after. But I don’t remember anyone starting out sober, getting drunk, and then returning to sobriety quite like Hoffman does it here. We know exactly where he's at during these transitions, but we never see them happening.” A. O. Scott of the New York Times wrote about Edward Norton that, “he can, within a single scene, be extremely controlled and childishly vulnerable. Monty is all these things: an outlaw big shot and a messed-up kid; a dutiful son and a drug pusher who sweet-talks schoolgirls on the playground.” An absolutely stunning example of Norton’s acting can be seen in the scene that takes place in the bathroom of his father’s bar. This scene alone could easily be an essential New York short film. There is not one New Yorker who cannot completely relate to the scene because, at some point, we all felt similarly to Monty. Looking himself in the mirror, Norton as Monty delivers the ultimate monologue against the different ethnic and racial groups, social classes and neighborhoods in New York City. He uses the worst stereo types associated with particular groups: from “the panhandlers” and “squeegee men” in the streets to the “self-styled masters of the universe” on Wall Street, from black basketball players to Korean grocers: “Ten years in the country still no speaky English.” The policemen are corrupt, priests are pedophilic, homosexuals are extroverted, and Russians are gangsters. There are Italians in warm-up suits, “black-hatted” Hasidic Jews, pampered upper-
class housewives and Muslim fundamentalists. Taxi drivers are “terrorists in fucking training” and even Jesus Christ “got off easy! A day on the cross, a weekend in hell, and all the hallelujahs of the legions of angels for eternity! Try seven years in fuckin' Otisville, J!” Monty does not spare his friends and family: “Fuck Jacob Elinsky. Whining malcontent. Fuck Francis Xavier Slaughterly, my best friend, judging me while he stares at my girlfriend's ass. Fuck Naturelle Riviera. I gave her my trust, and she stabbed me in the back. Sold me up the river. Fucking bitch. Fuck my father with his endless grief, standing behind that bar sipping on club sodas, selling whisky to firemen, cheering the Bronx bombers. Fuck this whole city and everyone in it.” Monty hopes that the City, he so belongs to, will be destroyed, “from the projects in the Bronx to the lofts in SoHo, from the tenements in Alphabet City to the brownstones in Park Slope, to the split-levels in Staten Island.” The deep, comprehensive and detailed monologue, fueled with anger of Biblical proportions and perfectly played by Edward Norton, is the right measure of how much Monty actually loves this City. At the end, he admits that he is angry only with himself for getting greedy.

Music in the film plays big part in capturing the mood of the City. Lee’s longtime composer, Terence Blanchard, has created the score that, I feel, perfectly reflects the melancholy of New York City in the fall of 2001. He spoke to the NPR about the creative process for the score: “When you listen to some of the music in 25th Hour, you know, Spike wanted to make sure that music kept you in a post-9/11 New York. And so, in my mind, that meant bagpipes, that meant Irish flutes, which represented the New York Police Department and the Fire Department. It also meant to me that there was Arabic percussion and Arabic vocals that could have been used, which represented al Qaeda. And in various scenes throughout, you know, 25th Hour,
you'll hear those elements, you know, throughout any given scene, which subliminally should keep you in the mindset that this is after 9/11, and it gives a certain type of flavor to the film” (Chideya).

According to the book *Spike Lee: That's My Story and I'm Sticking to It*, reviews for the 25th Hour were mixed. *The San Francisco Chronicle* called it “the first great twenty-first century movie about a twenty-first-century subject.” Richard Corliss argued that the film was lethargic. David Denby in the *New Yorker* wrote that it “captured the City’s bitter, wire-taut mood after September 11th.” The film did not perform well at the box office, making less than $13 million domestically. That was frustrating for Edward Norton who felt that “studio released it at the wrong time.” The film was released on December 22nd, 2002, on only five screens. The studio did this to qualify the film for the Oscars and, at the same time, avoid contenders like *Gangs of New York* and part two of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Aftab, Lee, 2005, pp. 284-285). The 25th Hour does not make a pleasant Christmas time experience because it is a sad love letter to New York and America. However, it will be remembered as an important film about the worst moment in the history of New York.
Conclusion

The films I have chosen are not the only essential New York films. The list is based on my personal taste and on my life experience in New York City. The essential New York films, each in its own unique way, educate viewers about the real life in the City and preserve the City’s zeitgeist during specific moments of its history. In so doing, they significantly contribute to the creation of the grand historical narrative of New York and serve as the inspiring stepping-stone for anyone who aspires to understand the essence of Gotham. I hope to inspire other film enthusiasts to search and find more authentic films about New York.

Four out of the six films were produced and set in the 1970s. It is difficult to identify all the reasons why the 1970s, a decade of economic decline for New York, was such a fruitful era for filmmaking. However, one of the main catalysts for the renaissance of film production was the invention of the Mayor’s Office of Media and Entertainment. Prior to the invention of the office, shooting in New York was an administrative and logistical nightmare for film producers. The goal of the new agency was to make New York as welcoming and as friendly to film production as possible. Therefore, a new “one-stop system” was established: “a single agency issuing a single permit, free of charge, good for shooting anywhere in the city, and valid for the length of production.” Mayor Lindsay and his special assistant Barry Gottehrer set in motion the process at the end of May 1965. “The results were almost instantaneous. In 1966 the number of feature films shot in part or in whole in New York leapt from eleven to twenty-five.” Mayor Lindsay was proud: during his two full terms in office, from January 1966 until December 1973,
“no fewer than 366 feature films would be shot in whole or in part in New York City” (Sanders, 2006, pp. 18-19).

Except for Manhattan, all the films I selected were inspired by John Cassavetes to some degree. And Cassavetes was strongly influenced by the New York scripted-documentary filmmakers Shirley Clarke, Lionel Rogozin and Morris Engel. According to Daniel Allentuck’s and Nina Rosenblum’s documentary Ordinary Miracles: The Photo League’s New York, many of the scripted-documentary filmmakers were photographers and members of the legendary New York Photo League. Even the champion of the French New Wave, Francois Truffaut, mentions one of the League’s prominent members as the crucial influence: "Our New Wave would never have come into being if it hadn't been for the young Morris Engel with his fine Little Fugitive." (Higgins, 2006, p. 219). Therefore, the New York Photo League played a major part in the genesis of the American and European independent film. It would be interesting to dedicate more time to this unique collective of photographers, which was active in New York City from 1936 until 1951.

There are many similarities among the films I wrote about. All of the films are dramas, except Manhattan which is “drama with comedy” (Fox, 1996, p. 108). All the characters in the films are in some kind of limbo, at the crossroads of their lives. And they remain in limbo as long as they stay alive. All the characters are fighting to prove themselves in the melting pot. Everybody seems lonely, unloved or in doubt, in the hardest city for love. The city is a major character in all of the films. Stylistically, there is frequent evidence of a documentary mode of representation, using a handheld camera, ambient sounds and improvisational acting. The majority of actors in the films are, or were, real New Yorkers. If there is a soundtrack, it’s mostly
jazz, with the exception of *Mean Streets*. And there is always, except in the black and white *Shadows* - a yellow taxi cab.

The essential New York films contain very strong tragic elements in them. Their representation of life in New York is dark. Professor Douglass Muzzio, of CUNY’s Baruch College in his essay “‘Decent people should not live here’: The American City in Cinema,” explores how US cities are portrayed in American cinema. In the essay he reminds us that, “since the days when Jefferson imagined that the pursuit of happiness ended on a small family farm, large number of Americans have feared and distrusted cities.” Professor Muzzio quotes former New York Mayor John Lindsay who wrote in 1969 that “the world of urban America, as a dark and desolate place undeserving of support or help has become fixed in the American consciousness.” One of the conclusions of Muzzio’s thoroughly researched essay is that “the dominant images of the generic US city and of specific cities in our films of the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s have been grim, almost irrespective of genre, location, and director and without regard to whether the audience was for mass audience or niches.” Professor Muzzio argues, inspired by Anselm Strauss’s pioneering work on urban images in American literature, that the city is most often portrayed as a “dehumanizing place of corruption and immorality, as a jungle, as mean streets, as a reservation/killing fields, as racial tinderboxes, as a growth machine, and as Hell and the Apocalypse” (Muzzio, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 18:2 (1996): 199-200).

Despite the dark aspects of life in the City, my fascination with New York is as strong today as the first day I arrived, more than twenty-three years ago. As Woody Allen would say: “It’s really the rhythm of the city. You feel it the moment you walk down the street. There’s hundreds of good restaurants, thousands of brilliant paintings, you can see all the old movies, all
the new ones… It has to do with nerves, with the blood that runs through the city. It’s dangerous, noisy. It’s not peaceful or easy and because of that you feel more alive.” (Clapp, 2013, p. 197) That is why I believe that the films I wrote about will only become more important with the passage of time. For there is “the rhythm of the city” contained in these works of art, that people will always be coming back to.
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