



Hollywood's New York A publicity still from Hitchcock's 'Rope' (1948), with the Manhattan skyline in the background

Big apple and silver screen

New York has been a favourite movie backdrop for 100 years, finds **Gerald Kaufman**

Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies

by James Sanders
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AS A YOUNG woman stands over a New York sidewalk grating, a blast of warm air blows up her skirt. No... the photograph on page 32 of this book does not depict Marilyn Monroe (who can be seen in a similar situation on page 336 in the 1955 film *The Seven Year Itch*) but an actress called Florence Georgie, performing in a 1901 movie called *What Happened on Twenty-third Street*.

This illustration, one of 274 in this beautifully produced and totally irresistible volume, demonstrates the omniscience and omnivorosity of James Sanders, an architect who not only appears to know everything that needs to be known about New York architecture but, in addition, everything that needs to be known about the cinema, and about architecture as it relates to the cinema.

He can – and does – provide the precise address at which Holly Golightly lived in

Breakfast at Tiffany's (171 East 71st Street, for anyone who wishes to visit it), and points out that the 1945 thriller *The House on 92nd Street* was in fact shot on 93rd Street. He also supplies the indispensable information for sightseers that the Monroe air-vent sequence was shot on East 61st Street (between Third and Lexington Avenues, to be precise) but adds that what cinemagoers actually saw on the screen was re-shot on a soundstage in Hollywood.

Sanders explains that, although filming in New York began in 1896, most of the thousands of movies "located" there – even he cannot provide a precise total – were for many decades shot on sets constructed in Hollywood by all the major studios.

Sanders prints a wonderful picture of such a set on the Warner Bros lot, with, looming over it, not skyscrapers but the incongruous vista of the Hollywood Hills.

Even so, such sets could not-New York New York. The set of the Waldorf Hotel in *Week-end at the Waldorf* was half as large again as the real Waldorf. Moreover, New York had to conform to the views of the studio bosses. When in 1928 King Vidor, the director of *The Crowd*, insisted on a toilet bowl being visible from almost every corner of the set, the studio boss, Louis B. Mayer,

"vowed that no toilet would ever again be visible in an MGM film".

During the filming of the tenement-based *Dead End* (1938) Samuel Goldwyn warned the director William Wyler, who was striving for realism: "There won't be any dirty slums in a Goldwyn picture!"

Nevertheless, studios went to immense trouble to achieve visual authenticity. Art directors did their masterly best to reproduce "the Italianate lintels, the Greek Revival pediments, the modernistic cornice lines, the neoclassical fire hydrants". Studios' filing cabinets "bulged with thousands of special photographs of New York". Warehouses contained hundreds of thousands of items for set-decoration.

One art director declared his aspiration that movie-New York should be "more real than real". The instant recognisability throughout the world of New York landmarks meant that a single shot of the Statue of Liberty (site for a climactic sequence in Hitchcock's *Saboteur*) provided the devastating dénouement for *Planet of the Apes*.

Yet, of course, the cinema's New York was and remains as mythic as realistic. In the musical *42nd Street* the art director and costumier created a dancing Manhattan skyline. Sanders, illustrating his thesis that

New York is a "locus of image and style, memory and dreams", points out that the towers of the Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz* were inspired by that skyline.

Everyone who has ever seen a New York film knows that the top of the Empire State Building is where lovers must meet, as in *On the Town* (the first musical to be shot, in part, on New York locations), *Sleepless in Seattle* and *An Affair to Remember*, where Deborah Kerr describes the building as "the nearest thing to heaven".

No wonder that, arriving at Grand Central, Pa Kettle in *Ma and Pa Kettle Go to Town*, marvels, "Nice-looking city", only to be told by his daughter, "Pa, this is the station." No wonder, too, that the most heartfelt panegyric paid to New York in any movie is the sigh by the evil J.J. Hunsecker (Burt Lancaster), on "seeing a bouncer tossing an unruly drunk on to the sidewalk" in *The Sweet Smell of Success*: "I love this dirty town."

But there is one notable absence from the book... just as there is now from New York City. As the book was completed before September 11 last year, there is no mention of the effect of the fall of the Twin Towers on the New York skyline.

Gerald Kaufman is Chairman of the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee.