

# Once seen, never forgotten

**CELLULOID SKYLINE**  
**New York and the Movies**  
by James Sanders  
Bloomsbury £30 pp498

**CHRISTOPHER SILVESTER**

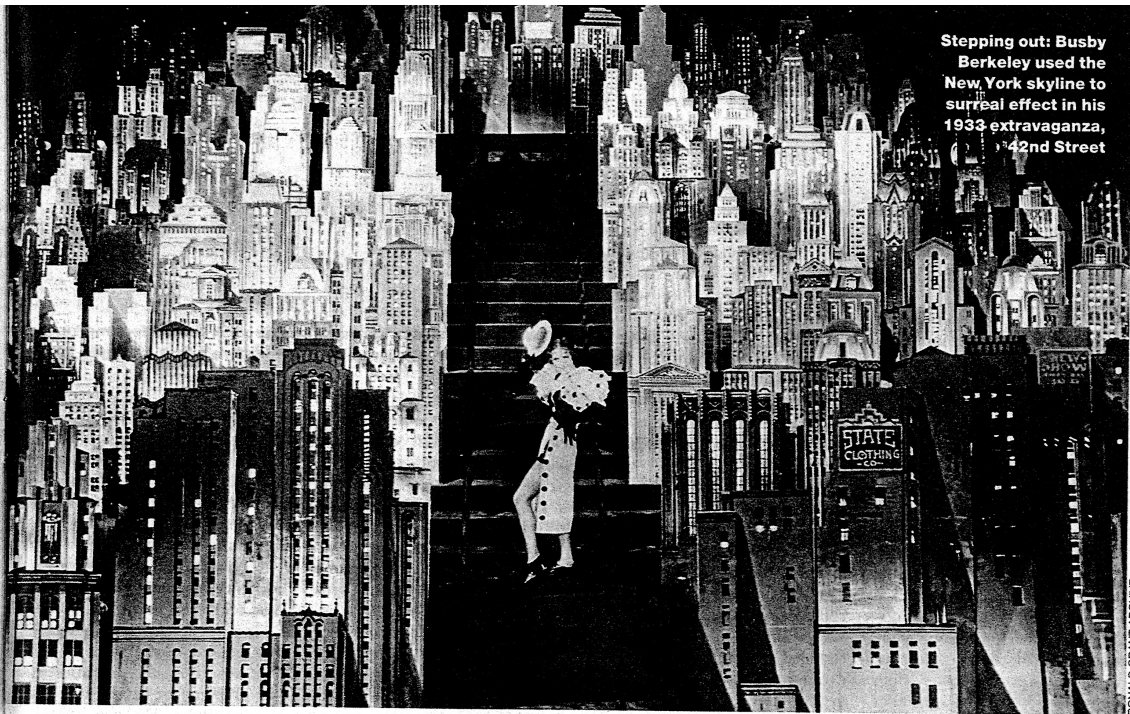
This is more a book about New York than a book about the movies, but the conjunction is well chosen, since our dominant perception of New York has been through film while American cinema has been dominated by New York, above all other cities, as a source of mythology and dreams. "Through a kind of urban grace," says James Sanders, "the skyline of New York — in one sense simply the overscaled product of technology and real estate — became the locus of one of the most potent collective emotional experiences in the life of America."

Although it is the verticality of New York's skyline that makes it so unique, nonetheless it is the horizontal spread of that skyline that characterises New York as an "endless metropolis". Its shape was determined by the city's setback

zoning law of 1916, which required that upper floors should be no larger than one-quarter of the size of a building lot. "Since the early 1920s," Sanders explains, "New York's towers had been consciously shaped as stepped, mountain-like masses, with wide, solid bases that narrowed as they rose, soaring high and free until they reached their peaks, which were invariably capped with a spire or pinnacle of some kind."

Yet Sanders, who is a practising architect and architectural historian, is not interested in architecture as such, but rather in "the imaginative interplay between buildings and people". Unlike the ideal city beloved of medieval thinkers, New York is a "fabled or mythic" city, teeming with heterogeneous humanity. "There are eight million stories in the Naked City," went the line from the film and subsequent television series of that name.

This wide-ranging and erudite study begins with an examination of the early "actuality" films that were shot in the streets of New



Stepping out: Busby Berkeley used the New York skyline to surreal effect in his 1933 extravaganza, *42nd Street*

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York using unwieldy, fixed cameras. These simple records of the bustling motion of the citizenry were soon followed by primitive dramatic stories shot on location. However, the advent of sound in 1929 necessitated a more fundamental change. The new, synchronised-sound cameras were unsuitable for location shooting in an urban environment, so the Hollywood studios, blessed with a limitless supply of cheap land out in California, created "an artificial New York... where sound could be controlled" while turning to New York for writers, composers, lyricists and stage actors who

could best exploit the new medium of sound.

Spurred by homesickness, these transplanted New Yorkers set about creating a New York of the imagination that transcended the real thing. The "horizontal endlessness" of Los Angeles "would be avenged by movie New York's overwhelming verticality" and its "sleepy boulevards, meanwhile, would be retaliated against with an imaginary New York street life that surpassed almost anything the real city could offer". So wonderfully realised was this imaginary New York that its effect could be profoundly dislocating for an East Coast exile such as screenwriter Herman Mankiewicz, who was sitting in a New York bar one day in the 1940s when he dreamily exclaimed, "Oh, to be back in Hollywood, wishing I was back in New York."

Drawing on the photographic resources of the studio reference libraries, Hollywood's art departments designed standing sets of New York that were meticulous in every detail. These constructions "made up a substantial portion of all the permanent sets" on the studio lots — for good reason, since 37 out of 115 features made in 1934 were set in New York City, "making it by far the most popular setting of any kind — urban or rural, foreign or

domestic — in American films".

Skyline backings 40ft high and 120ft long, three-dimensional miniatures, glass shots, rear projection — all were deployed to render the New York of the movies as dramatic and super-real as possible. But there were also some curiosities. In contrast to the predominantly straight streets of the real New York, "the blocks of Hollywood's New York Street... had a gentle bend midway in their length, or met each other in T-shaped intersections — very unlike the real city". The motive for this was financial, since "bending the street, or having it intersect another, served to close down the vista and eliminate the need for expensive additional streets stretching into the distance. The curious result, evident in countless films, was to give a distinctly small-town scale to one of the world's largest cities." Paradoxically, this distortion of reality conveyed a truth appreciated by most New Yorkers, namely that their city consists of a series of small neighbourhoods.

Sanders takes individual movies as cues and explores various New York spaces, from the waterfront and the great railway terminuses to "the great white way" (Broadway), from tenements to mansions and penthouses, from basement speakeasies to rooftop nightclubs.

Turning every page of this sublimely illustrated book brings a new thrill, not just because the pictures are so apt and so exquisitely presented, but also because the text is so lucid, so cogently argued, so dense with pertinent examples, and even, dare I say it, so poetic.

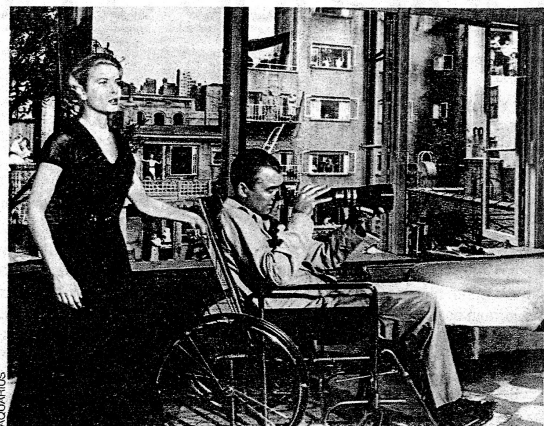
Celluloid Skyline was published in America more than a year ago and remains unchanged in this edition despite the brutal transformation of the New York skyline post-September 11. While it is possible to gaze upon the Empire State building and not automatically recall the ascent of King Kong, any depiction of the New York skyline in a film, with or without the twin towers, must now induce a frisson of regret. Yet at the same time, this ghost at the banquet has caused the most famous skyline in the world to become even more deeply embedded in our collective consciousness. □

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## Size matters

One of the most memorable New York films was Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), left, starring James Stewart and Grace Kelly. The set, which featured a mythical Greenwich Village courtyard, was so large that the floor of the studio stage had to be cut open and the wardrobe rooms beneath removed. In fact, workmen dug down so deep to accommodate the set design that they struck water, and had to install a pump.

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