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# Landscape and Gentrification:

## The Picturesque and Pastoral in 1980s New York Cinema

### Introduction

Recently, the relationship between New Hollywood cinema and the urban crisis of the late 1960s and 1970s has been explored in interdisciplinary scholarship with a predominant focus on New York City.<sup>1</sup> The prominent role of New York in this literature is no accident: in 1966, the newly elected John Lindsay set up the Mayor's Office of Film, Theatre and Broadcasting to encourage film production and a striking number of the now canonical films from the following decade – a golden era in US film history – were shot on location in the city. In contrast the interrelations of cinema and urban change in the 1980s – New York's neoliberal decade *par excellence* (Mollenkopf and Castells, 1991; Fitch, 1993; Harvey, 2005) – remain comparatively unexplored. Although directors such as Woody Allen, William Friedkin, Sidney Lumet and Martin Scorsese continued to make important films set in New York in the 1980s, there are arguably no equivalents to *The French Connection* (William Friedkin, 1971), *Dog Day Afternoon* (Sidney Lumet, 1975), *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) or *Annie Hall* (Woody Allen, 1977), which combined high critical acclaim with box office success.<sup>2</sup>

Instead, the most commercially successful New York film of the 1980s was *Ghostbusters* (Ivan Reitman, 1984), while the decade as a whole is perhaps mostly associated with broad-based variations of the-out-of-towner motif and parallel and sometimes overlapping attempts to portray the city's emerging yuppie culture.<sup>3</sup> In contrast with the high-density spatial tropes of these genre films – awe-inspiring aerial shots of Manhattan's skyline, panoramic vistas from luxury apartments and offices, crowded sidewalks and traffic-congested avenues – a parallel

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<sup>1</sup> This interdisciplinary literature (Greenberg, 2008; Clutter, 2009; Haenni, 2010; Wojcik, 2010; Corkin, 2011; Andersson, 2013; Shearer, 2013; 2015; Webb, 2014) has combined visual and narrative methods from film studies with approaches from urban and economic geography on New York's restructuring (Smith, 1996; Harvey, 2005) and the parallel restructuring of the US film industry (Christopherson and Storper, 1986; Scott, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) occupies such a rare position, but is typically seen to usher in the 1990s.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of out-of-towner motif include romantic comedies such as *Splash* (Ron Howard, 1984), *Moscow on the Hudson* (Paul Mazursky, 1984), *Crocodile Dundee* (Peter Faiman, 1986), *Big* (Penny Marshall, 1988) and *Coming to America* (John Landis, 1988) while the emerging yuppie culture featured in films such as *Wall Street* (Oliver Stone, 1987), *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987) and *Working Girl* (Mike Nichols, 1988). In contrast with Hollywood's anti-establishment themes of conspiracy and corruption in the 1970s, exemplified in the New York context by *Klute* (Alan J. Pakula, 1971), *Serpico* (Sidney Lumet, 1973) and *Three Days of the Condor* (Sydney Pollack, 1975), 1980s cinema often appeared seduced by the decade's excesses. The text book example of this tendency is *Wall Street*, where in spite of a somewhat critical script, the glamorous milieu and star appeal of Michael Douglas, turned yuppie villain Gordon Gekko into one of the cinematic heroes of the decade.

iconography of desolation and urban decay is also emblematic of early 1980s New York cinema. Following the depopulation and deindustrialization of the previous decade, the gradual appropriation of this ruinous landscape – and its aestheticization in cinema and other art forms – has become a template for a visual aesthetic of gentrification, which juxtapositions urban decay with subcultural vitality.

In this article, I want to discuss this cinematic landscape in relation to a wide and eclectic range of examples from different film genres although the main focus will be on Edo Bertoglio's low/no-budget art film *Downtown 81* (1981/2000) and Susan Seidelman's studio-backed romantic comedy *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985). While the genre, style and tone of these films are very different, both are predominantly set in parts of Downtown Manhattan which already at the time were case-studies in the literature on arts-led gentrification (Zukin, 1982; Deutsche and Ryan, 1984). Moreover, their narratives in which artist Basquiat and popstar Madonna play parts with striking similarities to their real-life personas can be read as meta-commentaries on the relationship between art, artists and gentrification. Yet with a few recent exceptions (Corkin, 2011; Kredell, 2012; Webb, 2014; Greenberg, 2014), arguments about the role of art and artists in the gentrification process have rarely extended to cinema in spite of films not merely depicting (and sometimes critiquing) gentrification, but also anticipating and participating in the process by glamorising “edgy” urban locales.

The ways in which *Downtown 81* and *Susan* are positioned in relation to this process differ significantly according to their production and distribution histories. The former was shot in 1980-81, but only completed and screened mainly at film festivals 20 years later during the Giuliani-era at a time of considerable nostalgia for pre-gentrified New York,<sup>4</sup> while the latter was a box-office hit at the time when it helped to introduce and popularise Downtown Manhattan's subcultures to larger audiences. The main reason for choosing these two films as my main examples, however, is not to address questions of production, distribution and reception, but rather because they typify broader trends with regards to the representation of New York's urban landscape. *Downtown 81* is one of several films set among New York's ruins in the early 1980s – a visual motif associated with the picturesque – while *Susan*'s neon-lit cinematography can be thought of in relation to the connected, but separate pastoral tradition.

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<sup>4</sup> During the Giuliani-era with its “quality of life” regulations and crackdowns on nightlife (Hae, 2011) a number of nostalgic period pieces including *Basquiat* (Julian Schnabel, 1996), *The Last Days of Disco* (Whit Stillman, 1998), *54* (Mark Christopher, 1998), and *200 Cigarettes* (Risa Bramon Garcia, 1999) were also released.

To give a schematic etymological definition of these landscape terms from the outset, the picturesque with its origins in the period of the enclosures of the English countryside tends to *aestheticize* suffering and dispossession, while the pastoral is an *idealising* mode of representation with roots in bucolic poetry. This distinction can productively be deployed in relation to tensions between exploitation and glamorisation in 1980s New York cinema, which often dealt with the themes of rent, eviction, and unemployment. Renewed scholarly interest in landscape and the politics of representation in the early 1980s had also begun to highlight the inherent voyeurism of genres such as the picturesque and pastoral with their clear demarcation between the privileged viewer and the motif of the rural poor in ways that resonated with parallel preoccupations with gender and spectatorial desire in film studies at the time.<sup>5</sup> Primarily associated with the journal *Screen* and Laura Mulvey's (1975) article 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', the 1970s debates about spectatorship continued in the early 1980s as a partial rejection of the monolithic structural arguments about the cinematic medium, which had dominated the previous decade. The apparatus-theory favoured by many scholars writing in *Screen* in the 1970s tended to view the overall mechanics of cinematic representation as inherently ideological yet in spite of deploying a Marxian (or specifically Althusserian) framework rarely had anything to say about the representation of class – or space for that matter (Webb, 2014: 21) – in individual films or genres (Nystrom, 2009: 6).

While this article is not an attempt to synthesise *Screen*-theory and landscape studies (it does not, for example, engage with the psychoanalytical arguments which dominated film studies at the time), it draws on work in *Screen* and film studies more broadly to combine its emphasis on spectatorship and sexual difference with the predominant focus on class in the landscape literature. The approach, then, aims to be both interdisciplinary and intersectional in order to encompass the class-based restructuring and divergent identity politics that characterised early 1980s New York and the eclecticism of its cinema.

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<sup>5</sup> Significant examples of this new landscape literature include John Barrell's (1980) *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840* and Ann Bermingham (1986) *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860*. In geography Denis Cosgrove's *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (1984), which had a narrow focus on class relations, inspired subsequent work on visual culture from postcolonial and feminist perspectives as well as distinct geographical approaches to cinematic landscapes. For work specifically on landscape and cinema, see for example Rose, 1993; Aitken and Zonn, 1994; Pidduck, 1998; Gandy, 2003; Lukinbeal, 2005; Lefebvre, 2006; Caprotti, 2009; Harper and Rayner, 2010; as well as interdisciplinary spatial approaches to cinema such as Doel and Clarke, 2007; Rhodes and Gorfinkel, 2011; Shiel, 2012; Olund, 2013; Corbin, 2015.

## **Ruins, cinema and the picturesque**

By the early 1980s, large swaths of New York City – condemned by dubious practices such as redlining, blockbusting, and insurance-related arson – literally consisted of burnt-out rubble and ruins. In a discussion of this ruinous landscape in the South Bronx, Marshall Berman (2007: 19), describes a “new urban picturesque” which, as he points out, had become a destination for arty European tourists. First coined by William Gilpin in the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century, the term picturesque is associated with the motifs of derelict mills and dispossessed poor people during the enclosures of the English and Welsh countryside. Culminating with the General Enclosure Act of 1801, these enclosures are one of Marx’s (1995: 366-71) key examples of primitive accumulation much like the restructuring of New York City in the late 1970s and early 1980s has become one of Harvey’s (2005) emblematic examples of accumulation through dispossession. While the analogy between the enclosures of the countryside and the neoliberal urban restructuring of the early 1980s should not be overdrawn, this historical parallel nevertheless draws attention to the overlapping motifs of derelict mills/urban ruins and the dispossessed rural/urban poor as material and embodied manifestations of creative destruction.

Apart from these motifs, the picturesque refers specifically to a mode of appreciating scenery informed by the compositional rules of landscape painting. Thus in Rosalind Krauss’s (1985: 163) words “it is perfectly obvious that through the action of the picturesque the very notion of landscape is constructed as a second term of which the first is a representation”. As she succinctly puts it: “Landscape becomes a reduplication of a picture that preceded it.” Quickly, this mode of appreciating landscape was appropriated by American writers who in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century began to use “Gilpin’s aesthetic formulas to appreciate the sublime wilderness of the New World and harmonize it with the civilized beauties demanded by Old World standards” (Berthold, 1984: 67). A century later, by the 1880s and 1890s, the rural category of the picturesque had “migrated to urban scenes where it was applied to ragged street urchins and crumbling buildings” (Brooks 1997: 38) with artists such as Alfred Stieglitz, who had previously been known to photograph derelict mills in the countryside, embarking on a portfolio he called *Picturesque Bits of New York and Other Studies* (1897). In relation to this work, Sandra Phillips (2010: 20) has described Stieglitz’s “aesthetic stance” as “that of a privileged observer who sees the world through his own sensibilities”.

As Berman suggests, this privileged perspective may have belonged to arty tourists in early 1980s New York, but representations of the city’s ruins also reached larger audiences through cinema,

media reporting and political campaigning. Both President Carter in 1977 and Presidential nominee Ronald Reagan in 1980 organised photo-opportunities among the South Bronx ruins and in particular the latter's carefully orchestrated press conference – microphones in the air, camera crews filming, the former Hollywood actor dressed in a white suit – anticipates the use of the same location as a cinematic setting in the early 1980s. The films that deployed this ruinous landscape ranged from multi-million box office productions such as *Fort Apache, the Bronx* (Daniel Petrie, 1981) and *Wolfen* (Michael Wadleigh, 1981) to low-budget sci-fis *1990: The Bronx Warriors* (Enzo G. Castellari, 1982) and *Escape from the Bronx* (Enzo G. Castellari, 1983), and the graffiti and hip-hop films *Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1983), *Style Wars* (Tony Silver, 1983), and *Beat Street* (Stan Lathan, 1984).<sup>6</sup>

The Lower East Side, which had suffered similar neglect also featured in various films including *The Deadly Art of Survival* (Charlie Ahearn, 1979), *Permanent Vacation* (Jim Jarmusch, 1980), *Alphabet City* (Amos Poe, 1984), *batteries not included* (Matthew Robbins, 1987) and *Downtown 81*. While the visual motif of ruins and the frequent emphasis on eviction, dispossession and unemployment to varying degrees connect all these films with the picturesque tradition, the application of the term to cinema may at first seem counter-intuitive given its primary association with static imagery such as landscape painting. Anne Hollander (1986: 263-64) has suggested that the “picturesque ideal is essentially static” while the category of the sublime “has been the appropriate mode for cinematic landscape”. Yet this characterisation of the picturesque as static downplays the term's original association with walking tours in the English countryside and with gardens designed to reveal multiple views to a mobile subject. Commenting on the cinematic quality of this mode of viewing, Giuliana Bruno (2002: 194) notes that: “The picturesque enacted shifts from vista to vista as its rhythm of montage unravelled along a path of sequential motion.”

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<sup>6</sup> The eclecticism of these films – united only by their South Bronx locations – undermines the dominant discourse of US cinema in the 1980s as characterised by homogenisation and the commercial logic of the *blockbuster* – a term whose etymology and association with the air raids in the Second World War directly links it with the theme of the burnt-out neighbourhood. In these films, aerial perspectives sometimes operate as visual battlegrounds for competing political visions in ways not dissimilar from the emphasis on post-war reconstruction in the so called *Trümmerfilme* (rubble films) produced in Germany between 1946 and 1949. Billy Wilder's *A Foreign Affair* (1948), which can be seen as an international variation of the genre, begins with aerial views over Berlin from a plane where members of a congressional committee discuss the merits of the Morgenthau and Marshall Plans, the former advocating the wholesale pastoralization of Germany, while the latter was influenced by Keynes's (1919) critique of the Versailles Treaty (Rentschler, 2010: 422). Similarly, ideological debates about urban restructuring in New York in the 1970s and early 1980s ranged from Keynesian reconstruction plans to Morgenthau-inspired proposals to turn “the south Bronx into a giant vegetable garden” (Finch, 1993: 215).

Similarly, the 1980s films of New York's ruins deploy various perspectives ranging from aerial photography, horizontal tracking shots and perhaps, above all, handheld cameras to convey a landscape in motion. Films in which the ruinous landscape is channelled through the eyes of a strolling protagonist illustrates a useful distinction between the sublime – an awe-inspiring experience where the subject is overcome by the object – and the picturesque, which in contrast is “a sort of sublimity where the subject exceeds the object, rather than the other way around” (Macarthur, 1997: 132). In addition, many of these films exhibit picturesque tendencies insofar that they aestheticize the ruins for an audience – and sometimes for characters in the narratives – primarily from elsewhere. The protests by sexual and racial minority groups targeting the location shooting of *Cruising* (William Friedkin, 1980) and *Fort Apache, the Bronx* are the most well-known examples of resistance to such exploitative voyeurism. Crucially, in these instances, the protestors regarded the presumed spectators as fundamentally different from the people depicted: a largely white audience viewing Puerto-Ricans and African Americans in *Fort Apache, the Bronx* or straight people enjoying what an early critique of *Cruising* by Simon Watney (1982: 109) described as the film's “picturesque gay underworld”. Yet films with subcultural credibility also frequently conformed to this voyeuristic pattern with regards to narrative tropes, audience and authorship.



*Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1983)

*Wild Style*, for example, the influential film about black and Latino graffiti and hip-hop culture, was made by a white filmmaker and the narrative features a Downtown journalist who arrives in a convertible car to interview the graffiti artists among the ruins. Moreover, the film was partly

funded by European TV companies Channel 4 and ZDF and presumably, to a large extent, aimed at foreign audiences (Jaehne, 1984). Yet, rather than merely conforming to a picturesque fascination with the subculture of the ruins, *Wild Style* includes a self-reflexive meta-commentary on the voyeurism with which it is implicated. The journalist visiting the ruins can be seen as a stand-in for both the director and the audience's fascination with urban decay, while later in a scene set in an art gallery the Downtown commodification of graffiti is ridiculed. Contrary to the negative assessment of 1980s cinema as reactionary (or at best apolitically escapist), which has dominated since Robin's Wood's influential *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (1986), many of the films set among the ruins also deploy overtly anti-gentrification narratives even if the political content is expressed in idiosyncratic or cartoonish terms. In *Wolfen*, wolf-like creatures kill a property tycoon who wants to redevelop the South Bronx (for a recent political reading of this film, see Toscano and Kinkle, 2015: 106-36), while in *batteries not included* space-aliens intervene to stop the eviction of tenants in a run-down building on the Lower East Side.



*Wolfen* (Michael Wadleigh, 1981)

Beyond the immediate critical meaning of such narratives, however, the frequent juxtapositioning of urban decay with subcultural vitality in many of the 1980s rubble films aestheticizes the ruinous landscape in ways that inform rather than resist gentrification. *Downtown 81* is illustrative in this regard not merely because of the narrative focus on young artists and musicians on the Lower East Side, but also because of the ways in which it channels the landscape through the protagonist's aesthete sensibility. A day-in-the-life of a young artist played by Basquiat, *Downtown 81* is largely set on the gentrification "frontier" in Alphabet City where Neil Smith's (1996: 205; 189) detailed analysis of tax arrears identified the "turning points" from



devalorization to gradual reinvestment as occurring between 1978 and 1981. As a number of critical commentators have argued, both the dilapidated physical environment (Mele, 2000: 233) and the visible poverty and homelessness in this part of the Lower East Side aided gentrification as a source of “aesthetic pleasure” (Deutsche and Ryan, 1984: 111).

This aestheticized notion of poverty and decay resonates with arguments in the literature on the picturesque, where perhaps most forcefully Ann Bermingham (1986: 69) has highlighted how in some of its forms “the aesthetic effect of the picturesque seems to be calculated precisely on poverty and misery”. *Downtown 81* is ambiguously positioned in relation to this type of voyeurism: the privileging of introverted voice-over over dialogue relegates the minor cast of prostitutes, junkies and street hustlers to a decorative backdrop and as the reviewer in the *New York Times* argued, Basquiat and the other young creative types in the film “seem utterly unaffected by the desperate poverty of their neighbors” (Kehr, 2001). Yet any easy picturesque reading is complicated by the film’s point-of-view in which Basquiat is at once the embodiment of urban spectatorship through which we appreciate the ruinous landscape, and at the same time, an evicted and dispossessed object in the art-house film in which he plays a part.

This dual perspective informs the point-of-view of the film, which is structured as a *picaresque* – a term associated with the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish novel, but more broadly understood as an episodic first-person narrative of the adventures of a sympathetic outsider. Voiceover narration is used to emphasise the point-of-view of Basquiat whose adventures are structured almost entirely around random urban encounters. However, in contrast with the first-person novel in which we see the world through the eyes of the protagonist, the mobile 16mm camera with which the film is shot alternates between depicting Basquiat and mimicking his point of view. Thus, if the distinct quality of the first-person novel is to enter the mind of a character, a paradoxical marvel of this cinematic convention is to both look at the protagonist and see the world through his eyes. At times the two perspectives – through him and of him – almost merge into one, in a type of point-of-view Neil Archer (in a completely different context) has described as “a conflation of viewer perception with the diegetic; or in other words, a perspective that both incorporates and encompasses that of the protagonist”. Indeed, the voiceover narration (actor Saul Williams’s voice dubbed after Basquiat’s original audio track was lost) observes how: “The streets look really good to me. They look like art” and then later when writing on a wall: “The city looked big and I felt big because I was part of the landscape.” Seen through his eyes, the streets become art,

yet as a figure in the landscape – even while in the process of creating – he is simultaneously objectified.



*Downtown 81* (Edo Bertoglio, 1981/2000)

Basquiat's dual role as artist and evicted in *Downtown 81* – and reportedly homeless in real life during the production of the film – complicates the critiques of the 1980s Downtown art scene as merely appropriating the themes of poverty and homelessness as gritty surface aesthetic (Deutsche and Ryan, 1984: 106-7).<sup>7</sup> Walking around with a painting, which he needs to sell to reclaim the flat from which he has been evicted, Basquiat is often engaged in some form of artistic practice such as wall painting or playing the clarinet. José Esteban Muñoz (1999: 43-44) has read the saxophone-playing black man in one of Basquiat's paintings (a 1984 collaboration with Andy Warhol) as a melancholic figure that draws attention to the exploitation of black cultural labour in the United States yet it is not clear whether the clarinet scenes in *Downtown 81* should be understood unequivocally as labour. He is not busking, but appears to play for pleasure on his walks around the city and similarly, the spray-painting of enigmatic phrases during these walks – reminiscent of the tags associated with informal graffiti group SAMO of which Basquiat was part – do not seem to serve any immediate commercial purpose.

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<sup>7</sup>According to Bowler and McBurney (1991: 56) such critiques paint “a landscape of politico-aesthetic conspiracy” in which the “one-dimensional vilification of artists as agents of gentrification shifts critical attention away from larger economic and political forces at work”.

The fact that the protagonist's art is always produced or carried around on foot, however, suggests an allegorical equation between art and street walking, artist and prostitute, which at times correlated with Basquiat's real-life situation as same-sex rent boy. While this queer biography is not directly alluded to, Basquiat's renowned sexual charisma – or *radiance* to quote René Ricard's *Art Forum* article 'The radiant child' (1981) – is clearly part of the episodic narrative where he is accosted by strangers in the street. At one point, he is picked up by a woman with the Dantesque name Beatrice (Anna Schroeder) in a convertible car in a scene that inverts the gender conventions of the typical "pick-up" and again underlines the art/prostitution analogy when she offers to be both lover and patron.

This narrative episode also draws attention to the spectatorial pleasure of looking at Basquiat as an "object of sexual stimulation through sight" (Mulvey, 1975: 10). While Mulvey's arguments about scopophilic desire were initially reserved for the male gaze on women, her work was subsequently appropriated to encompass male erotic objects, female narrative subjects, queer spectators as well as contexts in which the fetishistic desire of gender domination was transferred to racial difference. These analyses not only complement the emphasis on class-based voyeurism in the literature on the picturesque, but add an explicit libidinous dimension to the gentrifying gaze, for which the meaning of urban decay has "shifted from fear and repulsion to curiosity and desire" (Mele, 2000: 233). While *Downtown 81* like some of the other early 1980s rubble films arguably combines a fetishisation of ruins and racial difference in picturesque form (the German term *Ruinenlust* seems apt here), Basquiat is never reduced to an *objet d'art* in the still life tradition of, for example, Robert Mapplethorpe (Mercer, 1994). While he may be an object of scopophilic desire, he is also the bearer of the film's gaze in a dual perspective that partly disrupts the privileged picturesque outlook. Ultimately, however, it is this perspective that enables the spectator to enjoy the aestheticized poverty while parasitically identifying with Basquiat's own marginality.

### **Through neon-tinted spectacles**

In *Loft Living*, Sharon Zukin (1982: 180) suggested that the aesthetic transformation of SoHo in the 1970s – conceptualised as an "artistic mode of production" – submitted its light manufacturing legacy "to the rules of the 'picturesque'". In the following, however, I want to suggest that cinematic representations of SoHo and the surrounding Downtown bohemia in the mid-1980s exhibited pastoral rather than picturesque sensibilities. A heterogeneous term originally associated with Roman literature (Alpers, 1982), pastoral refers to idealised depictions

of agricultural labour (the shepherd and nymph motif) although the term has also been deployed in relation to modern art (Greenberg, 1986: 51-2; Crow, 1993; Stallabrass, 1999: 237-45) and urban aesthetics (Gandy, 2002; Daniels, 2006) including the context of arts-led gentrification (Harris, 2012). Unlike the picturesque tendency to aestheticize suffering, the pastoral, both in its literary and visual forms, idealises or removes hardship from view in favour of an emphasis on the simple pleasures of the poor (casual sex, drugs and clubs were the equivalents in 1980s New York cinema to the nymphs, flutes and wine of Arcadia). Moreover, as Julian Stallabrass (1999: 239) has argued, the pastoral outlook involves a “double view” insofar that it attributes particular forms of authentic wisdom to marginalised populations yet insists that only the privileged and educated “can bring to full consciousness and representation the unconscious virtues of the poor”. While it has been suggested that pastoral art flourished as a nostalgic reaction to urbanization (Kermode, 1952: 15), the cinematic pastoral under consideration here can be understood in relation to a particular moment in the gentrification cycle when the eclectic diversity celebrated in films was either about to, or had already been, displaced.

By the late 1970s, SoHo’s art and fashion scenes had already featured in a small number of narrative films including *Fingers* (James Toback, 1978), *The Eyes of Laura Mars* (Irvin Kershner, 1978), *Girlfriends* (Claudia Weill, 1978), and the critically and commercially acclaimed *An Unmarried Woman* (Paul Mazursky, 1978), which started a mini-trend by contrasting the sexual and romantic experimentation of the Downtown scene with materialistic conformity. Variations of this theme were recycled in a string of films from the mid-1980s – *Desperately Seeking Susan*, *Afterhours* (Martin Scorsese, 1985), *9 ½ Weeks* (Adrian Lyne, 1986), *Hannah and Her Sisters* (Woody Allen, 1986), *Parting Glances* (Bill Sherwood, 1986) and *Legal Eagles* (Ivan Reitman, 1986) – which vary significantly in tone and genre, but tend to celebrate the area’s eccentric or arty inhabitants as a source of escape for more conventional protagonists (or in some instances warn against their seductive appeal). Through the narrative device of the urban encounter, these films frequently analogise the experiences of romance/sex, discovering an edgy neighborhood and, ultimately, (re)discovering oneself in a classic gentrification trope. *Susan* – which will be my main example – is almost entirely structured around urban encounters and Roger Ebert (1985) praised “the cheerful way it bopped around New York, introducing us to unforgettable characters, played by good actors”.

A romantic farce of mistaken identity, the film is also a gentrification narrative in which suburban housewife Roberta (Rosanna Arquette) follows mystery woman Susan (Madonna) into

Manhattan's semi-bohemian youth culture. The lifestyle, it seems, is contagious: Roberta becomes romantically involved with a film projectionist at the Bleecker Street Cinema and when his girlfriend runs off with a man in a Porsche (the ultimate yuppie symbol of the 1980s), Roberta moves into his SoHo loft temporarily and brings with her the restoration ethic of the gentrifying classes ("You could do a lot with this space. There's a lot of light"). Contradictorily positioned in relation to the transformation of the area, *Susan* celebrates the semi-bohemian subculture under threat from displacement yet by romanticizing it in an accessible form – the romantic comedy – also participates in the area's gentrification.

In fact, the gradual revival of the romantic comedy and the parallel repopulation and demographic changes of the inner-city in the 1980s can be seen as interconnected. In an article on genre theory, written at the end of the 1970s after a decade or more of shrinking industrial cities, Brian Henderson (1978: 19-21) boldly predicted the demise of the romantic comedy, which he viewed as characterised by smug urban superiority. Furthermore, the dramatic tensions of the romantic comedy, he argued, had been dependent on a "condition of non-fucking" under the self-censorship of the classical Hollywood-era, which was no longer possible after the sexual liberation movements and simultaneous disintegration of the Hollywood Production Code in the late 1960s. Yet Henderson was writing this at a time when the romantic comedy was about to make a come-back, first with the "nervous romances" of the late 1970s (Neale, 1992), and then with a new cycle of films with a pastoral emphasis on the pleasures of the Downtown scene. While *Susan* includes no explicit sex scenes – perhaps as homage to the screwball tradition it celebrates – characters wake up in each other's beds and the narrative is not structured around the absence of sex as in Henderson's definition of the romantic comedy. Susan's erotic history keeps the otherwise loose plot together and although not a musician in the diegetic, the disco scene in which she dances to Madonna's 'Into the Groove' (footage from this scene was used in the promotional video for the song) makes her virtually indistinguishable from the sexualised persona of the emerging pop star who plays her part. Indeed, Madonna's transition from subculture to mainstream mirrors the parallel trajectories of the neighborhoods – the East Village and SoHo – in which the story is predominantly set.

The tension between niche credibility and mass appeal, in fact, characterises the whole film. Ambiguously straddling the independent/Hollywood divide, *Susan* tries to appeal to several subsections of the market simultaneously by combining esoteric cinephilic and pop cultural references with an accessible feel-good plot. This audience maximisation is perhaps most striking

in relation to the film's sexual politics, which appear to be designed with separate sub-audiences in mind: on a literal level the narrative is heterosexual yet the basic premise of the plot in which Roberta identifies Susan through a personal add and follows her through Manhattan, clearly flirts with the gay market. The fact that the homoerotic potential of this narrative is never allowed to fully blossom led feminist/queer scholars to diametrically opposed verdicts on the film: while Jackie Stacey (1987) saw emancipatory potential in the ways in which it visualised same-sex desire, the "failure" of this theme to materialise in the story led Teresa De Lauretis (1990: 19) to lump it together with a range of other films she deemed homophobic in an overview of women's cinema in the 1980s. For contemporary audiences, however, the unspoken and unconsummated homoeroticism arguably has a queer quality insofar that it resists "settling down" into a homonormative pattern of monogamy and domesticity. As Wood (1986: 229) noted in relation to the male buddy films of the 1970s, the "surreptitious gay texts" of these narratives often had more radical potential than the male lovers films of the 1980s, which mimicked and adopted the liberal ideals of family. A key characteristic of the buddy film, Wood (1986: 228) noted, was "the absence of home" – a theme adopted in *Susan* through Roberta's rejection of her suburban life in New Jersey and embodied in Susan's nomadic persona.

This rejection of home is dependent on the domestication of the city's public spaces, which at least Susan appears to inhabit effortlessly. Skilfully navigating and manipulating the male gaze, she "transgresses conventional forms of feminine behaviour by appropriating public space for herself" (Stacey, 1987: 60) and turns Manhattan into her own apartment (the Port Authority lockers are used as a wardrobe, its rest rooms as a bathroom, and, at times, she is seen lounging on furniture abandoned in the street). In his *New York Times* review, Vincent Canby (1985) even drew a vivid analogy between the film's accessibility and the inclusivity of some of Manhattan's most iconic public spaces describing it as "a New York movie that, like Times Square at 4 A.M. or Central Park at high noon, is available to everyone". Yet Times Square in the 1980s was arguably not "available to everyone", but a place where according to Berman (2006: 176) the "male gaze turned aggressively nasty". Commenting on Allan Moyle's *Times Square* (1980), a similarly homoerotic film about two young women who appropriate public space for themselves (they live on a pier and hang out in Times Square), Berman (2006: 185) disparagingly refers to its "pastoral vision".



*Desperately Seeking Susan* (Susan Seidelman, 1985)



*Times Square* (Allan Moyle, 1980)

In both *Times Square* and *Susan*, it seems, the politics of the gaze have moved beyond the anti-porn logic of Take-Back-The-Night marches and Mulvey's critique of gendered spectatorship in Hollywood cinema from the 1970s. Reflecting some of the sex-positive ethos that emerged from

the Feminist Sex Wars in the early 1980s, *to-be-looked-at-ness* – for these female characters which combine elements of the pastoral nymph with the femme fatale – is no longer viewed merely in oppressive terms, but also as a way of navigating and accessing parts of the city. When Mulvey (1998: 122) herself wrote an essay on *Susan* – comparing it to the French New Wave classic *Céline and Julie Go Boating* (Jacques Rivette, 1974) – she highlighted how new technology and portable equipment had “transformed 35mm location work in the 1980s, opening up narrative itself”. The lively sense of place and narrative structure facilitated by this technology, however, should not be mistaken for spontaneous depictions of street life “as it is”: the inclusive portrayal of public space in *Susan* crams in as many demographic types as possible into the exterior street scenes in what are clearly carefully staged tableaux. Thus the film deploys similar visual strategies to Jonathan Demme’s contemporary *Something Wild* (1986), in which Cameron Bailey (1988: 32-33) noted how in spite of an all-white lead and supporting cast, the film “strews black faces across the background of the film, providing a literal local colour that adds to the film’s hip credibility”.

In *Susan*, this “literal local colour” is accentuated further by Edward Lachman’s colourful cinematography which depicts Roberta’s suburban world in Fort Lee, New Jersey, in claustrophobic pastel colours, while the diverse Downtown settings associated with *Susan* are glamourized in neon. Taking advantage of faster film stocks, sharper lenses, and mobile equipment, which had transformed location shooting at night or during the “golden hour” (Eidsvik, 1988; Arnett, 2006: 127), the film forms part of a distinct visual style now seen as emblematic of the 1980s. Seidelman’s description of the neon-lit cinematography in *Susan* as “hyperrealism” with a “gritty but... slightly romanticized edge” (Maslin, 1985) underlines that the film is not merely a depiction of the Downtown scene, but also an expression of its visual culture. Similarly, its vintage ethos – fashion items drive the narrative and a couple of scenes are set in the now closed East Village store *Love Saves the Day* – is not merely a plot device, but informs the look of the film as many props and outfits were bought in the area’s second-hand shops (Maslin, 1985). Adding grit to these quirky fashion objects, street hustlers and drunks often feature in the street scenes in a colourful repackaging of the Lower East Side tradition of both reformist and exploitative representations of destitution. In a critique of so called Bowery photography, Martha Rosler (1989: 304) has argued that: “The buried text of photographs of drunks is not a treatise on political economy.” Neither of course can the carefully staged mise-en-scène in *Susan* be seen as a treatise on pluralist democracy when the minor minority characters so rarely get to speak.



The most conspicuous of these minority silences concerns the AIDS crisis, which by the mid-1980s enfolded Downtown Manhattan and as Sarah Schulman (2012: 26; 37) has argued, accelerated gentrification when AIDS victims turned “over their apartments *literally* to market rate at an unnatural speed” (a process further exacerbated by the lack of legal protections for gay people whose “surviving partners or roommates were not allowed to inherit leases that has been in the dead person’s name”).<sup>8</sup> The first US feature film about AIDS – Bill Sherwood’s *Parting Glances*, which was filmed in 1984 and released in 1986 – deployed a similar Downtown geography of lofts and nightclubs as *Susan* (and Scorsese’s *After Hours*) yet was safely compartmentalised and marketed as a “gay film”. In cinema with broader target audiences AIDS was rarely mentioned – *Hannah and Her Sisters* includes an ill-judged joke about dentists and gay patients – in spite of a clear tendency to recognise the presence of gay men in this milieu.

Among the potpourri of “diverse types” in *Susan*, the flamboyant store attendant in the vintage shop scenes is clearly a representative of sexual diversity much like the butch leather queens and the street cruiser are in *After Hours*. Thus gay male culture and some of its most stereotypical representatives feature as quirky examples of liberal pluralism at exactly the moment when these types had come to signify death. While President Reagan with justification has been criticised for refusing to publically use the word AIDS until 1985, his silence, it seems, was mirrored in the arts where the first dramatizations of the health crisis – *An Early Frost* (John Erman, 1985) on TV, the theatre-production of *The Normal Heart* (Larry Kramer, 1985) and *Parting Glances* in the cinema – appear mid-decade after an initial period of traumatic aphasia. Herein lies perhaps the most pastoral aspect of New York’s early to mid-1980s visual culture: in the midst of the health crisis, sex and romance continued to be represented as if nothing had happened.

## Conclusion

Through the critical lens of landscape, this article has highlighted narrative and visual themes in 1980s New York cinema that anticipated and participated in the revalorization of parts of the inner-city. Picturesque and pastoral motifs feature across a range of film genres, but as modes of representation arguably correspond to different stages in the gentrification cycle. If the ruin

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<sup>8</sup> While the relationship between AIDS and gentrification has only recently received scholarly attention, it was hinted at in gay fiction already in the 1980s. In Gary Indiana’s (1989: 101) AIDS novel *Horse Crazy*, the protagonist who lives in the East Village observes how “Someone dies in an apartment three floors down, a week later the place is gutted by beefy Polish workers, three weeks later the place rents out to a prosperous, starched-looking couple for \$1200 per month”.

cinema of the early 1980s thrived on the picturesque interplay between gritty decay and the aestheticizing perspective of a narrative outsider, the pastoral moves beyond this posture of spleen by holding out an elusive promise of participation in the hedonism it portrays. In contrast with the antagonistic encounters in 1970s crisis cinema – typically muggings and violent confrontations in which characters stand in as representatives for larger groups in the city (Andersson, 2013) – immersion with difference is instead presented as emancipatory in narrative tropes which analogise the “revitalisation” of character and neighbourhood.

Given that many of the films mentioned here are now cult classics or artefacts in the retro-cycle, their depiction of difference as a desirable feature of gritty urban landscapes (albeit on mainly decorative terms) feeds the contemporary nostalgia for pre-gentrified New York. Novelist Edmund White (2015) recently identified “an intense yearning for a specific five-year period in New York City, those years between the blackout in 1977, and 1982, when AIDS was finally named by the Centers for Disease Control”. Yet since AIDS was never mentioned in the dramatic arts until several years after the outbreak, cinema from beyond these five years continues to shape an idealised notion of the 1980s. Pastoral in nature, the backward glance on this period tends to view at least the first half of the decade as a Golden Age of creativity in which relatively low rents enabled artistic and lifestyle experimentation to flourish. Indeed, the cultural repertoire of the era ranging from hip-hop, New/No Wave, house, fashion and graffiti, which is arguably epitomised overall by an iconography of faux-dereliction and urban decay continues to dominate gentrifying hipster enclaves around the world.

This wistful affection for the period of neoliberal restructuring and AIDS should perhaps be viewed with suspicion by progressives, yet as film scholars have begun to recognise, nostalgia can be imbued with critical potential (Cook, 2005; Sprengler, 2009). In early 1980s New York cinema, the ruins which in the original picturesque depicted derelict abbeys and mills, often mourn the disappearance of progressive institutions and infrastructure or alternatively cherish the re-appropriation of the same built structures for subcultural purposes. Similarly, the pastoral emphasis on erotic idealisation in the midst of the AIDS crisis, which on the one hand suggests an inability to acknowledge trauma, can simultaneously be viewed as a form of resistance to the conservative backlash that had already begun. Even the sexual ambiguity of some Hollywood cinema from the period – clearly stemming from a reactionary refusal to allow same-sex desire to feature literally in scripts for the mass-market – has a certain queer quality insofar that it resists homonormative temptations for “happy endings”. Paradoxically, then, the aestheticization and

idealisation associated with the picturesque and the pastoral, typically thought of as depoliticising, can be permeated with contradictory and sometimes progressive tendencies. Moreover, these genres cannot be reduced to merely representational modes or motifs: deployed as critical lenses, they make visible certain social relations and help us to re-politicise the urban landscape.

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