



RADBOUD UNIVERSITY NIJMEGEN

Take a Walk on the Wild Side:

Unearthing Abel Ferrara's New York

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Introduction

Throughout the decades New York has served as an urban backdrop for countless productions. Statistically, New York City is home to the most filmed locations (Davison) and often takes on the role of a character, serving as more than a background for what is being depicted on screen. Cinema has the ability to produce multiple versions of a single city, as different narratives, techniques of filming, genres, and directors will each produce a different cinematic urban reality. Through the lens of many filmmakers, countless versions of New York City have been created and many historic moments in the cinematic landscape have come to fruition: From King Kong hanging on to the Empire State Building in Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack's 1933 *King Kong* to Robert De Niro traversing the darkened and vicious city streets of 1970's New York in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. From a metaphor for the decay of contemporary culture, filled with adoration and love for the city in Woody Allen's *Manhattan*, to a post-apocalyptic depiction full of danger and filth in John Carpenter's *Escape From New York*. Perhaps New York can be seen as an embodiment of the versatility of cinema, a place so vast and unique that every filmmaker can make it part of their universe. However, to create and be able to transcend a feeling and imagery of an urban setting, a filmmaker has to make distinctive decisions in the application of film forms and techniques. "A painter knows how to manipulate color, shape, and composition. A novelist lives intimately with language. Likewise, filmmakers work with a distinct medium" (Bordwell et al. 111). Within film, elements such as narration, cinematography, and mise-en-scène all play an important role in how a cinematic production turns out and how the urban environment is represented. How these elements and techniques are applied differs depending on the filmmaker and the projection of their vision. Filmmakers often have a distinct style, conveyed through cinematic elements and expressed over the scope of their work. With that, the style of a filmmaker can greatly impact

how a setting is portrayed on screen. Therefore, the cinematic world of Abel Ferrara serves as an insightful study of the confluence of cinematic elements and their role in the representation of New York City.

Abel Ferrara is a New York filmmaker in heart and soul. Born in the Bronx of Italian and Irish descent and influenced by the likes of Pasolini and Fassbinder, Ferrara started directing his first feature film in 1975, a pornographic film titled *9 Lives of a Wet Pussy* (Brenez 2), which was released the following year and set the trajectory for the often-provocative content of his films. Over the years, Ferrara has built up an impressive filmography, spanning several decades, and frequently taking place in New York; featured as a gritty urban setting, augmented by neo-noir imagery and a protagonist who traverses the city streets while coming in contact with a variety of societal problems in urban life. In exploring the representation of New York City through the eyes of Ferrara, the main goal of this research is to provide answers to the following question: *How is New York depicted through narration, cinematography, and mise-en-scène in Abel Ferrara's filmography?* This will be explored through the lens of *Ms .45*, *King of New York*, and *Bad Lieutenant*. Together, these three films span the 80s and 90s of a seedier side of New York. Moreover, these films all feature protagonists who are vastly different from one another, ultimately resulting in a different outlook on, and experience of, the city, as different layers of society are explored. The interactions with the citizens of New York, along with the point of view from which the setting is experienced, bear little resemblance to one another. Yet, so many distinct elements and cinematic choices that call attention to Ferrara's unique style are present. Together, *Ms .45*, *King of New York*, and *Bad Lieutenant*, highlight the role of New York City in Abel Ferrara's filmography. Analyzing these three films and their implementation of cinematic elements will provide me with detailed knowledge of the stylistic similarities used by Ferrara to create a personal and, at times, flummoxed New York. In return, allowing me to better understand the representation of the city through his eyes.

Theory

“Every problem in Ferrara’s films is a social problem, a problem endemic to the formation and maintenance of a human community” (Martin). Abel Ferrara’s oeuvre plunges into the most extreme forms of wickedness, from dealing with assault and violence in *Ms .45*, issues of drug trafficking and the role of gangsters in society in *King of New York*, to a deep and brutal look at the abuse of power by men who are supposedly on the right side of the law in *Bad Lieutenant*. Crime, deterrence, and drug abuse peaked between the mid-’80s and ’90s in New York, resulting in an increase of assaults, deaths and murders in the city (Corman and Mocan 590). I would argue that Ferrara’s use of New York as a filmic topography far extends the simple pragmatic use of an urban setting for stylistic and aesthetic purposes. Rather, it aims to reflect an unfiltered and exemplified version of the underbelly of New York. The problems at the core of these films ultimately serve as a reflection of the city. In *Social Justice and the City*, Harvey argues that “any general theory of the city must somehow relate the social processes in the city to the spatial form which the city assumes” (23), building a bridge between sociological imagination and spatial consciousness; from the representation of distinctive spaces and lifestyles to human conditions of the city, Ferrara’s films and the representation of urban life in New York, embody cinema’s “striking and distinctive ability to capture and express the spatial complexity, diversity, and social dynamism of the city” (Shiel 1).

Spatial consciousness enables the individual to recognize the role of space and place in their own lives, to relate to the spaces perceived around them, and to recognize how transactions between individuals and between organizations are affected by the space that separates them (Harvey 24). In this respect, “Ferrara’s films are structured like passages through the looking-glass; it is a matter of passing from the recto to the verso of a given situation or image” (Brenez 15). The characters are aware of their surroundings and interact with them; from the fashion filled Garment district of 1980s Manhattan in *Ms .45* to the suburbs in *Bad Lieutenant*, space

plays a distinctive role. In a certain way, Ferrara's New York is exemplary in its demonstration of spatial consciousness, giving rise to a typical narrative structure of Ferrara's work where the major fold is progressively translated throughout a series of small folds (15). The protagonists are conscious of their environment, able to map it through bad and good. "It is possible to regard the spatial form of a city as a basic determinant of human behavior" (Harvey 44). In the depiction of New York in Ferrara's films, the spatial form of the different areas and locations serve as a signifier for deciding the appropriate behavior, depending on the immediate surroundings and the relationship between the character and the territory they find themselves in.

According to Jameson, cinema is cognitive mapping in its attempt to think spatially (qtd. In Shiel 6). With that, cinema is best understood in terms of spatial organization; both the geographical relationships of various settings in film sequences, and the shaping of lived urban spaces by cinema as a cultural practice (Lima 144). In exploring the cinematic mapping of the metropolis in Ferrara's filmography, I would refer to Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City*, in which he argues that there seems to be a public image of any given city which is the overlap of many individual images (46). Contributing to those images are physical forms that can be classified into five types of elements: paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks. Within these five elements, Lynch stresses the desire for humans to comprehend the imageability of their environment, providing the basics to the concept of cognitive mapping. Individually these elements are simply the raw material of the environmental image at city scale, but to provide a satisfying form they must be patterned together (Lynch 80).

Ms .45, *King of New York*, and *Bad Lieutenant*, like many of Ferrara's films, revolve around a central character who navigates the augmented reality of the New York streets, diving into the flow of city life, where images, faces, gazes, structures and even emotions are consciously perceived. The characters offer an observation of the physical forms of the urban

landscape, along with the human activity around it, strengthened by a variety of cinematic elements. In this regard, the notion of cognitive mapping can be fruitfully combined with the concept of *flânerie*. The perception of the urban territory is edited by human experiences due to the decision-making in movement through the environment, similar to the way the experience of a city in film is shaped by those that are in control. According to Benjamin, the streets become a dwelling for the *flâneur*: “he is as much at home among the façades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls” (37). The figure of the *flâneur* can be viewed as an observer and a narrator that transforms the context of the metropolis into an interior and exterior image (La Rocca 10), with the urban environment as an amplifier of these experiences.

Within the three chosen films, the protagonists have socio-cultural differences that separate their experiences of the city, resulting in different interactions and perceptions. However, common among them all is their complex relationship with the urban crowd, along with their aversion towards adhering to exemplary behavior that is custom to society. Because the individual experience plays a central part in these films, and because the protagonists are all deeply nested in city life, I believe the concept of *flânerie* to be beneficial in answering the research question. By looking at the experience of the individual, analyzed through several cinematic elements, my findings will provide me with different viewpoints that show different perspectives of New York within the cinematic universe of Ferrara. Weaving the concept of *flânerie* together with the theory by Lynch, allows me to delve deeper into the specific areas observed and experienced by the central characters.

Methodology

The applied research method for this thesis is film analysis, serving as a tool to analyze the representation of New York through narration, cinematography, and mise-en-scène. Film analysis is the activity of looking closely at how movies work. “By analyzing films, we can understand the sources of our pleasure in them and share that understanding with others” (Bordwell et al. 595). Illustrating how form and style work together in film, and illuminating certain aspects of a film’s workings. In using film analysis as my methodological apparatus, I will be able to explore the way narration, cinematography, and mise-en-scène are put into practice to externalize a particular image of New York City. These three categories are especially interesting for further scrutiny because of the role they play in a filmmaker’s rendering of the urban environment, where narration can provide the viewer with character knowledge, presenting perceptions and thoughts (74). These perceptions and thoughts of a character can be affected by the surroundings, and can ultimately decide how the film and its setting progresses. Different techniques within mise-en-scène can help to give a setting an authentic look (78), while cinematography is used to control this look, offering a new area of choice in how the process is recorded (159).

To properly analyze the films, they will be divided into different chapters. This will be done in the order of which they were released, spanning the years of 1981, 1990, and 1992 respectively. This allows for an in-depth analysis of one particular film at a time, rather than analyzing elements in different films simultaneously. This way, Ferrara’s films, and the setting of New York featured within the different films, can be separately discussed in relation to narration, cinematography and mise-en-scène, while the concept of cognitive mapping can help in pinpointing specifics in the landscape. The first chapter will serve as an introduction to Abel Ferrara’s New York, offering a closer look at the depiction of the city as the storyline of *Ms .45* progresses, while ultimately capturing the changes in landscape through the implementation of

mise-en-scène and cinematography. The second chapter revolves around *King of New York*. This chapter builds on information acquired through the analysis of *Ms .45*, as it continues to highlight the overall setting. Additionally, the use of certain tropes and techniques is further explored to uncover the gritty and darkened atmosphere. The third and final chapter analyzes how previously uncovered cinematic elements are implemented in *Bad Lieutenant*, offering a look at the use of techniques, symbolisms, locations and props, in establishing Ferrara's New York.

Chapter 1

A First Glance at New York's Wild Side

Established earlier on in the introduction, Ferrara's films deal with heavy subject matter, delving into issues that are endemic to the formation and maintenance of a human community. The setting of New York in Ferrara's feature films is first introduced in 1979's *The Driller Killer*, where we get to see the main protagonist, an artist living in a dilapidated neighborhood at Union Square, succumb to stress often associated with city life. Faced with rental, electricity, and phone bills, along with disruptive noise and images of homelessness and poverty all around him, ultimately driving him to insanity. This gives the viewer a first glance at the depressing poverty of urban dereliction (Brenetz 10). The theme of urban life and its effects on the human psyche are continued from film to film, becoming even more evident in 1981's *Ms .45*. Taking place in a New York filled with contradictions, where the threat of violence lurks around every corner and the mean streets make a person numb to humanity, offering a grimy and besmirched version of the city. Therefore, *Ms .45* serves as a basis to analyze the role of New York's underbelly and its effects on the protagonist. In this chapter, the predominant focus lies on establishing the side of New York that becomes evident with the progression of the film.

Ms .45, alternatively titled *Angel of Vengeance*, sees Zoë Lund take on the role of Thana, a mute woman working in the fashion industry. The film takes place in another area of New York's Manhattan, called the Garment District, and also known as the Garment Center. Ferrara wastes no time introducing us to this setting, as the opening frame features a static shot of daytime traffic, with the caption "Garment Center – Manhattan" reading over it (see Fig. 1). Immediately after this opening frame we are introduced to Thana's place of work, a fashion boutique store offering a seemingly women-friendly, clean and fashionable environment. However, a change in setting is offered quickly as Thana and her co-workers enter the crowded

streets of the Garment Center on their journey to traverse to their respective homes. Upon entering the crowded streets, Thana and her co-workers are met with dozens of men catcalling and harassing them, exemplified through a series of medium and close-up shots. (see Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). These sequences of shots are incredibly important, as they signify a stark juxtaposition between the sociable working environment and the hostile streets of New York, where women have to face harassment from male aggressors. In doing so, introducing us to the social problem that is at the core of *Ms .45*.



Fig. 1: "Garment Center - Manhattan". *Ms .45*, 1981, 00:00:58. Drafthouse Films, Blu-ray.



Fig. 2: "Thana and her co-workers". *Ms .45*, 1981, 00:02:58. Drafthouse Films, Blu-ray.



Fig. 3: "In the Garment District". *Ms .45*, 1981, 00:03:10. Drafthouse Films, Blu-ray.

Although the film was released in 1981, the subject matter of street harassment is still a poignant problem in the United States, with a 2014 study on harassment in public spaces reporting that sixty-five percent of women experienced at least one type of street harassment in their lifetimes, ranging from verbal to physical violence, and most commonly occurring on streets and sidewalks (Kearl 6). The problem of street harassment continues to be highlighted as the film progresses, with Thana being subject to rape twice in a relatively short amount of time. First, as she is walking down a typical New York street, categorized under the element of paths, a masked stranger, portrayed by Ferrara himself, pulls her into a typical alleyway that is associated with New York City through its extensive use in cinema; characterized by trash bags, decaying buildings and rusty fire escapes. Although in reality Manhattan barely has any alleyways due to the Commissioners' Plan of 1811, which served as the original design for the aforementioned borough, with the underlying motivation of maximizing real estate (Rosenberg), it is nonetheless present in films to emphasize the use of New York as a gritty and dark environment. Shortly after Thana is victimized by the rapist in the alley, she returns home only for it to happen again by a man who has invaded her apartment. Both events, as gruesome as they may be, serve as a turning point in the film. From that moment on, Thana goes from the average New Yorker participating in everyday life to the murderous vigilante equivalent of the flâneuse.

After both events have taken place, Thana is able to take on the second rapist and murders him as an act of self-defense. She takes his gun and later on disposes the body. This is where her act of revenge begins. However, before the film continues with Thana's journey, there is a brief moment in which we are shown a tilt shot of The Empire State Building, yielding the impression of unrolling a space from top to bottom (Bordwell et al. 194). The camera focuses on the landmark as it gradually goes down to reveal the street. On the street, the viewer is confronted with a homeless person (see Fig. 4). In this scene, Ferrara uses one of New York's

most iconic landmarks, visible from near and far, by day or night, and dominant by size and contour (Lynch 82), to offer a stark contrast between different elements and layers of urban society: The Empire State Building, a symbol for the technological prowess and economic strength of the United States, opposite to homelessness and poverty. By implementing this, Ferrara purposely makes use of the imageability of the landmark, directly offering a distinct image that goes against the feeling that the landmark evokes. In doing so, he challenges the viewer to read the city by mobilizing the viewers' associations and memories about New York, whether personal or prosthetic, while simultaneously reminding us of opposites within the same city.



Fig. 4: “Tilt shot of the ESB”. *Ms .45*, 1981, 00:28:00. Drafthouse Films, Blu-ray.

Over the several sequences that follow, Thana maneuvers the city streets in a detective-like manner. “In times of terror, everybody will be in the position of having to play detective. Flânerie gives the individual the best prospects of doing so” (Benjamin 21). Although Benjamin writes in a completely different context, the notion of flânerie and the detective-like behavior that accommodates it nonetheless rings true for Thana, as she finds herself across multiple public spaces, analyzing the behavior of men all around her, and eavesdropping on

conversations. Her third murder serves as the first example of this. We are shown a brief static shot of a café, titled “The Steak & Brew & Burger”, as a typical yellow cab, reminiscent of New York City, passes by (see Fig. 5). The café, which at the time was located on Broadway & 43rd Street (Carlson), serves as a node, as the following shot shows Thana inside having lunch with her colleagues. Thana actively observes a couple kissing, and makes direct eye contact with the man as soon as the lady leaves. This prompts him to approach her, but he is quickly shut down by Thana’s co-workers. Once Thana leaves the diner by herself, the man approaches her in an attempt to persuade her to come to his apartment. Although Thana clearly has no interest in the man, the observed behavior is enough to know that he is up to no good, serving as an incentive to follow him to his apartment, ultimately killing him with the previously acquired gun upon arrival.



Fig. 5: “The Steak & Brew & Burger”. *Ms. 45*, 1981, 00:31:27. DraftHouse Films, Blu-ray.

The diner scene can be viewed as another turning point in the film, as it marks another change in behavior. The events up until now were merely a foreshadowing of future events. She was not actively seeking out her victims, they approached her and she acted based on the behavior showcased by these men. According to Elkin, the flâneuse can use the city as a place

to liberate herself from oppression or to help those who are oppressed (26). Thana's actions exemplify her desire for liberation, as she has now made the conscious decision to traverse the decayed streets of New York in search of men undertaking in problematic behavior towards women. This conscious change in the film is captivated through several cinematic elements, ultimately impacting the overall depiction of New York. Whereas both the acts of self-defense and the murders that have been depicted on screen up until this point happened in broad daylight, the violence portrayed over the sequences of scenes that follow all take place during the nighttime. This opens the film up to a typical Ferrara trademark; New York as a dark, neon-lit and crime-filled environment. Even the way Thana presents herself strengthens this change in the landscape, "morphing into an alluringly clad, self-confident, and stylish psycho killer with an assertive, probing gaze" (Met). In doing so, transmitting the fact that she has built up the confidence to take on the mean streets of Manhattan.

From here on, Thana's journey takes the viewer through several quintessential New York landmarks. Perhaps the most recognizable of these is Central Park. In the context of the film, it is not surprising that Thana continues her journey as a nighttime vigilante here; although nowadays Central Park is regarded as an urban oasis where people come to work out or walk their dogs, back in the early 1980s the park found itself in a very different condition. According to Doug Blonsky, President of Central Park Conservancy, "this was a time when Belvedere Castle was tagged with graffiti, lawns were mostly dirt, and broken benches were just sad reminders of a time when the park was filled with life" (qtd in. Carlson). Ferrara emphasizes the state and danger of Central Park through the use of several techniques. The scene opens on a static long shot of Central Park at nighttime (see Fig. 6), overlooking only a small part of the lit-up Manhattan skyline, as we slowly see Thana walking past, dressed in completely black and blending in with her surroundings. The scene then cuts to Thana walking through the Bethesda Terrace, as the camera pans with her movement, gradually unveiling the Bethesda

Fountain in the distance (see Fig. 7). The speed at which the camera moves horizontally is relatively slow-paced, and aside from building up tension for what is about to come, also gives the viewer the opportunity to take in the portrayed setting, as the passage from the terrace to the fountain is visibly in a decayed state, covered in graffiti from top to bottom. Towards the end of the scene, when Thana reaches the Bethesda Fountain, she finds herself encircled by multiple men, which ultimately erupts in a shootout that is captivated through several camera movements and angles, ranging from crane shots to ground level shots. The Central Park scene is heavily strengthened by the use of low-key lighting, giving the idea of a threatening and mysterious environment. The combination of the elements used provide a sense of realism to the role of the locale, as the park really suffered from urban decay and crime at the time, but moreover, it builds up suspense, along with awareness of the hazardous environment, as the scene reaches its climax.



Fig. 6: “Thana in Central Park”. *Ms .45*, 1981, 00:41:08. Drafthouse Films, Blu-ray.



Fig. 7: “Bethesda Fountain”. *Ms .45*, 1981, 00:42:15. Drafthouse Films, Blu-ray.

In another scene, the film takes us to the iconic Chinatown district. Filmed on 40 Pell Street, corner of Mott Street and Pell Street (IMDb). The Chinatown scene opens on a medium close-up shot of a couple making out, as Thana is observing the behavior of her next target. The film then exposes us to a static medium long shot of a Chinatown corner, as cars and pedestrians are walking by and neon-signs covered in Chinese symbols are present in multitudes (see Fig. 8). The same shot sees Thana appear in the frame, as she walks in a diagonal movement, directly followed by a pan shot of Thana following her target (see Fig. 9). At first glance this reveals another angle of a path in Chinatown, once again recognizable by the many neon-signs, along with its littered streets. However, the pan shot is more so used to showcase the revelation of a quiet and empty street (see Fig. 10), where low-key lighting is implemented to attach a sense of fear, offering harsh shadows and a clear contrast. The appearance of the street suggests a perfect environment for Thana to make her move and strike her target down. In this scene, we, once again, see Thana perusing the Manhattan streets in a detective-like manner, performing the act of *flânerie* as a nocturnal activity: Strolling the city at night brings all the senses into play (or vigilance as the case may be), as *flâneurs* experience the city as a space of entertainment and insecurity (Boutin 90).



Fig. 8: “Thana in Chinatown”. *Ms .45*, 1981, 00:51:54. Drafthouse Films, Blu-ray.



Fig. 9: “Chinatown sidewalk”. *Ms .45*, 1981, 00:52:04. Drafthouse Films, Blu-ray.



Fig. 10: “Quiet street”. *Ms .45*, 1981, 00:52:20. Drafthouse Films, Blu-ray.

Thana’s nighttime flânerie continues well into the next scene, as she enters a bar and meets another man who is heavily indulged in a rant about his ex-wife. This scene is particularly interesting in regards to the relationship between men and women in Ferrara’s grimy New York. As the man rambles on and on about his personal problems, with no knowledge of Thana’s inability to speak, he not even once appears to care about what she might have to say. This is very much in line with what is showcased by the other men throughout the film, where their sheer curiosity for Thana, and women in general, simply does not exceed beyond scopophilic pleasure. The scene further unfolds when Thana and the man go outside together and continue their (one-sided) conversation on a street bench located on a path overlooking the Queensboro Bridge near the linear edge of the East River. Here we are confronted with a brief static shot, serving as a deep-space composition featuring Thana and the man in the foreground, and the

Queensboro Bridge in the distance, covered in various colors of light, brightening up the landmark and making it recognizable at night (see Fig. 11). However, through Ferrara's choice of locale another fascinating juxtaposition is given. The location of this scene is also featured in Woody Allen's *Manhattan* (see Fig. 12), where the two main characters find themselves sitting on the exact same bench (Tobias). However, in *Manhattan* it serves as a love letter to the city of New York and all the romanticism it embodies, portraying it as a magical place. Whereas Ferrara uses the setting as another location for Thana to finish off her next target. Whether intentional or not, in the use of the iconic *Manhattan* bench, Ferrara offers a stark contrast with one of New York's most famed films, where the city is portrayed as a beautiful environment, opposite to *Ms .45*, where the city is a darkened hellhole, ridden with crime and filled with cat-calling lowlifes.



Fig. 11: "Queensboro Bridge". *Ms .45*, 1981, 00:55:15. Arrow Video, Blu-ray.



Fig. 12: "Queensboro Bridge". *Manhattan*, 1978, 00:28:58. MGM, Blu-ray.

The continuation of the film mostly takes place at an indoor Halloween party where Thana eventually meets her end. With that, Ferrara has taken the viewer through a wide variety of locations in Manhattan, ranging from the fashion fueled Garment District to the decayed, desolate and nocturnal Central Park of the early 1980s. *Ms .45* offers a stark contrast between day and night, characterized by the appearance of the city and the behavior of the protagonist, which progresses in tune with the depiction of New York. *Ms .45* not only gives us a first glance at a journey with the rejects of society, as they make their way through the crime filled and decayed urban jungle, but it also allows us to make sense of the narrative by “identifying its events and linking them by cause and effect, space, and time” (Bordwell et al. 74). In many ways, it serves as a reminder of the dangers of New York City in the late '70s and early '80s, when the city, especially after dark, wasn't a safe place; overrun by crimes like street robberies, assaults, murders, and directly related to the film, rapes. It highlights the problematic and dangerous wild side of New York, while simultaneously emphasizing its beauty through cinematic elements. With that, the *Angel of Vengeance* has laid the foundation for our entry point in the exploration of New York's underbelly.

Chapter 2

A City with Two Sides

Ms .45 introduced us to the underbelly of Ferrara's New York, by gradually depicting the city as a dark and urban jungle as the movie progresses. In many ways, *King of New York* picks up where *Ms .45* left off. Although the stories differ completely, and the perspectives of which the city is experienced are almost complete opposites, the darkened mean streets of New York in *King of New York* can be seen as a continuation of the tone that was established in *Angel of Vengeance*. Just as *Ms .45*, *King of New York* has been written by frequent Ferrara collaborator Nicholas St. John, starring New York's own Christopher Walken as the notorious drug kingpin Frank White, alongside Laurence Fishburne, Wesley Snipes and David Caruso, among others. In *King of New York*, the underground drug economy greases the wheels of the above-ground economy (Brenez 10), as the film follows Frank White, a fresh out-of-jail drug boss with the desire of becoming the ruler of New York City, effecting a passage from individual morality to a political enterprise, as the manifestation of rage duly alters (44).

In *Ms .45*, the role of New York was already more than that of an urban backdrop, showcased through the accentuation of quintessential landmarks, and strengthened by cinematic elements that emphasized the dangers of the several districts traversed by the central character. Moreover, the social problem at the core of the film was one that is endemic to the urban metropolis. To no surprise, *King of New York* also deals with several societal issues associated with urban landscapes, directly relating to early 1990s New York. The film delves into the world of drugs and violence, coinciding with the peak in drug abuse and crime occurring between the late 1980s and early 1990s (Corman and Mocan 590, 591). However, in *King of New York*, the role of the city expands even beyond its social and cinematic usage, as the city quite literally takes on the role of a character. As the title of the film already implies, for Frank White, the protagonist of the film, whether achieved to bad or through good, through

political means or criminal means, it is that what he seeks; to be the emperor, ruler and king of New York. The position of the protagonist is already that of a man in power, we are not following the journey of a man struggling on the streets of New York, barely getting by, living from pay-check to pay-check. The use of New York through the *mise-en-scène* and cinematography exemplifies this, as it clearly exuberates the wealth and position White finds himself in. Similar to what Harvey describes within the ideological superstructure of society (215), White attempts to utilize his achieved status and class into the projection of political power, with the end-goal of becoming King of New York.

The opening shot of the film reveals White being released from Sing Sing Correctional Facility, located 30 miles north of New York City on the east bank of the Hudson River (Sing Sing Prison Museum). As White exits the prison and steps into a black limousine, we immediately transition from day-to night-time, setting the tone for the depiction of New York present in the film. As White traverses back to his beloved city, we observe the mean streets from the perspective of the car through a series of tracking shots, showcasing the progression of his entrance into New York City. Switching back and forth between close-ups of White sitting in the back of the car (see Fig. 13) and shots of the streets of New York, in which we see images of the city at night, filled with street workers (see Fig. 14) and homelessness (see Fig. 15). The imagery showcased here is strengthened by several neo-noir characteristics. The use of low-key lighting in these shots create stronger contrasts and sharper, darker shadows (Bordwell et al. 129), thus giving the impression of a dangerous atmosphere through obscuring light. Moreover, the setting depicted here creates both a sense of place and mood, while simultaneously reflecting White's state of mind. The back-and-forth shots between White and the streets of New York emphasize his relation to the objects within the frame, suggesting White's awareness of the geographical imagination of his surroundings, allowing him to relate

to the role of space and place. This imagination enables the individual to recognize the relationship which exists between him and his territory (Harvey 24).



Fig. 13: “Frank White”. *King of New York*, 1990, 00:05:50. Arrow Video, Blu-ray.



Fig. 14: “Street workers”. *King of New York*, 1990, 00:06:05. Arrow Video, Blu-ray.



Fig. 15: “Homeless”. *King of New York*, 1990, 00:06:17. Arrow Video, Blu-ray.

Once White arrives in New York, one of the more prevalent scenes in establishing the perspective of the protagonist unfolds. Not necessarily because of the locale, although it does play a role, but more so because of the power relations showcased through clever use of cinematic elements. First of all, White’s apartment, which looks rather lavish, is located in the Plaza Hotel. The Plaza Hotel, above all, is a place of luxury, only accessible for the elite and higher classes of society. As the scene progresses, we see White staring outside, taking in the view of New York City from his apartment. In this reflection shot, which is also the image featured on the official artwork of *King of New York*, the left side of the frame reveals the interior of the apartment, while the right side of the frame shows White admiring his city (see Fig. 16). Due to the reflection of the window, the viewer is able to experience what White is observing, adding depth to the scene and exposing us to the brightened Manhattan skyline, featuring, among others, the Chrysler Building. Taking into consideration that White is already in a position of power, I believe this shot to be extremely important, as it can be seen as a

signifier of that very power. In *Ms .45*, the Empire State Building is shown through a tilt shot, slowly moving from the top of the building to the revelation of a homeless man on street level, using the architectural height of the city to offer a metaphor between the literal top of New York and the bottom. Whereas in *King of New York*, the skyscrapers are observed from a higher position, once again presenting a metaphor, but rather than signifying a difference between the top and the bottom, serving as a reminder of the status Frank White has already acquired; he is at the top, but perhaps not the very top. Here, the iconic exterior of the city, in combination with the shown perspective, is once again used as a symbol to emphasize the power relations on screen.



Fig. 16: “Staring at the city”. *King of New York*, 1990, 00:14:06. Arrow Video, Blu-ray.

Throughout *King of New York* there are several moments in which the protagonist offers social commentary on the state of the city. Although he is a man in power on the wrong side of the law, it is very clear that he shares a love for New York, with a strong desire to make the city better. One of White’s commentaries comes during the attendance of a chic event, where he briefly speaks to the mayor about a children’s hospital that is about to be foreclosed. Here he

says, “I know what this city needs, and privileged districts shouldn’t be the only ones with hospitals” (*King of New York* 00:33:30-00:33:36). According to Harvey, the first principle of social justice as they apply to geographical situations is that “the spatial organization and the pattern of regional investment should be such as to fulfil the needs of the population” (107). Here, through the form of narration, Ferrara and St. John speak on the segregation of the urban environment, whereas rather than organizing space to fulfil the needs of all citizens, regardless of class, the space is often organized to facilitate those who need it the least. Since the 1990s, New York City boroughs have lost more than 20 hospitals, with most of the facilities closed consisting of public hospitals in poor urban neighborhoods, ultimately leaving low-income neighborhoods with no safety-net hospital (Thomas). Frank’s comments therefore can be seen as a form of critical commentary on the actual state of New York in the early 1990s.

As the film progresses, the role of New York is centralized within White’s journey, as it directs us through iconic districts and landmarks, such as Chinatown, the Brooklyn Bridge, Williamsburg, the Queensboro Bridge and Times Square. Although a small portion of the scenes take place during the daylight, most of the film takes place during the night. In similar fashion to *Ms. 45*, this is also the time when most of the violence in the film occurs, consciously playing with the association between nighttime and danger. However, in Ferrara’s use of a nocturnal New York, two distinctive colors are predominantly used; blue and orange. The blue/orange trope is frequently used in movies due to its association with opposing concepts (TV Tropes), and Ferrara purposely uses the contrast between these colors to exemplify the events and circumstances. On the mean streets, where prostitutes walk, danger lurks, poverty strives, and violence and shootouts erupt, everything is blue. Whereas in the places of luxury and wealth everything is orange. In doing so, offering a clear distinction between the luxurious lifestyle and the threatening streets, demonstrating two sides of the same city.

Within the different locations visited throughout the film, the typical New York settings become apparent due to the physical characteristics, such as the symbolism and brightened neon signs in Chinatown (see Fig. 17), which can be observed through a mixture of static, tilt and pan shots from various angles, used to captivate a high-action sequence (*King of New York* 00:51:30-00:52:26). Or the high level of pedestrian activity, yellow cabs, neon lights and billboards observable in Times Square (see Fig. 18), and captured through everything from hip level to eye level shots, and a mixture of pan, tilt and crane movements (*King of New York* 01:35:15-01:39:50). By heightening the imageability through facilitating visual identification and structuring (Lynch 95), the scenery becomes recognizable, bringing to mind a flood of associations. From beginning to end, *King of New York* emphasizes the role of the city, not only in the imagery itself, but in the life of the protagonist as well. On several occasions, we see White staring into the distance and admiring the Manhattan skyline, at one point he even blurs the lines; “Something you’ve looked at all your life..., it crosses your mind that you’ll never see it again.” (*King of New York* 01:00:06-01:00:12). Without further context given, it is as if White is aware of his own soon-to-come demise. In the final scene, at the nocturnal crossroads of the world, White sits alone in one of the city’s widely recognizable symbols, bleeding to death in a yellow cab. In tune with his surroundings, consisting of a Times Square traffic-jam, fueled with paramedic and police sirens, car honks, and the rumbling of crowds of people in the distance, Frank takes his final breath in the heart of the city. The king is dead, but the city never sleeps. With that, the demise of Frank White stresses the idea of Ferrara’s New York as a relentless environment, where compassion and understanding is lacking on both sides of the law.



Fig. 17: "Chinatown". *King of New York*, 1990, 00:51:34. Arrow Video, Blu-ray.



Fig. 18: "Times Square". *King of New York*, 1990, 01:37:48. Arrow Video, Blu-ray.

Chapter 3

Fear and Loathing in New York City

Through *Ms .45* and *King of New York* we have become familiar with Ferrara's depiction of New York as a gritty urban jungle, where danger lurks behind each and every street corner. In *Ms .45* we followed an average New York citizen turned vigilante, in *King of New York* we followed a fresh-out-of-jail drug boss with the desire of ruling the city, and in *Bad Lieutenant*, as the title already gives away, we follow the tale of a downward-spiraling crooked NYPD lieutenant who patrols the decayed, damaged, merciless metropolis of early-1990s New York, as his own downfall unfolds. The lieutenant, portrayed by Harvey Keitel, finds himself in a permanent state of rage, who's fury is exercised against everything that stands in his path; hoods, victims, his family, colleagues, and even young women (Brenez 40). The writing of the film is credited to Abel Ferrara and Zoë Lund, who also portrayed Thana in *Ms .45*, and similar to the previous films, *Bad Lieutenant* poses the question whether redemption is possible in a cruel and dark New York, where hope seems to be as rare as a four-leaf clover.

In *Bad Lieutenant*, we are once again exposed to several social issues that unfold through a variety of means. However, the perspective given in *Bad Lieutenant* differs immensely with those of the previous two, as they had no moral obligations to serve and protect the city. The lieutenant is a user and an abuser, indulged in his own gambling and drug fueled behavior, as he clearly misuses the power granted to him by the city of New York. From stealing drugs from crime scenes to selling and consuming it himself, and from harassing women to heavy gambling, as he continuously bets on the fictitious playoff series between the Los Angeles Dodgers and the New York Mets. Much in line with the previously discussed films, Ferrara once again depicts ill-mannered behavior that was all too familiar with New York in the '80s and early '90s. As discussed in chapter 2, the early 1990s were a time when crime and drug abuse peaked in the city, both themes that are prevalent in *Bad Lieutenant*. However, this

peak also coincides with corruption in the New York police force, as the early 1990s saw many large-scale corruption scandals being brought to light; from the Long Island Cocaine Ring to the Dirty Thirty (Treaster). According to a report by Amnesty International, the period between the late '80s and the early '90s was a time when there was a substantial increase in claims for police misconduct against the City of New York, from 977 in 1987 to more than 2,000 in 1994 (1). These examples reinforce the use of ostensible truths in Ferrara's social reflection of New York City, in addition to evincing a level of realism in the lieutenant's behavior.

Like *Ms. 45*, *Bad Lieutenant* takes us from an ordinary scene to its devastated version (Brenez 17). The film opens on a seemingly daily situation of the lieutenant taking his two sons to school, driving in a decent looking suburb in the Bronx, which is firstly shown through a static long-shot of a suburban street, as we observe the lieutenant driving away. It then switches to an eye-level static close-up of the lieutenant driving in the car, with his sons in the passenger seats, and the occasional switch to a panning movement observed from the outside of the car. This combination allows us to follow the interactions between the characters, along with tracking their movement through the suburbs, and into the city. After having dropped his sons off at school he arrives at a crime scene near Union Square, where two young women were found dead in their car. In this scene, the frequent element of oppositions in Ferrara's depiction of New York becomes immediately prevalent through offering an adverse of a situation, where on one hand we have a normal situation of a father driving his sons to school, opposite to two young women being murdered while commuting through the city in the same means of transportation.

In *Bad Lieutenant*'s depiction of New York, several elements present in the previously discussed films are featured to a lesser extent. Unlike *Ms. 45* and *King of New York*, *Bad Lieutenant* doesn't have as many shots in which the quintessential architectural landmarks of New York are highlighted. Additionally, *Bad Lieutenant* doesn't offer a clear correlation

between the time of day and the activities portrayed on screen. This, in part, is due to the state of mind of the lieutenant, as he is so indulged in the consummation of illegal substances, and therefore, a sense of time and space is often lacking. However, within the many scenes in which we can see the lieutenant consuming drugs, the environment and the portrayal of these places gives the viewer a hint of the side of New York the lieutenant willfully finds himself in. For instance, in one scene we can see the lieutenant standing in a corner of the staircase in an apartment building (see Fig. 19). Within this shot, in typical Ferrara fashion, low-key lighting is used to encase the frame in dark tones and black shadows, leaving only a small part of the inside of the building visible, and creating the idea of a somewhat decayed and hazardous environment. Shortly afterwards, as the lieutenant exits the building and enters the New York streets, the camera briefly cuts to a first-person point-of-view, as it moves around in a blurry motion reminiscent of the handheld camera movement (see Fig. 20). This point of view allows the viewer to see the city street, filled with typical New York apartment buildings decked out in fire escapes. Moreover, the given perspective, along with the motions portrayed by the camera, purposely gives the viewer a sense of how the lieutenant is experiencing the city; in a drugged-out, paranoid and hazy state of mind.



Fig. 19: “Apartment staircase”. *Bad Lieutenant*, 1992, 01:02:30. Lionsgate Films, Blu-ray.



Fig. 20: “L.T.’s point of view”. *Bad Lieutenant*, 1992, 01:03:05. Lionsgate Films, Blu-ray.

Whenever the lieutenant isn’t harming himself, he is harming someone else. The way the lieutenant maneuvers the New York streets is often reminiscent of the idea that the one who looks holds the power, and the one who is looked at is powerless. The lieutenant’s lack of moral, combined with the authority provided to him by the badge he carries, allows him to mistreat those who surround him without consequences. This especially becomes apparent through a scene in which he forces a woman to mimic the act of fellatio. Quite similar to the way the relationship between men and women is portrayed in *Ms. 45’s* New York, and in similar fashion as to what is described by Mulvey in regards to scopophilic pleasure, where the other person is used as an object of sexual stimulation through sight (18); to the lieutenant the woman is confined to her existence as an object of his desire.

For the lieutenant, the car is a pivotal means to traverse the New York City streets. The element of automobiles, along with the observance of the city from this perspective, already played a role in *King of New York*, but is even more extensively used in *Bad Lieutenant*. “Aspects of flânerie linger unmistakably in car driving, and especially in its cinematic representation” (Jacobs 215). The motif of a car drive can construct cinematic space, and within

Bad Lieutenant, a good chunk of the city is experienced through the perspective of a car. Whenever the Lieutenant travels from A to B, he tends to do this by car, despite the number of drugs consumed. Whether during the day or at night, the point of observance given by the camera stays predominantly the same, as if we're sitting next to the lieutenant, allowing us to experience the city along its edges and paths. These shots are filmed from inside the car (see Fig. 21 and 22), placed on a shoulder level angle, and featuring static camera movement as the city is passing by. A static composition may keep pulling our attention back to particular elements (Bordwell et al. 151), as is the case with these driving scenes, as it allows us to observe the lieutenant's behavior in the foreground, and the authentic look of the architectural construction of the New York streets, filled with pedestrians, yellow cabs, and recognizable storefronts, passing by in the background. These scenes are also used to showcase the decayed state of certain regions within New York, as the frame occasionally and purposely strays away from the lieutenant, making sure that the emphasis lays on the visibility of the streets, where abandoned cars and piles of litter can be observed (see Fig. 23). This perspective is accomplished through the handheld camera movement, which at times offers a visibly shaky motion, as the car progresses through the city streets.



Fig. 21: "L.T. driving". *Bad Lieutenant*, 1992, 00:42:27. Lionsgate Films, Blu-ray.



Fig. 22: “L.T. pointing a gun”. *Bad Lieutenant*, 1992, 01:26:33. Lionsgate Films, Blu-ray.



Fig. 23: “Decayed street”. *Bad Lieutenant*, 1992, 01:26:00. Lionsgate Films, Blu-ray.

From private rooms to night-clubs, and from apartment buildings to churches, the lieutenant spends a relatively large amount of time inside buildings. The buildings the lieutenant finds himself in give a strong sense of both suburban life and the wild side of the city. Within the buildings shown, Ferrara once again makes use of the blue/orange trope, an element we have become familiar with through *King of New York*. Whereas in *King of New York* it was predominantly used to signify the difference between wealth and danger, in *Bad Lieutenant* it is mostly used to give a sense of the environment the lieutenant is in. Private rooms and family inhabited apartments are mostly in orange, where ambient light from the interior of the building is used to create a sense of the setting (see Fig. 24), along with natural light (see Fig. 25),

suggesting that the lighting in these scenes comes from the lamps, candles and windows. Whereas scenes of horror, such as the rape of a nun in the St. Paul's Church in East Harlem (see Fig. 26), and scenes of nightlife (see Fig. 27) are mostly depicted in blue and darker colors. Within these oppositions, Ferrara highlights the difference in locale and events, where on one hand a suburban and family friendly environment is suggested, while on the other hand gruesome and nocturnal activities are shown, distinguished by the portrayal of the setting and the use of light that comes along with it.



Fig. 24: "Family apartment". *Bad Lieutenant*, 1992, 01:00:52.
Lionsgate Films, Blu-ray.



Fig. 25: "L.T. at home". *Bad Lieutenant*, 1992, 00:21:22.
Lionsgate Films, Blu-ray.



Fig. 26: "Rape of a nun". *Bad Lieutenant*, 1992, 00:18:29.
Lionsgate Films, Blu-ray.



Fig. 27: "Nightclub scene". *Bad Lieutenant*, 1992, 00:57:49.
Lionsgate Films, Blu-ray.

Bad Lieutenant takes us through several districts and boroughs, ranging from the East Village and East Harlem to Hell's Kitchen, and from the previously mentioned Bronx to Brooklyn. Although no major and instantly recognizable landmarks are shown, authentic shots of the physical details of storefronts, signs and buildings provide the viewer with a sense of place. These physical details that are observable all around New York, encourage, what Lynch refers to as, the deposit of a memory trace (199), where the frequent exposure to these physicalities ensures the association with New York. From static shots and images of archetypal New York bodegas, characterized by their distinctive look, reminisced of a small convenience store, featuring large signs and filled with a deli counter (see Fig. 28), to decayed apartment buildings with stairs typically associated with Brooklyn housing, covered in graffiti and littered with trash cans (see Fig. 29).



Fig. 28: “Bodega”. *Bad Lieutenant*, 1992, 00:12:47. Lionsgate Films, Blu-ray.



Fig. 29: “Brooklyn building”. *Bad Lieutenant*, 1992, 01:25:20. Lionsgate Films, Blu-ray.

All the way to the very end of the film we are exposed to New York imagery, as the lieutenant makes his way to the Port Authority Bus Terminal, located near the heart of Manhattan and becoming visible through a handheld shot, in which the operator of the camera simply walks forward with the camera braced on the shoulder (Bordwell et al. 197). This allows us to take in all the characteristics of the Manhattan street, as large crowds pass by with

multitudes of store adverts and signs observable in the background on the right side of the frame, while traffic filled with yellow cabs and trucks surges by on the left side of the frame (see Fig. 30). As soon as the lieutenant arrives, the camera focusses on his movement through a panning-like motion, as he takes two suspects of the rape of a nun inside the terminal. Once inside the terminal, the lieutenant decides to put the two suspects on the Interstate 95 bus, as he implies that New York is a merciless environment: “You get on this fucking bus, man, cause your life ain’t worth shit in this town” (*Bad Lieutenant* 01:29:40-01:29:50). Shortly afterwards the final scene of the film unfolds, as we are shown a static long shot of a building on a Manhattan street, covered with a large advert for the Trump Plaza hotel in Atlantic City, with the lieutenant sitting in his car in the foreground. As another car passes by, the lieutenant is shot down and crowds of people gather around to see what had happened (see Fig. 31). Once again, Ferrara’s central character is put to rest in the heart of the city, and for the lieutenant, New York has shown no mercy.



Fig. 30: “Manhattan street”. *Bad Lieutenant*, 1992, 01:27:28.
Lionsgate Films, Blu-ray.



Fig. 31: “Final Scene”. *Bad Lieutenant*, 1992, 01:32:47.
Lionsgate Films, Blu-ray.

Conclusion

At the very beginning of this thesis, I stated that cinema holds the power to produce multiple versions of a single city. Within these different portrayals, the directorial choices that are made hold the ability to transcend both a sense of feeling and imagery of a cinematic urban reality. In this context, New York is especially interesting, as it is an urban environment that people around the globe have become familiar with through its extensive use in motion pictures; from a romantic and peaceful setting, all the way to a criminal playground, New York is a city of multitudes, and cinema can be seen as an amplifier of this.

However, in rendering a cinematic urban environment, the application of film forms and techniques is crucial. The use of narration, mise-en-scène, and cinematography have a direct impact on how a film turns out, thus influencing the perception and reception of a setting. Whether the emphasis is laid on character knowledge, creating an authentic setting, or offering unique ways in which a gaze is controlled, these techniques can be used interchangeably with one another, with the portrayed urban environment as a direct result of the confluence of these elements. In this frame of reference, the exploration of Abel Ferrara's filmography offers comprehensive insights into the application of techniques in its representation of New York City. Consequently, *Ms .45*, *King of New York*, and *Bad Lieutenant* have served as a basis for this analysis.

I argued that Ferrara's use of New York as a filmic topography extends beyond the pragmatic use of an urban setting for stylistic and aesthetic purposes. In all of the three films ostensible truths directly related to the space and time of the urban setting are implemented to serve as a base for the development of the stories. The city streets are almost habitually explored through the eyes of a central character, where commentary on the decayed state of the surroundings is given in both subtle and sharp-witted ways. Moreover, the experiences of the

protagonists differ vastly due to their socio-cultural differences. This, combined with the confrontation of complications unique to the individual, however not uncommon to the urban environment, results in personal perspectives and experiences captured on screen, ultimately offering different points of view on the same side of the city. Within this context, the use of theories by cultural thinkers like Harvey and Benjamin become linked to the sense of orientation and guidance provided by Ferrara's antiheroes. Whereas the use of urban theory by Lynch provided knowledge into the mapping of the captured environment, granting alertness of the whereabouts within the vast urban jungle.

The side of New York City reflected in Ferrara's filmography becomes synonymous with terms such as the wild side, the dark side and the underbelly. It is not a place for hope, redemption nor mercy, but rather a place for despair, danger and death. At its core, Ferrara's New York is a haven for the degenerates of society. As outlined in the previous paragraph, this partially becomes evident through the events and the portrayed characters. However, in shaping this image of New York in these particular films, the use of cinematography and mise-en-scène are essential as well. Whether the city is traversed on foot or by car, Ferrara makes sure that a gritty yet beautiful sense of the environment is given. Frequent use of a nighttime setting, combined with imagery of New York landmarks and shots of littered streets filled with neon-signs, homelessness and crime, embodied in low-key lighting and blue-tints, captured in a range of camera distances and angles, from long, medium and close-up to static, tilt and panning, all make sure that the viewer is constantly aware of the dilapidated and dangerous state of the city.

Although this thesis particularly focused on *Ms .45*, *King of New York*, and *Bad Lieutenant*, the wild side of Ferrara's New York continues to be amplified in films like *The Driller Killer*, *Fear City*, *China Girl*, *The Funeral*, and *New Rose Hotel*. To be able to fully comprehend the complexity of Ferrara's cinematic rendering of New York, I would propose further research into elements such as genre and sound, as both music and sound effects are

frequented, along with many characteristics reminiscent of the neo-noir genre. Additional research into these aspects has the potential to uncover an even more in-depth perspective of Ferrara's ability to merge elements of cinema to convey a particular and peculiar setting. Nonetheless, through narration, cinematography and mise-en-scène, Ferrara is able to create an eloquent image of New York's metropolis that is just as enigmatic as the director himself. At heart, Ferrara's New York is an urban contradiction; engaging yet distant, merciful yet merciless, gorgeous yet ugly, rich yet poor, and tranquil yet restless. It simply is a cinematic universe you either love or hate, it moves you or it doesn't. In all its uniqueness, Ferrara makes the wild side of New York alluring, thrilling and provocative.

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