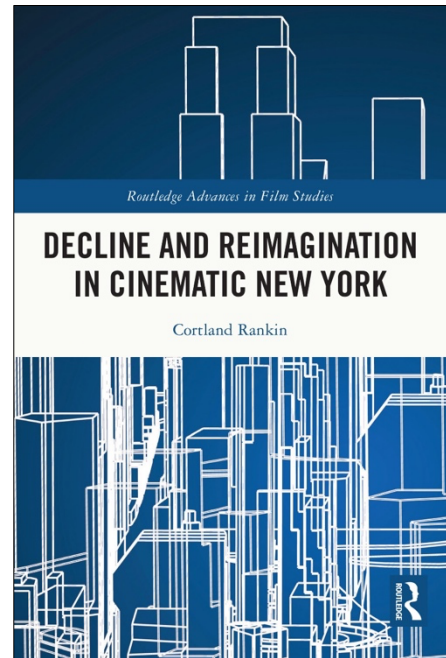


Cortland Rankin, **Decline and Reimagination in Cinematic New York**, New York, NY: Routledge, 2022, 260 pp., \$170.00 (hardcover).

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In May of 2023, disturbing images of an incident on New York City's F train circulated across social media platforms. Cell phone cameras captured a White ex-Marine named Daniel Penny placing an unhoused Black man named Jordan Neely in a chokehold, eventually killing him. These videos are both tragic and traumatic. Compounding the situation was the swift proliferation of defenses and even celebrations of Penny among many observers, from pseudonymous Internet commentators to allegedly respectable politicians and pundits. In these justifications for vigilantism, Penny is positioned as a heroic defender of law and order or, more perversely, a "Good Samaritan" protecting his fellow citizens from the "threat" represented by people like Neely (Bouie, 2023; Ganz, 2023). Many of those excusing Penny's actions have little connection to New York City at all. In cases like this, New York City serves less as a place and more as a sign of a deteriorating moral and social order, symptomatic of a civilization in decline.



While suspicion of urban spaces (and the people who occupy them) has a long history in Western society, the particular symbolic function that New York City serves in the contemporary reactionary imagination is deeply shaped by "urban crisis" in the United States from the late 1960s to the 1980s. Cinema is one important arena in which the idea of urban decline was formulated and circulated. Cortland Rankin's **Decline and Reimagination in Cinematic New York** impressively chronicles filmic representations of New York City's changing economy, landscape, and sense of itself in this period. While many American cities have struggled with population loss and social unrest, Rankin claims that cinematic New York is particularly important as an object of study because it "came to embody the nation's uncertainty about the future of cities in large part because of how it was represented on film" (p. 2). One of the book's foundational claims is that both the forms that this national uncertainty took and the range of filmic representations of the city are more multifarious than popular or scholarly conversations typically account for.

Given the popularity and canonicity of films like *Midnight Cowboy* (Schlesinger, 1969), and *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976) among many others, it is no surprise that film studies has dedicated significant attention to New York City in this era. Valuable scholarship from scholars like Stanley Corkin (2011), Martha Shearer (2016), and Lawrence Webb (2014), among many others, has explored the role that New York played as setting, workplace, and symbol. Corkin's work makes a valuable contribution to extant scholarship through its focus on cinema extending beyond Hollywood productions. *Decline and Reimagination* also

considers documentary, experimental, activist, and community filmmaking that sought to either participate in or to respond to hegemonic visions of decline. The breadth and diversity of the book's filmography (over 100 titles!) is quite impressive. The inherent complexity that accompanies a corpus of texts so large reinforces the argument that cinema does not offer a singular vision of "the city in decline" that emerges out of the cinema in this period. Rather, the book explains, filmmakers drew on a shared vocabulary of sights (or sites?) and sounds to make a range of diverse and competing claims about the changing status of the city and its citizens.

Throughout its five chapters, *Decline and Reimagination in Cinematic New York* exhibits a thorough understanding of the city's changing landscape in the second half of the 20th century, as well as a deep appreciation for a wide array of filmmaking styles, genres, and modes. In offering readers a capacious and inclusive definition of "cinematic New York," Rankin aims to

rebalance the historical narrative of New York cinema during this period by bringing the dominant cinematic discourse of urban decline into dialogue with marginal perspectives that reimagine the city along alternative paths as a resilient, adaptive, and endlessly inspiring place. (p. 5)

To do so, Rankin draws on historical research to contextualize the debates over urban space in the city, as well as debates circulating around particular locations (Central Park, Lincoln Center, and the Brooklyn Navy Yard, to name only a few). As the book's title suggests, each of its chapters focuses on a spaces of "decline" or spaces of "reimagination." As Rankin's analysis shows, the very same spaces can be utilized in films to depict vacant lots or shuttered industrial facilities as wastelands and wildernesses, and at the same time serve as sites of potential for questioning the social, aesthetic, or even natural order. This organization, which resists simple chronology, implicitly encourages readers to acknowledge the multiplicity of perspectives that can be brought to bear on the same locations, and the polysemous social and ideological meanings that emerge from those places.

Readers interested in the relationship between New York City, post-Classical Hollywood and post-1968 American politics may find particular value in Rankin's first chapter, which interrogates the framing of urban spaces in the wake of the collapse of the manufacturing sector in the 1960s and 1970s. The rapid elimination of hundreds of thousands of industrial jobs and the attendant population collapse left visible scars in the cityscape, and "urban ruins" like abandoned shipyards, factories, and buildings becoming more prominent on screen. These urban "wastelands" functioned on screen to remind audiences of the traumas of deindustrialization, provide explanations for immoral and criminal behaviors, and to connote psychological and social breakdown. Through keen analyses of films like *Shaft's Big Score!* (Parks, 1972), *Badge 373* (Koch, 1973) and *Escape From New York* (Carpenter, 1981), Rankin illustrates the conceptualizations of urban space that serve as the justification for "broken windows policing."

But Rankin's work reminds us that New York City was not entirely defined by "decline" in the 1970s and 1980s. As ever, the city provided fertile ground for the flowering of dynamic and vibrant arts communities, from the Lower East Side to the South Bronx. In chapter 4, "From Studio to Street," Rankin compellingly demonstrates how spaces of "urban decline" also serve as canvasses and stages for visual and

performing arts. In a particularly effective section, Rankin examines the rise of hip hop culture (particularly graffiti) in New York cinema. Rankin points to a scene from the documentary *Style Wars* (Silver, 1983), in which local graffiti writer Skeme describes his end-to-end train car mural reading "All You See is . . . Crime in the City." From a certain point of view, subway trains covered with graffiti is one symptom of decline ("Crime in the City"). But the opening words "All You See . . ." suggest that there are other ways to look at the spaces, art, and indeed the people of New York City that can open up new horizons of possibility. The ambivalence of Skeme's artistic statement aligns with the central thrust of *Decline and Reimagination in Cinematic New York*.

While the impressive scale of this project is a real strength, it also comes with certain limitations. Because Rankin's work considers so many different kinds of films that are directed at so many different kinds of audiences, it is sometimes difficult to understand how all these different cinematic visions of New York relate to one another, or to parse which visions of the city resonated with which audiences. It is also sometimes difficult to distinguish between cinematic representations that are about New York City specifically, and those that are indexing anxieties about urban spaces in general. But these are not so much shortcomings of the book itself, but rather the inescapable results of acknowledging the complexities of both cinema and the city.

*Decline and Reimagination in Cinematic New York* is a fine work of scholarship that does a real service to those interested in the relationship between film and urban space. It deals with classic Hollywood movies and rarely seen works of experimental cinema with equal levels of care, attention, and enthusiasm, and conveys a real respect and affection for the city and all its inhabitants. It is a book that has given me a richer understanding of the varying ways one can look at the city and the importance of fighting for more just, empathetic, and inclusive ways of doing so.

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