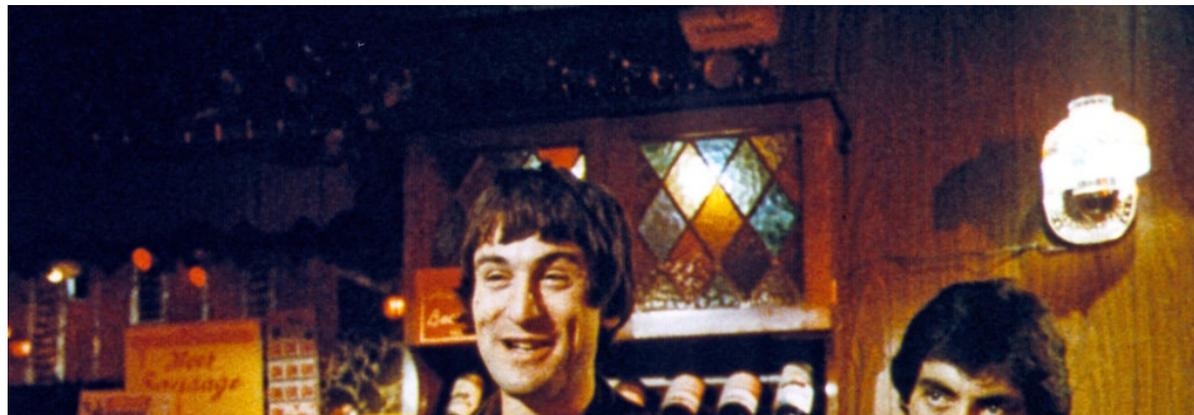


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# Nouvelle Vague in New York Style





Mr. De Niro, left, and David Proval in Martin Scorsese's "Mean Streets" (1973), to be shown at Film Forum's series "New Yawk New Wave." Film Forum/Photofest

**By Nicolas Rapold**

Jan. 4, 2013



THE past 20 years or so have turned indie filmmaking into a brand as much as an ethos, and one side effect has been a certain amnesia. Long before indie became the trademark of a festival in Utah (much less a term at times as contentious as hipster), a revolution in cinema occurred on several fronts in New York. Shot on location, often on meager budgets, these films tapped into the city's cultural and social energies: its streets, its people, its artistic fervor.

But this wasn't the 1990s, or even the '80s — more along the lines of Eisenhower or Kennedy.

Released in 1953, “Little Fugitive,” for example, was a feature directed by the photographers turned filmmakers [Morris Engel](#) and his wife, Ruth Orkin, and Ray Ashley. Perhaps the granddaddy of the independents, shot on a hand-held, modified 35-millimeter camera, it follows a boy run amok in Brooklyn who has been tricked into thinking he has shot his brother.

Only a few years later, the actor turned filmmaker John Cassavetes's debut feature, [“Shadows,”](#) drew on a mostly nonprofessional cast and the verve of jazz for its stories of interracial romance and just hanging out. Not long after, “The Connection,” by Shirley Clarke, brought to the screen Jack Gelber's 1959 play about heroin users, with its addict's sense of dead time and Beat-inflected theatrics.

These three films — all landmarks — are only part of the independent craft on display in a sprawling series opening at Film Forum this week. Gathering over 50 restless films under one roof, [“New Yawk New Wave”](#) focuses on the fertile span from 1953 (“Little Fugitive”) to 1973, when Martin Scorsese's independently produced “Mean Streets” was distributed by Warner Brothers.

The selection is multifaceted. Here are Brian De Palma's pre-"Carrie" counterculture trips "Hi, Mom!" and "Greetings," starring a young Robert De Niro; the smart-aleck culture jam "Putney Swope" of Robert Downey (father of Hollywood's Iron Man); and the first feature by the avant-garde godfather and exhibitor Jonas Mekas, a founder of the movement called the New American Cinema.

 Richie Andrusco in "Little Fugitive" (1953).

Richie Andrusco in "Little Fugitive" (1953). Joseph  
Burstyn/Photofest, via Film Forum

Clarke's "Connection" rubs shoulders with Lionel Rogosin's skid-row exposé, "On the Bowery," while in D. A. Pennebaker's "Jingle Bells" and Robert Drew and Hope Ryden's "Jane," Robert F. Kennedy and Jane Fonda go about their business under the eye of cinéma vérité pioneers.

You'll also find a double bill of differently suspenseful subway thrillers ("Dutchman," written by Amiri Baraka, and "The Incident," starring Martin Sheen and the future spaghetti western star Tony Musante), work by the Warhol associate Paul Morrissey and the underground mainstays Kenneth Anger and Mike and

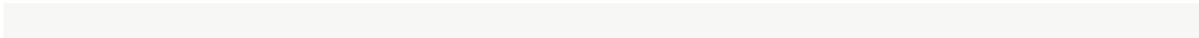
George Kuchar, not to mention one of the novelist Norman Mailer's forays into no-holds-barred filmmaking, "Maidstone" (in which he wrestles with Rip Torn).

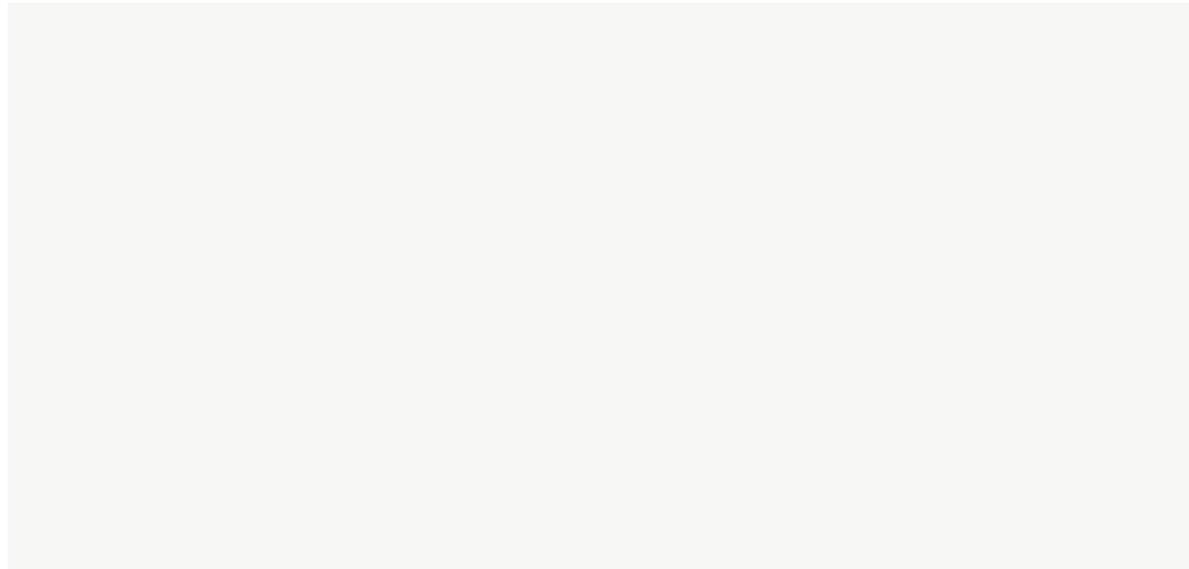
Astonishingly, most of these films came out in one 10-year period and traded crosscurrents with booms across the Atlantic, like the French New Wave and the earlier Italian neorealism.

"What struck me regarding 'Little Fugitive' was that Truffaut credited it with inspiring the French New Wave," the critic J. Hoberman, who conceived the series, said in a phone interview. He advised Film Forum's director of repertory programming, Bruce Goldstein, in charting the "parallel tradition" in the lineup: New York's alternatives to Hollywood's studio productions.

Truffaut wasn't the only Frenchman curious about "Little Fugitive." Jean-Luc Godard wrote Engel that his cinematographer, Raoul Coutard, would be getting in touch to "have a look at your camera from his technical point of you."

The practical problem of designing mobile cameras was also very much on the mind of Mr. Drew. The documentarian shared the notion that a fresher take on reality was yet to be discovered.





Hampton Clanton in “The Cool World” (1964). Cinema V/Photofest, via Film Forum

“I was at Life magazine producing picture stories, and I wondered why documentaries on television were dull,” recalled Mr. Drew, who calls Engel a genius, in a phone interview. “I had no doubt we could make a lighter camera, and I started with that premise and started finding people who could do that.” He recruited Richard Leacock, who in turn brought on Mr. Pennebaker. A camera engineer named Mitchell Bogdanowicz ultimately hit upon the plastic gears that made the cameras run quietly.

The immediacy of *cinéma vérité* was not the only model for capturing spontaneous moments on film. Jazz improvisation and

the theater were also inspirations in a city that was home to countless thriving clubs as well as the experiments of the Living Theater and the Actors Studio.

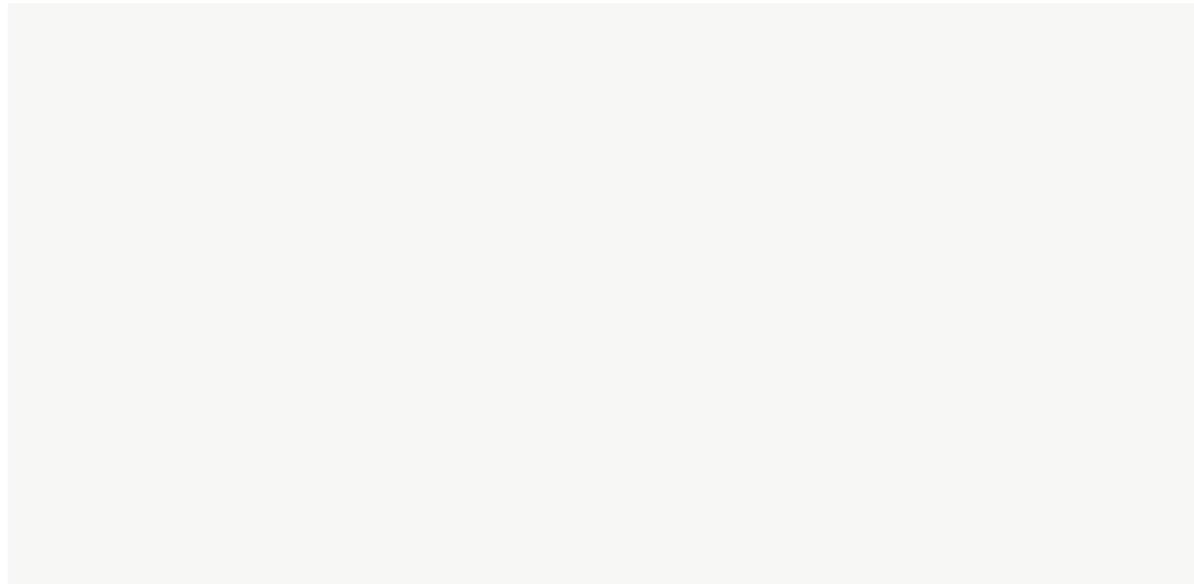
Cassavetes's "Shadows" features music performed by Charles Mingus and Shafi Hadi, but also an infectiously freewheeling sense of filmmaking and desire to tap into the moment. Clarke's theater adaptation, "The Connection," draws on the bop of Freddie Redd's quartet, while "The Cool World" features a score by Mal Waldron recorded by Dizzy Gillespie. Herbert Danska's 1966 film "Sweet Love, Bitter," also in the series, tells the story of a saxophonist modeled on Charlie Parker, and played by Dick Gregory.

Besides capturing the city's sound, these New York filmmakers also wanted to get its lived-in look, not the anonymous classy or brassy hustle and bustle of so many Hollywood studio films. "Little Fugitive," which receives a weeklong run at the end of the series, takes us to Brooklyn tenements and the carousel on Coney Island. Michael Roemer's deadpan 1969 classic about an ex-con outmatched in the catering business, "The Plot Against Harry," was purposely shot across Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx without regard to landmarks.

Clarke's "Cool World" is widely regarded as the first fiction feature

shot entirely on location in Harlem. The director's star, Rony Clanton, was discovered working at a church at 14 by Clarke's collaborator the actor Carl Lee.

“Shirley Clarke said, ‘Why don’t you act out a gang fight?’ ” Mr. Clanton, who appears on “Boardwalk Empire,” recalled of the audition. “I was a Boy Scout, but I knew about the streets.”



Robert De Niro, right, in Brian De Palma's "Hi, Mom!" (1970). Photofest, via Film Forum

The series supplements the era's location shoots with street scenes captured across decades in shorts by the likes of the photographers Rudy Burckhardt, Paul Strand, Helen Levitt and even Robert

Flaherty. But not all of the action was outdoors: Milton Moses Ginsberg's 1969 psychosexual study "Coming Apart," starring Mr. Torn, takes place inside a Kips Bay apartment. Our point of view is the secret camera Mr. Torn's character has installed in a mirrored objet d'art to film his arguments and escapades.

One of the great pleasures and insights of Film Forum's smorgasbord is seeing sensibilities influencing one another. Before directing his feature Mr. Ginsberg did sound work for Robert Frank, also featured in the series, and he credits Jim McBride's 1967 ["David Holzman's Diary"](#) and its self-conscious approach as an inspiration for "Coming Apart."

"Diary" presents the audience with a callow filmmaker trying to make art of life, and annoying his girlfriend and others around him in the process. Before becoming a director Mr. McBride wrote a monograph on cinéma vérité for the Museum of Modern Art with the film's star, L. M. Kit Carson. They interviewed Mr. Pennebaker, Albert Maysles, Andy Warhol and others, and became inspired by the seductive practice of shooting live situations.

"They forget sometimes that the truth lies," Mr. McBride said. "And somehow thinking about all those kinds of things, we thought about a guy making the film he thought would tell the truth."

Mr. McBride's debut came out the same year as that of another filmmaker whose first features lead the series into the storied '70s. With "Who's That Knocking at My Door" and "Mean Streets." Mr. Scorsese synthesized the disparate advances and energies of the New York New Wave. The result was what Mr. Hoberman calls "a coherent package" that left its stamp on the New Hollywood and its paradigm shifts.

Not, however, without the help of a little movie magic.

"One of the ironic things about 'Mean Streets' is that it's mainly shot in Los Angeles," Mr. Hoberman pointed out. "But the New York stuff is so vivid that he's really able to make it feel like it's completely a New York film."

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