was looking for a place on the outside from where I could observe Manhattan, and so today I took the orange ferry from Battery Park to Staten Island, the massive island that stretches out in front of Manhattan and protects it from the open sea (and which, in the company of Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx, became part of New York in 1898). There is not much to be seen on Staten Island: the archives kept in honor of Alice Austen (one of the pioneers of social photography in the United States) at the Historical Society, the Garibaldi-Meucci Memorial Museum (Meucci gave hospitality to Garibaldi for a period between 1850 and 1851). . . . not much else.

Indeed, if you do not actually live there (and are not overly interested in the above), the only reason for going to Staten Island is for the half-hour journey by sea and the marvelous views that are to be had of the metropolis. This ferry is an out-and-out New York icon. It is a time-honored symbol, at least as mythical as its tariff: 10 cents up until 1974, 25 cents until 1989 and then—much to the perplexity of the public at large—half a dollar. (The service has been free for some time now, although maintenance costs have suffered and just recently there have been numerous unpleasant accidents.)

The idea for the ferry came from railway magnate and go-getting entrepreneur Cornelius Vanderbilt (one of the so-called robber barons) in the 1830s. And, apart from serving commuters between the two islands since its inception, the daily round-the-clock ferry has also become a tourist attraction and a source of no little romance. A necessary and integral part of metropolitan folklore, the half-hour ferry ride is a miniature journey that takes you away from the island of Manhattan and momentarily suspends any direct involvement with it. The return trip resuscitates something of the original emotions experienced upon “arriving in New York,” something that is very much part of American culture (and New York’s culture in particular).

The ferry is intrinsic to the culture of the “hilly island.” The ferry that connected the island to Hoboken, New Jersey, is, for instance, at the center of one of the decisive scenes in Edith Wharton’s The Age of Innocence. And it
appears—a powerful metropolitan symbol—at the beginning and end of John Dos Passos’s Manhattan Transfer. More than anyone else, however, it was Walt Whitman who celebrated this key element of New York’s geotechnology: “Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes! how curious you are to me! / On the ferry-boats, the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more curious to me than you suppose; / And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence, are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose” (“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” 1860). Or, as he wrote in Specimen Days (1882): “Indeed, I have always had a passion for ferries; to me they afford inimitable, streaming, never-failing, living poems.”

The city you see from the Staten Island Ferry is a city rising from the sea. It is half past five in the afternoon. I lean on the parapet and feast my eyes on the light that dances about the island contours. The sun warms the sky and caresses the skyscrapers in what is truly an impressive panorama: the former Standard Oil building in the shape of a paraffin lamp, the rounded steel-blue building at 17 State Street, the Morgan Bank topped off with a cream-colored pyramid, the ugly squat rectangle of the Citibank Building, the reflecting surfaces of the National Westminster Bank USA, the cathedral-like spires and columns of the Woolworth Building, the arches, the rosettes, the triple lancet windows... And there is more: the dirty grey-greenness of the Statue of Liberty, the vibrant blotch of structures making up the South Street Seaport, the soft-hued brickwork and the sweet-brave dance of steel cables of the Brooklyn Bridge. From the orange ferry the parading shapes, volumes, and colors of a wealthy, powerful, and symbolically potent Manhattan come across in all their completeness.

Yet it is also rewarding (depending on where you are) to observe and try to identify the dark, narrow streets that creep along beneath the massive buildings, the shadow zones suddenly bathed in light, the perspectives that open out before you every time the boat changes position, the small ancient buildings dwarfed by looming towers, the gleaming of the windows here and there, the distant rumbling of the traffic, and maybe even the teeming hordes of passersby...

This half-hour trip on the Staten Island Ferry is a real feast for the eyes. And I start thinking about all those images of New York that have been superimposed on my retina over the years.

It is impossible not to see New York. That might seem obvious, but think about all the pictures, the photographs, the films, and the ads. Visually speaking, New York is all around us. Long before being a history of a city or places on a map, written words or sounds heard, New York is essentially an image: the image of a metropolis. The moving skyline of the skyscrapers, the evening-time garland of lights that is the Brooklyn Bridge,
the art deco arabesques of the Chrysler Building shining in the night, the airy pink prow of the Flatiron Building pointing northward, the gallery of intent faces in the subway car, the steep flight of steps of the Public Library, the opulence of store windows along Fifth Avenue, street scenes from Harlem or Greenwich Village, Little Italy festooned for the feast of San Gennaro, joggers in Central Park with the elaborate building tops peeping out from behind the trees, children around a hydrant spattering water in the midsummer sun, a policeman with arms folded and paunch spilling over his belt, visitors standing in front of pictures at the MoMa, a blaze of lights in snowbound Times Square . . . Carry on at your leisure with the silent imaginary slides that you have as yet to inflict on unsuspecting friends: slides that are already inside you and already make up part of your very own New York.

Of course, all this complicates things tremendously. Expectations and anticipations are created—a sort of arbitrary preconsciousness—and our true vision risks being blurred. It is hard to see New York as if for the first time, with that “capacity for wonder” that F. Scott Fitzgerald spoke of (as we have just seen). And yet, if the city is to be seen beneath and beyond the surfaces of those images, one must try. It can be done, by training the eye to the vision again. Once more, the fact that New York requires some kind of mental gymnastics is food for thought: we must go beyond the everyday ephemeral that the city itself seems (or, according to some, is) ultimately responsible for.

In Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (the fact that I’m mentioning it again should not be overlooked) there is a famous scene in which Basil and Mabel March observe the city from the Elevated. From that particular observation point, the spectacle is almost better than the theater: “a family party of work-folk at a late tea, some of the men in their shirt sleeves; a woman sewing by a lamp; a mother laying her child in its cradle; a man with his head fallen on his hands upon a table; a girl and her lover leaning over the window-sill together. What suggestion! what drama! what infinite interest!” At the station of 42nd Street the two of them stand on the bridge spanning the tracks in direction of the Central Depot and look at the long stretch of the Elevated north and south:

    the track that found and lost itself a thousand times in the flare and tremor of the innumerable lights; the moony sheen of the electrics mixing with the reddish points and blots of gas far and near; the architectural shapes of houses and churches and towers, rescued by the obscurity from all that was ignoble in them, and the coming and going of trains marking the stations with vivider or fainter plumes of flame-hot steam—formed an incomparable perspective. They often talked of the superb
spectacle, which in a city full of painters nightly works its unrecorded miracles. . . .

Today it is not easy for us to get inside the skin of Howells's stunned spectators and experience the metropolitan spectacle on similar terms of almost primeval wonder. Maybe, however, it is possible to do it by suspending our direct relationship with the city for a moment and by seeking to submerge ourselves for a time in the host of images that the city has evoked: by visiting the labyrinthine depths of an exhibition, leafing through the world of dreams contained in a book of photographs, or entering the dark cavern of a cinema. And, at last, on emerging from this regenerative dip into a world of images, you are ready to look around and embark on a new journey of discovery. Then can the act of seeing in New York (the act of seeing New York)—on the streets, beneath the towers, inside the houses, in the tunnels, on the bridges, inside the kaleidoscope—once again become a deeply emotional experience.

A city full of painters, wrote Howells in 1890. And indeed he was right. From that time on the city gradually filled with painters, and this is another story of New York, and of great interest because in one way or another it has much to do with the birth of a genuinely American art. Not that an American art did not exist beforehand: about the middle of the nineteenth century (the era when the continent was “opened” and “colonized”), painting followed the westerly route, providing itself with subjects, dimensions, colors, brushstrokes, and views of a very particular nature. Of course, the influx of European landscape painting continued to make its presence felt, and the sublimity of the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains led to familiar reactions of romantic stupor. Yet the painters of the Hudson River school, for example, still managed to find their own individual voice (and an exquisitely American voice it was, too) in the warmth and all encompassing nature of the boundless landscape.

However, genuine changes only really occurred following contact with the metropolis—and with all the positive and negative urgings nourished therein—at the end of the century. The philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson had written in 1837, “I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low” (“The American Scholar”), and for budding American painters and writers alike, the phrase became a kind of manifesto of independence. In the second half of the nineteenth century, almost in concomitance with the poet Walt Whitman, painters like Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins made it their creed, to the point of even risking expulsion from the academic and institutional establishment. And it was Eakins himself, whose huge canvases were dominated by the presence of a powerfully realistic human figure, who set a chain reaction in motion.
Indeed, one of his pupils, Robert Henri, gathered around himself a very promising group of young artists, first in Philadelphia, and later in New York. Fascinated by the French Impressionists, and intolerant of society and the arts scene in their native land, these artists promptly went about painting different subjects in different ways. Their names were John Sloan, George Luks, Everett Shinn, William Glackens, Maurice Prendergast, Ernest Lawson, Arthur Davies and George Bellows, more popularly known as The Eight. One of the most interesting things about this group was the fact that they worked as artist-reporters on the main daily newspapers of the period: on being sent to the scene of some urban event or other, they made a quick sketch of it (often employing a kind of "artistic shorthand") and from this they would later prepare a proper illustration for the newspaper. Shortly afterward, the reproduction of photographs in newspapers and magazines was made possible by advances in technology, and the artist-reporter became a redundant figure, but during their relatively brief period of activity, The Eight were part of an experience that was unique both in artistic-technical and sociocultural terms. And when the group moved to New York under the guiding hand of Henri, their single and collective potentials positively blossomed.

Exposure to the New York panorama (a much-used expression that summed up nicely the endless variety of types, faces, views, and situations of the metropolis) seemed to enhance the curiosity and keenness of eye of the young painters. Their social and artistic commitment intensified and their skill in capturing the essential nature of certain street scenes was honed still further. And indeed, it was the street—and not interiors or portraits—that became the dominant theme of the group: local markets, corner scenes, the great building works and excavations, demonstrations and protest marches, the traffic, sunny parks, young workers trudging home at the end of the day, evening lights, the massive scaffolding of the Elevated, store windows and theater foyers, the towers and the alleyways, snow-covered sidewalks, views from the roofs, places of entertainment, boxing matches, cheap restaurants and small backyards: a varied, sorrowful humanity observed and depicted with warmth and affection, and completely devoid of the journalistic sensationalism that made its way to newsstands of the time. Taken as a whole, it represented a thorough breakdown of metropolitan life in all its constituent parts, something akin to a gigantic Balzacian sociological inquiry poured out onto canvas.

And how it was poured! The Eight stood static and overly regular perspectives on their head. They went straight to the street, choosing unusual or slantwise points of observation, picking out scenes that had been ignored or neglected up to that moment, painting moving bodies distorted by labor or writhing in yearnings. Their brushwork differed greatly
from that of the academy: it had aggressive colors and encrusted surfaces, and a grimy touch far removed from the composed sheen and smooth brilliance to which the American public was accustomed. They were nick-named the Ash Can school, a name that despite its originally sarcastic intentions was accepted by its members with pride. The metropolis had found its pictorial representatives, its novelists of the image.

And so here you are, standing in front of Cliff Dwellers (1913) by George Bellows or The City from Greenwich Village (1922) by John Sloan. The first, an evening-time street scene from the Lower East Side (people looking out of their windows and onto the fire escapes, crowding about office fronts and beneath the street lamps, clotheslines everywhere and the city rising mountainlike in the distance), features subdued colors ranging from yellow to brown, broad and rapidly applied brushstrokes, and a vividness of bodies and movement. The second, depicted from above, is a portrayal of the city by night with people leaving the streets and offices, the Elevated on West 3rd Street with a few cars and the odd passerby beneath and, in the distance, the almost surreal vision of Wall Street gleaming in the night: here we have dark volumes battling it out with sudden streaks of light, smears of color that rescue corners and particulars from the obscurity, and slanted—at times even unnatural—perspectives.

Canvases and sketches, engravings and charcoal drawings, vignettes for radical newspapers and magazines like the Masses: even today the wealth of works produced by The Eight remains the most vivid and moving documentation in our possession of the period between the end of the nineteenth century and the First World War. Because it really was something of a fleeting moment. Indeed, in 1913, on the initiative of some of The Eight and Jerome Myers—an excellent realist painter given to aloofness (rather like Jacob Epstein who, before leaving for Europe, provided the superb illustrations for Hutchins Hapgood’s 1902 work, The Spirit of the Ghetto)—the great Armory Show of Lexington Avenue (which we have already spoken of in chapter 3) was inaugurated. Its aim was to provide a public platform for the first collective exhibition of American realism and, more importantly, to give the public a taste of what was going on in the arts in Europe—a world apart that only a few American collectors and travelers knew anything about.

But the Armory Show marked the beginning of the end for The Eight: the outcry and disconcertment roused by the aggressive and disturbing works of the European avant-garde (Marcel Duchamp’s Nude Descending a Staircase) stifled the milder voice of the New York realists. Then came the war, the social and political unrest of the postwar era, and the contradictory upheaval of the 1920s: painting New York in the same way as before seemed an impossible task. Separate roads were taken. One realist
school obstinately pursued its activities throughout the Jazz Age and especially during the 1930s, with Sloan and company being joined by artists of great worth like Art Young, the brothers Raphael and Isaac Soyer, Ben Shahn, Glenn Coleman, Edward Hopper, Reginald Marsh, and Isabel Bishop, all of whom were especially interested in portraying the bodies and faces in the metropolis, the million lives and million stories of its inhabitants, the hidden corners of an urban context that never ceased to change its skin.

But above all, New York became the “abstract city,” the vortex of lines and energy and the explosion of colors and perspectives that belonged to Abraham Walkowitz, Stuart Davis, John Martin, Max Weber, Joseph Stella, and Georgia O’Keeffe. In tacit agreement with the syncopated rhythm of the city, with ragtime and with jazz, their canvases sought to bring to life on a flat surface the complex three-dimensional quality of an urban experience made up of skyscrapers under construction, the excavation of new subway lines, bridges and scaffolding, nocturnal neon lights, frenzy and speed, pummeling pneumatic drills, bus rides, water tank silhouettes on the roofs, cranes and chimney stacks, bright white windows in the dark, a constant prismatic capsizing of perspectives, a convergence/divergence of lines and force fields, a sense of overcrowding and proximity along the narrow perimeter of the island, and uninterrupted vortexes of cars and bodies (in his 1930 novel, Jews Without Money, Michael Gold wrote that his street “was an immense excitement. It never slept. It roared like a sea. It exploded like fireworks”).

Take, for instance, Georgia O’Keeffe’s Radiator Building—Night, New York (1925), a canvas livid with blacks, blues, and violets: in the middle, imposing, the skyscraper of the title, whose only sign of life is the series of illuminated windows—almost an electric circuit of whites, yellows, and blues—and an Oriental templelike summit sculpted by saber thrusts of light rays against the black sky, a lateral red stripe, and a puff of white steam. In The Brooklyn Bridge: Variation on an Old Theme (1939), by Joseph Stella, the world’s most famous bridge becomes a musical nave in blues and greys, a cathedral whose two Gothic arches contain and compress the rest of the city. At the bottom, a first layer encapsulates the metropolitan symbols, the outline of the bridge, and the skyscrapers and, underneath, a second layer multiplies the motif of the yellowish eyes of the train in the darkness of the underground tunnels.

The city also becomes a “geometric city” in the works of artists like Charles Sheeler, Louis Lozowick, and Hugh Ferriss, who preferred the vision of a New York (real or imaginary) made up of shapes and volumes, rarefied geographies, and clean-cut, sharp, square outlines: the possibility of harmony, but also the spine-chilling prospect of sameness. In these two
modernist visions of the metropolitan sublime, ecstasy and unease, marvel and anxiety shared the canvas cheek by jowl. These two approaches were deeply bound together, supported—if not actually inspired—by another visual means of communication triumphant in those years: photography.

When examined close-up, photography followed a similar path. In fact, at the end of the nineteenth century, the need to find new ways to express the city experience was bound up with the profound unease felt by wide sectors of society when faced with a risk- and contradiction-ridden reality. Immigration from faraway lands, the urbanization of black masses coming from the southern states and the explosion of working-class protest all over the country exacerbated the fears of both the WASP ruling class and a middle class that persisted in its foolish beliefs that frontier individualism, equal opportunities for everyone, the self-made man, and the American “way of life” were genuine lasting alternatives to the social adversities of the Old World. Certain areas of the larger American cities were becoming severely congested, and this was thought to be the most obvious threat: it was high time these living conditions—in the blandly reformist conception of sociologists, journalists, and social workers—were brought to light in order that they might be neutralized.

This is precisely what happens with Jacob Riis, the Danish immigrant we have already come across in chapter 1: using rough-and-ready photographic equipment (on more than one occasion he accidentally set fire to apartments and basements with his magnesium lamps), Riis casts a light over obscure and hidden existences and records what was often a shocking modus vivendi et laborandi in the tenements, the sweatshops, and the poorly lit, stuffy apartments. As in “Knee-Pants’ at Forty-five Cents a Dozen—a Ludlow Street Sweater's Shop” (1889), where male and female workers are intent on cutting, tacking, and sewing trousers in the midst of an untidy room: the surprised look of workers caught turning toward the lens, the childlike smile of a laborer whose mouth is half-hidden behind an enormous pair of scissors, the frenzied working atmosphere suggested by the movement of bodies, a dog hunkered down patiently beneath a chair heaped up with fabrics, the dirty windows . . . And it is precisely with the help of photographs like this (which you can still see at the Museum of the City of New York, and harrowing they are, too) that Riis manages to put together How the Other Half Lives (1890). Annoying at times for its banality and the odd racist stereotype, this famous volume is a damning indictment of an urban context positively shocking in its squalor.

So there it is, the birth of social photography in the United States. After Riis came Lewis Hine, also a reformer but above all a great artist who turned to drawing up a veritable catalog of the new “American types.”
With almost anthropological precision, Hine photographed a single, gigantic sequence of immigrant faces, laborers, women, children, and old people, arriving at Ellis Island, hanging about street corners, surrounded by the bags and suitcases of those who would probably never make it back home, busy in the ever-alike gestures of mass production. This is the case in “Madonna of Ellis Island” (1905) or “Immigrants at Ellis Island” (1908), two photographs that tear individuals and groups away from the sheer anonymity of their condition to capture their cultural and existential complexity.

When the city spirals upward all around him, with skyscrapers (from the Chrysler to the Empire State) laying down their respective gauntlets between the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, Hine is there to witness their dramatic rise (albeit with a hint of nationalistic—Whitmanesque?—pride, it must be said). Above all, he is there to document what lies behind the soaring Manhattan skyline—construction tasks at dizzier than dizzy heights and the endless acrobatics between profit and wages, of anonymous laborers from all over the world.

Now, in Hine’s photographs of the Empire State Building under construction and the men at work (Men at Work is, in fact, the title of one of his best collections, from 1932), there is already an irresistible sense of wonder at the volumes and designs involved, the contrasting and intermingling of lines, the arabesques of the girders and steel cables, the drills and turbines, of a city engaged in a continual process of expansion and transformation. And again, exactly as occurred in the world of painting, the realistic representation of the metropolis gradually shifted toward the abstract and the geometric. Indeed, alongside “social” photographers like Riis and Hine, other photographer-painters like Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen were already at work, driven on toward a different use of the camera by the new urban landscape.

As in the paintings of Stella, O’Keeffe, Demuth, and Sheeler, their city representations became uninterrupted sequences of strong lines, reflecting surfaces and geometric volumes. It was an abstract and visionary world, coolly silent or magically iridescent depending on the time of day, the weather, or the point of view. Skyscrapers provided the main attraction for these photographers-painters, and in particular the Flatiron Building—so slender, ethereal, and light—a genuine architectural wonder that is photographed at all hours of the day and night, in the fog and rain, in the snow and sunshine, until it becomes an icon, in pure form.

Silence is what strikes us most in the images of photographers like Stieglitz and Steichen, Berenice Abbott (whose Changing New York, from 1939, is a splendid document), Walker Evans (with his photographs of the Brooklyn Bridge), William Klein (in his famous and recently rediscovered
New York), and Rudy Burckhardt, all of whom continued experimenting with the camera in close contact with the urban environment, its places, and its inhabitants. The metropolis speaks to us with eloquence, and often violently so, but there is a dreamy or nightmarish quality to all this: it does so without words. It is almost as if the city were showing us the other side, tacit and mute, of an experience that is nonetheless steeped in personal and collective experiences: something to place alongside the written word of literature and the merry-go-round world of spoken languages.

And it is hardly a coincidence that, from the 1930s on, a new instrument comes to take its rightful place in the world of painting as well, occupying a halfway-house territory with an intriguing power all its own: the "novels without words." The engravings of John Sloan and the paintings of Reginald Marsh already closely resembled novels without words—stages crammed with streets, places of entertainment, beaches and cinema and theater foyers. But the time was ripe for the establishment of a real genre. Reviving the great tradition of the early-twentieth-century Belgian avant-garde artist Frans Masereel, engravers like Giacomo Patri and Lynd Ward welded realism to abstractionism by projecting stirring black-and-white image-stories of life and survival in the city onto the page.

Photography and painting were never to abandon the New York arts scene throughout the twentieth century, as Peter Conrad has ably demonstrated in his fascinating book on the subject, The Art of the City (1984). While the realism of Joseph Levine, William Johnson, and Jacob Lawrence continued to explore the heart of the city, exposing it with irony and affection, the abstraction of artists like Jackson Pollock or Willem de Kooning (the so-called New York school) continued pouring pure energy onto the canvas and turning the city into a sign. But their paths would cross again—in certain pop art works of Robert Rauschenberg and Red Grooms, for example; or in the trompe l’oeil works of Richard Haas. The social photography of Riis and Hine, meanwhile, is taken up by Abbott and Evans, later evolving into the hallucinated recording of the metropolitan nocturne of Weegee (with his fires, street accidents, local homicides, and crowds of eager onlookers) and Diane Arbus (whose freaks are disconcertingly normal in appearance).

Just recently I’ve had the good fortune to see some interesting exhibitions at the Whitney Museum and the Museum of the City of New York. One was given over entirely to Joseph Stella, the great Italian-born artist who arrived in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. His early years in the country were characterized by works of fierce social critique, mostly in charcoal, while working for magazines like the Survey: the faces and bodies of immigrants, scenes from mines and laboring towns and the railroads and chimney stacks—an important documen-
tary account of what the “other America” was, and what it would continue to be. Then came the explosion of the 1920s and 1930s: aggressive colors, the visionary quality of the images, the vortexes of lines, and the Brooklyn Bridge adopted as a symbol of an era, a culture, and a context.

The other exhibition, City of Ambition: Artists and New York, 1900–1960, provided a splendid overview of the relationship between the arts and the metropolis through a striking range of images comprising the works of realist and abstract artists, social photographers and photographer-painters, and engravers and photo-reporters. There was also a telltale map of Manhattan that revealed how there was not one single place in the long narrow island that had not been visited by an image, in black and white or color, brushstroke or pencil, or frozen by a shutter release. The third and last exhibition, Shared Perspectives, dealt with that perpetual dialogue in motion between painting and photography—almost a challenge or a pursuit from which emerges the real sense of a “city of painters.”

The history of New York and its image is a “never-ending story”—maybe because the city is so full of stories that it is impossible to capture them all through the written word alone. I’m thinking about the contemporary work of Marlis Momber, whose photographs have been telling the life of the Lower East Side neighborhood for the last twenty-five years, and whose characters you can meet every day on the street corner, in front of Jardín de la Esperanza or at Casa Adela; I’m thinking about Margaret Morton’s photographs of the homeless, the inhabitants of those impromptu casitas erected in the midst of urban desolation, and of the New York tunnel people; I’m thinking about the black-and-white or color plates of Eric Drooker, the gifted artist whose visionary continuation of the “novel without words” tradition has resulted in some of the most staggering and pointed of metropolitan scenes. And I’m thinking of Seth Tobocman, whose cartoons continue the well-established tradition of the urban cartoon à la Will Eisner.

Clearly, as Marilyn Cohen has written apropos the canvases and drawings of Reginald Marsh, the dominant element in all this is “the cinematic vision of the city.” So the time has come to return to the quotation from Howells’s novel that more or less set this chapter rolling, because in that description of the city as seen by the two characters (every window containing a different scene) I think we already have a surprising foretaste of what cinema would bring. In Howells’s novel it is still a question of the characters moving in front of the stills, but just a few years later it would be the stills moving in front of seated spectators.

In fact, speaking of images in a New York context necessarily implies that we also speak of American cinema, not only because the movies
practically started off here (the first public showing took place at the Bials & Koster Music Hall on Broadway and West 34th Street in 1896); not only because the origins of cinema are so closely tied up to the city’s very own dynamics: the first movie producers were the sons of Lower East Side immigrants who worked in the clothing industry (cut and stitch together!), although by the time cinema had clearly become a serious business prospect they were flocking in droves to make their fortunes in Hollywood, where longer daylight hours allowed for an optimization of practices; and not only because cinema started off as a popular spectacle aimed at an ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous public (as an early-twentieth-century manual written for those interested in this new art/industry declared: the “ideal location is a densely populated working-men’s residence section, with a frontage on a much-traveled business street”). Not for these reasons alone, but because right from the start it was precisely the landscape of New York that helped model the cinema and was indeed its first great inspiration: the street as a stage, the urban labyrinth, the continual movement, the incessant transformations, the sheer variety of its inhabitants, the overwhelming multitude of stories and events . . . These were all fundamental aspects of cinema—its DNA no less—as Siegfried Kracauer has demonstrated in *Theory of Film* (1960) and (at least as far as American cinema is concerned) as Robert Sklar has reminded us in *Movie-Made America* (1975).

It may safely be said that the first stories projected onto a white tarpaulin took their origins from the street (*The Life of a Bootblack*, 1907; *The Black Hand*, 1908; *The Story of Rosa in Little Italy*, 1908; *The Little Match Girl*, 1908; *The Rag-Picker’s Christmas*, 1908; *The Child of the Ghetto. Rivington Street: The Strugglers*, 1910), as did the 450 brief films shot by David W. Griffith for Biograph between 1908 and 1912, prior to his famed yet controversial *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). They are stories of immigrants living between Little Italy and the Jewish ghetto, barbershops, tenement interiors, characters “endowed with a humanity that set them apart from stock caricatures” (in the words of Sklar), right up until the minor 1912 masterpiece starring a young and delectable Lillian Gish, *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*. The street formed an all-important backdrop in the films of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, too: all those astonishing chases, the sudden reversals, the surprises just around the corner, beneath the staircase, in the basement, and, well, did you see that manhole cover? A limitless theater of fortuitous incidents and accidents. So, once more that physical bond with the street and city locations, which, as we have seen, proved so important in New York literature, makes its reappearance at the dawning of the movies, and indeed, there it will remain as the most eloquent and honored of guests. It is hardly a coincidence that the taste
for that original theater—and for that street where everything starts and finishes, only to start back from the beginning again—and the pleasures to be derived from it, resurfaces anew in films like Susan Seidelman's Desperately Seeking Susan, Jonathan Demme's Married to the Mob, or Martin Scorsese's After Hours.

How, then, are we to get a grip on all those millions of moving cinematic stills dedicated to New York in these pages? All those documentaries and fictions? Manhatta by Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand and Manhattan by Woody Allen? What Did Mozart See on Mulberry Street by Rudy Burckhardt, and In the Street by James Agee, Halen Levitt, and Janice Loeb, and On the Bowery by Lionel Rogosin? James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, and Humphrey Bogart fleeing from dead-end streets only to go back again? The days and Sundays singing in the rain together with Gene Kelly? Breakfasts at Tiffany's and apartments at the Plaza? The Broadway of Woody Allen and the Bronx of Robert De Niro? Central Park with its nighttime warriors, its fisher king, and its marathon man? Hannah and her sisters and Harry meeting Sally? The crowd of King Vidor, the lost weekend of Billy Wilder, the heiress of William Wyler, the faces and shadows of John Cassavetes, the ragtime of Milos Foreman? The Empire State Building of King Kong and Andy Warhol? The Manhattan murder mystery and doing the right thing in Brooklyn? The godfathers, the princes of the city, the king of New York, the goodfellas, and the seven-year itch? The ghostbusters and Rosemary's children? The taxi drivers and the pawnbrokers? The noirs of the 1940s and 1950s, then Serpico, the death wishes, and the French connection? Wall Street, 42nd Street, and the West Side? On the waterfront, the mean streets of Little Italy, the dragons of Chinatown, and the smoke in Auggie's cigar store in Brooklyn? SoHo, Central Park, Harlem, Washington Square, the Brooklyn Bridge, Grand Central, and the Chrysler Building? . . . Oh, and you will forgive me if I left something out.

Cinema is to New York what Dickens is to London and Zola to Paris: there is a whole city in there—a whole world. And, vice versa, only one city produces the millions and millions of moving images that go to make up story after story (Richard Alleman's The Movie Lover's Guide to New York is an exhaustive guide to cinematic places in New York). I think one of the most significant films to illustrate this relationship between cinema and the metropolis (and it is one of the films my students have to put up with on a fairly regular basis) is Jules Dassin's 1948 work, The Naked City, whose opening shots are decidedly Dickensian in character. There are no titles to interfere with what we are seeing: an aerial view of Manhattan accompanied by a background narration that talks about the film and the city; then, while being treated to some nighttime scenes, the
metropolis is disassembled into its constituent parts: the river, Wall Street, the illuminated buildings, the deserted streets, the still offices, the never-ceasing pulse of the factories, the trucks carrying forth their goods for the next day, the woman cleaning the floor of what looks suspiciously like Grand Central Station, the host of a radio show announcing the next song, the glitter of rich, fashionable places, and the fitful shadows of a homicide in a dark apartment.

The background narration accompanies us throughout the film. The long, complex investigation takes place for the most part in the streets of New York, powerfully presented in visual and physical terms, and finishes with a thrilling chase through the Lower East Side, along to the Williamsburg Bridge and then up, up to the top of one of its steel towers, from where the island-universe appears for the last time. And the morbid background narration of producer Mark Hellinger accompanies us for the last time: “There are eight million stories in the naked city, and this is one of them . . .”

I wonder if after this deep-sea dive into the images inspired by New York (or, rather, which make New York: a complex matter this . . . ) it will be easier to come back and watch, or see, the city. Care will have to be taken anyway because, as Alan Trachtenberg has argued convincingly in *The Incorporation of America* (1982), ever since New York became the great capitalist metropolis at the end of the 1800s, it has always done its utmost to conceal its true nature and reality, offering itself as pure enigma. It has hidden the public places abuzz with the mechanisms of power behind masked facades. It has turned the banks into Gothic cathedrals, the stations into Doric temples, the dwellings of businessmen into medieval castles, the offices into minarets, and the big department stores into neoclassical buildings. And it has locked away the mystery of profits, land rents, and real-estate speculation in soaring skyscrapers resembling ancient Assyrian-Babylonian ziggurats.

Thus, a dwarflike presence in the streets, dazed and confused by the image and the form, we risk not seeing the substance at all. Unless we can accept the invitation and the challenge implicit in all these reflecting surfaces, which are forever sending each other images of themselves: an invitation and a challenge, that is, to go through the looking glass—to solve the puzzle and unravel the mystery.

I was looking for a place on the inside from where I could observe New York, and so today I’ve been up and down Central Park, letting its eight hundred acres of greenery dance all about me: as if the covered carousel with its huge wooden
horses close by 65th Street Transverse Road had suddenly spread out to encompass the whole park.

It is no easy task to find a “place on the inside” in the metropolis. Everything considered, it could have been any place on the Lower East Side or in Harlem, along Broadway or down 14th Street; it could have been . . . But what I really needed was a kind of eye-in-the-storm location from which I could look out onto the city as if I were standing in the wings at the theater. Or, reversing the relationship between spectacle and spectator, as when you separate the two drapes of the main curtain mysteriously before the show begins, to peep out and see what’s going on among the public in the stalls: you have to get used to this kind of reversal in a city like New York—seeing and being seen.

At last I found my hidden corner, my own special observation post: along the West Drive of the park and near the Strawberry Fields dedicated to John Lennon, on the lake. It was a small wooden jetty with a sloping roof that gives it the appearance of a gazebo, two L-shaped seats with parapets to the sides of the central opening. I sat down with my back to the Drive, popped my legs through the boards of the parapet, and let my feet dangle just above the surface of the water. And there I remained for a good hour, watching the gentle rippling of the lake, the inquisitive bustling about of the ducks, the slow movement of the boats, and, just in front of me, the slender cast-iron bridge that links Cherry Hill to the Ramble.

The peace and quiet of that place was exactly like being inside the eye of the storm. The metropolis was spinning all around me. I could see tall peaks stretching above the treetops along Fifth Avenue and Central Park South; I knew they were there behind me, along Central Park West (the turrets and bow windows of the Dakota Houses, the spires and small columns of the San Remo Apartments); I could feel them to my left and, going north, toward Harlem—the cement, the steel, the cast iron, the granite, stone, and brick of New York that wrapped their way about the intense green, the hills, the tiny valleys and the expanses of water in the park. A “momentary stay against confusion,” as Robert Frost put it, writing about poetry.

From my own special observation post, from this tiny window opening out onto a momentary sereneness in the midst of metropolitan turmoil, I observed at length the amazing spectacle of contradictions, the continual refraction of the peaks, and the artificial summits in the shuddering water. In the meantime, on the opposite bank of the lake, a girl was placing a canvas on her easel and was mixing the colors in her palette. Every now and then, she looked up.