

# Within the Ruins of New York City: No Wave as a Paradigm of American Independent Cinema

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## Abstract

This essay aims at exploring No Wave as a potential paradigm of American Independent Cinema by investigating where and when this body of works flourished: New York City from the mid-1970s. In such films, the decayed urban environment of Lower Manhattan had a key role in embodying a profilmic space, as well as the space of music and film practices. Performances with projections, films with re-enactments, art and TV shows were primarily created and played by No Wave musicians, filmmakers and artists together in Downtown NYC. They defined the first recognizable entity of a distinctive film culture. The essay is developed in the following steps with reference to several case studies: 1) New York City, 1975–1980: Downtown VS Uptown; 2) The Downtown Music Scene; 3) The Scene in the Ruins as a Space at Multiple Speeds; 4) Living Forward the Present, Activating the Past; 5) No Wave as a Paradigm of American Independent Cinema. In the ruined and rundown Lower East Side, No Wave represented a break-out phenomenon and became the outset of the American Independent Cinema. The main effect was the production of an independent pattern, based on DIY tools and media, which spread into a trans-local network.

**Keywords:** No Wave; American Independent Cinema; New York City; underground scenes; DIY culture.

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## 1 New York City, 1975–1980: Downtown VS Uptown

Since the mid-1970s the urban space of Downtown New York City represented a cultural context to enact original artistic strategies created in contraposition to the art world and the *bourgeois* society of Uptown. At the time, in the southern area of Manhattan, the East Village was in a state of abandonment. A few communities that were living there, such as the Latinos, decided to remain and to establish a kind of mutual alliance with the young *outsiders* that in those years were moving to NYC to make art such as Patti Smith, Lydia Lunch, and Jim Jarmusch (Mele 2000).

In his first film *Permanent Vacation* (1980) Jarmusch highlighted those contrasts that emerged from the urban grid. Let's start with this spatial contraposition, in line with the dialectic “us *versus* them” activated in the independent music scenes by their members according to Kruse (2003). We will explore how a bounded context, in which places and strategies are shared, may generate a prolific idea of “scene” and be closely related to the definition of what is the “American Independent Cinema” (Levy 1999; King 2005).

## 2 The Downtown Music Scene

In those years the independent production practices related to punk/new-wave/post-punk propelled the birth of open multimedia labs in the so-called “Downtown Music Scene” of NYC (Gendron 2005; Gann 2006) through live performances in connection with film, media, and visual arts. This art scene flourished in a decayed Lower East Side described by the artists who inhabited it as a “Wild West type of town” with “just blocks of abandoned buildings, set on fire nightly” (Masters 2007: 17). In the mid-1970s, the musician Ivan Kral and the filmmaker Amos Poe shot and edited in Super-8 several performances taken by the members of the music scene, which found its core in a few venues within the neighborhood. In 1976 they completed *The Blank Generation*, the first Do-It-Yourself feature film that portrayed an indie music scene mainly in the setting of a venue. It is composed of sequences of live shots edited on non-synch songs that were recorded separately by each band. The newly self-produced and self-distributed local fanzines *Punk Magazine* and *New York Rocker* described the soundtrack as both “punk” and “new wave”. Gendron points out how Downtown music ranged between the “gritty, aggressive, unadorned rock'n'roll” of bands such as the Ramones and the Dead Boys, and the “artiness, archness, self-consciousness, and ironic detachment” of bands such as Talking Heads and Television (2005: 53). What bands of such different styles shared was a common strategy: creating works of art through a performance act set on location. *The Blank Generation*, as a collection of varied and heterogeneous portraits of different performers, was unified by sharing the same time and the same space: this first film was an hybrid form of “documentary... home movie... music video... narrative film... [and] avant-garde film” — as it was outlined by Benedetti — since “[t]he film's confounding relationship with categorization is a crucial part of its ambiguous status as both a creative work produced within Downtown culture and a historical document of that culture” (2015: 42).

In a sequence that shows the Downtown music scene, the musicians are enjoying their time on and off the stage in the space of the venue, “a cultural synecdoche” of such music scenes (Shank 1994: 16). As Straw puts it: “Scenes emerge from the excesses of sociability that surround the pursuit of interests, or which fuel ongoing innovation and experimentation within the cultural life of cities” (2004: 412). In a previous essay, Straw describes the scene as a key context for alternative rock music culture: “[it] is that cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization” (1991: 373). The musicians in the scene create “forms of communication through which the building of musical alliances and the drawing of musical boundaries take place” (373) developing highly hybrid, personal, and eclectic styles “within an ongoing process of differentiation and complexification” (376). Straw underlines how different simultaneous styles represent stratifying layers of the past in the present, an artistic practice that becomes a point of rupture — compared to the continuity perpetuated by folk and rock communities — and a strategy that redefines “a distinctive relationship to historical time and geographical location” (375).

Thus, *The Blank Generation* embodied the characteristics of a music and cultural scene. Furthermore, it may be considered the first independent movie that shaped the film form through the song-format, since it is not only made up by cells that we might define as video-clips, rather, is it a collection of songs that represents a fluid intermedial and intertextual body of that art scene.

### 3 The Scene in the Ruins as a Space at Multiple Speeds

The core of the scene was the No Wave, a group of artists that had worked together for about six years on multimedia projects mixing together private and public life. Their activities started with a bunch of musicians that played live mainly at Max's Kansas City with the aim to challenge traditional forms, such as the song itself, using traditional rock instruments, such as voice, guitar, slide, bass, and drums. "Disruption, dissonance, disorder", as O'Meara describes this music:

"[b]ands labeled 'No Wave' by the New York press were musically diverse, but shared an approach to making music [...]. No Wave groups stripped away much of the melodic and harmonic framework of rock music. Instead, they focused on punk's most abrasive timbres, often framed by complex rhythmic structures. [...] They] discovered in punk's amateurism opportunities to experiment with new forms and timbres." (2007: 203)

How music and cinema are deeply connected in No Wave artwork within the scene is suggested by Eric Mitchell in *Kidnapped*. The film is a re-enactment of Andy Warhol's *Vinyl* (1965), an adaptation of Anthony Burgess' novel *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). *Kidnapped* was edited as a juxtaposition of Super 8 reels that represented a group of people locked in a flat, in which each scene lasts as long as the reel length. The characters are bored and to kill time indoors they chat, smoke and take drugs. Before deciding to kidnap and abuse Steve Mass — the owner of the Mudd Club, "the first art/rock nightclub" (Gendron 2005: 249) — Mitchell and his friends dance to "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction", a cover version of the Rolling Stones' song self-released in 1977 by Devo. The band rearranged a robotic version totally de-sexualized in respect to the original, firstly avoiding the initial hook played by the guitar — here substituted by the drums' groove with loops of short bass and the guitars' rhythmic cells — and, secondly, replacing the warm bluesy grain of Mick Jagger's voice with a psychotic and unpleasant tone. This cover version goes against the 'politics of pleasure' that permeated rock music since the 1950s, chiefly represented by the Stones. In *Kidnapped* the "(No) Satisfaction"-effect is doubled in the dance scene, both desecrating and disharmonic, where the performers' bodies seem affected by convulsions and move almost mechanically. According to Reynolds, "Devo treated the synth as a noise generator" (2005: 77–78) as much as band member Mark Mothersbaugh — later well-known for his film scores in Wes Anderson's movies — declared "to write synth parts I could play with a fist instead of fingers", the same practice adopted by Contortions' keyboardist Adele Bertei (2005: 151).

Devo and No Wave groups experimented with art practices that involved their presence and physical acts, like in performance art, in order to challenge traditional forms: how they explored the bodily and timbric aspect of any traditional rock instrument — such as the use of the slide for guitarists Pat Place and Lunch, or the exploration of voice made by Arto Lindsay — was reflected in how filmmakers used Super 8 and 16 mm cameras, conceiving the fictional film form as a song form. In this respect, any mistake that occurred during the shooting process was accepted and the editing process was reduced to minimum cuts for enhancing actors' performance. From *Kidnapped* Devo and No Wave shared a ruined urban landscape as a daily context — that of the industrial Akron in Ohio, where Jarmusch was born, and that of the East Village in the 1970s, when the municipality was close to the bankruptcy.

No Wave cast and crew were mainly formed by fellow musicians, filmmakers, visual artists, and writers. We should not forget that No Wave expressed itself in that specific urban context, far from the actual image of such a space. O'Meara outlines how Bush Tetras' songs reflected the structure of the grid of that neighborhood with its humanity and are characterized by the act of being positioned within that urban context. As well, Nares' *Rome 78* (1978) embodies the decay of Caligula's Roman Empire in the profilmic space of that NYC, in reference to Mervyn LeRoy's *Quo Vadis?* (1951). The film represents the layers of the metropolitan ruins, where the body is the only medium both to experience the city and to explore new film and art practices. The

scene gives the possibility to experience the urban ruins at two speeds as they become, in Straw's terms, "space of deceleration" (i.e. the Roman empire) and "accelerative space" (i.e. No Wave scene): "ruins function [...] as the marks of a historical decline too devastating to be easily reversed (the scene as space of deceleration) and as spaces of opportunity open to relatively easy transformation through artists' projects and urban activism (the scene as accelerative space)" (2014: 6–7).

#### 4 Living Forward the Present, Activating the Past

In 1978 Poe directed *The Foreigner*. Inspired by Albert Camus' novel *L'Étranger* (1942), it tells the arrival of a secret agent, Max Menace (Mitchell), to the Lower East Side. He is isolated and assaulted during the entire movie, while looking for support. He feels allied only with one character, a blonde girl met on the road (Debbie Harry) that sings a German tune, "Bilbao Song" (Weill/Brecht, 1929). The iconic face of Blondie's frontwoman framed in a close-up the lively act of singing, which reactivates the remembrance of that song in the present moment. The scene is enhanced by two elements: the clear and direct grain of Harry's singing voice; her look straight to the camera towards the spectator.

Bellour adopted in film analysis the concept of "present moment" outlined by the neurologist Daniel Stern (2008). The present moment is the affect experienced in a brief duration within a circumscribed place, it is enacted by the forms of vitality and develops a basic script; it is characterized by a life experience with a specific temporal profile and, in Stern's account, "it is similar to the development of a musical phrase" (2004: 199). As "dynamic experience arises from forces in movement", the forms of vitality are activated through the arousal systems, stimuli that

"satisfy the need for a force for behaviour [...], a force that throws the motivation into action, that triggers the emotions, sharpens the attention, starts up cognition, and initiates movement. [...] To be aroused is 'to be put into motion' or 'stirred up' or 'excited into activity', physically, mentally, or emotionally. It is synonymous with 'to animate.'" (Stern 2010: 57–58)

In another study Stern applied his model to the art form expressed in time. In the account of cinematic art he identifies the shot as the unit of the present moment: "[T]he closer the camera, the more the attention is focused and arousal is ratcheted up. Close-ups have an intrinsic force because they violate our established bodily boundaries and comfortable distances. They create a burst of arousal that prepares the body for some kind of action (e.g. to touch, kiss, hit, pull back)" (Stern 2010: 94–95). For Bellour the present moment recalls "the body of the spectator while it is reflected in the body of the film" (my translation, 2008: 84).

Shank affirms that a scene is a context constituted by its members' bodies mirrored in the performers' bodies during a live show (1994: 122). Furthermore, by re-inscribing each event continuously, the present moment activates the memory process of all the events codified as remembrance (Stern 2004, Bellour 2008), those layers of the past in the present that may be associated to the temporalities that define a scene in Straw's account. It happens in the scene of *The Foreigner* when, in close-up, Harry sings "Bilbao Song" towards the spectator, reactivating the arousal systems and the codified remembrance. In addition, the following sequence shows Menace while he is beaten by a gang, played by the members of the Cramps. They are all inside the music club CBGB, where the punk band Erasers is playing live: Menace is crushed by his enemies as the rhythm of the editing increases and the viewpoint becomes fragmented.

Inspired by fellow musicians with their "sheer sonic assault [and] physical aggression" (Reynolds 2005: 144), No Wave artists used Super 8 and 16 mm cameras and video as musical instruments to challenge traditional forms, such as the fictional film. Music performances with projections (as Scott B and Beth B made with Teenage Jesus and the Jerks at Max's Kansas City), films with re-enactments (as *Kidnapped*, *Rome 78*, *Underground USA*), art and TV shows (as Colab) were created and played by No Wave musicians, filmmakers and artists all together. In a few words — to come back to some key concepts that define a scene — these are art activities based on "differentiation", "cross-fertilization", "complexification", and "a new relation between geographical location and historical time" (Straw 1991). Following this, No Wave may be considered the first independent scene developing the idea of music, film, media, and visual arts as totally performative.

## 5 No Wave as a Paradigm of American Independent Cinema

At the beginning of the 1980s the East Village was exploited by real estate in a process of gentrification that changed the environment permanently (Mele 2000). In 1980 Mitchell and Jarmusch made their last works together grouped under No Wave: *Permanent Vacation* and *Underground USA*. If we consider the compilation *No New York*, produced in 1979 by Brian Eno, the testament for No Wave music, as well these two films can provide a few keys to interpret the disappearance of No Wave sonic cinematic art. Still making reference to the past (i.e. Earl Bostic music and *The Wizard of Oz* in the former, *Sunset Boulevard* and Warhol cinema in the latter), the final shots frame the ideas of “dead-end” and “crossroad”, which will be central in the subsequent American independent films.

In the end, No Wave works of art represent a complex intermedial and intertextual body enacted by artists who used their own bodies to give shape to every possible form of art and every medium necessary. Their films were primarily shot and only minimally written or edited since they may be considered performances of “the present moment”, forms that reflect the functioning of the “arousal systems” and the decodification of remembrances. Their energy was transformed in music concerts, theater shows, and film shooting as primarily performance acts, this way, perhaps, explaining why No Wave wasn’t very interested in preserving its productions. As filmic, multimedia and intertextual bodies, No Wave performers became a vector of movement in a ruined Lower East Side, embodying the idea of independent scene overall. They created an alternative pattern to be spread in a trans-local network. Based on DIY tools and centered on performing bodies, this pattern defined two key strategies to make possible the production of independent music and cinema among the American underground scenes: positioning (as to be positioned in a certain space and time) and mapping (as to be widely diffused in a network due to autonomous media). For these artists this became the opportunity to be placed in the productive cultural contexts of the local scene and to be able to share their artwork trans-locally in the other connected scenes.

These shared strategies have defined the US independent scenes and guaranteed their existences in time through the self-narration and the mapping (see Kruse 2003; Soldani 2017). The DIY pattern becomes crucial for the US indie underground scenes and in their narrative, in particular when their “then” oral history is told in the 2000s compiling biographical profiles and mapping cultural contexts (see Blush 2001; Azerrad 2002). These concepts, as the idea of scene as “space of deceleration” and “accelerative space”, underlie the documentary film *Kill Your Idols* (Crary, 2004), in which, years later, No Wave musicians are interviewed together with the actual indie musicians of Downtown NYC (e.g., Liars, Yeah Yeah Yeahs). Another key example is the documentary film *Blank City* (Danhier, 2010), which is a choral narration on the No Wave and the East Village culture of 1970/80s that tells (and preserves) a history through the personal memories of the scene’s members.

No Wave challenged the concept of tradition by using popular forms and created an original way of making art through autonomous media, networks, and patterns. Finally, these filmmakers suggested a way of defining the “American Independent Cinema” as a body of work with a common identity and shared characteristics (Levy 1999; King 2005). According to Levy, the American independent cinema was shaped by an “artistic impulse” to tell stories about “outsiders” told by “outsiders” (1999: 52) — as in the case of No Wave — “enjoy[ing] greater freedom in expressing their creators’ idiosyncratic vision because indies don’t depend on large audiences” (1999: 3). Furthermore, “social geography” becomes another key-element because of “[the] differences between indie film production on the East Coast (mostly New York) and on the West Coast (mostly Los Angeles), not to mention regional cinema outside urban centers” (1999: 3). The performance of multiple styles in the creation of personalized productions within the cultural scenes informed the American independent cinema, a body of work that, according to King (2013: 41–51) and Staiger (2013: 15–27), has been closely connected to the DIY music culture.

“From the lowest-budget, most formally audacious or politically radical to the quirky, the offbeat, the cultish and the more conventional, the independent sector has thrived in American cinema [...] producing a body of work that stands out from the dominant Hollywood mainstream.” (King 2005: 1)

In the context of the No Wave scene and the East Village culture of the 1980s were produced the first US DIY movies screened and awarded at Festival de Cannes, Susan Seidelman's *Smithereens* (1982) and Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), widely acclaimed as American independent films.



*Within the Ruins of New York City: No Wave as a Paradigm of American Independent Cinema* by Maria Teresa Soldani on Vimeo.

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