

## Reshaping New York City: The Child's Gaze in Todd Haynes' *Wonderstruck* (2017)

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This article looks at Todd Haynes' *Wonderstruck* and explores the ways in which New York, as a cinematic city, is reshaped in the film through the eyes of children. Given the rich intertextual links that can be traced in *Wonderstruck*, the article situates the cinematic New York alluded to by the film—the city of the late 20s and the 70s—as a metropolis characterised by alienation. The child's gaze, in its unregulated and sensorial way of looking at the world, is argued to transform this image of an alienated New York into a rehumanised version of the city. Drawing on textual analysis, the article contends that New York is thus mapped, both literal and metaphorically, as a living entity and a place defined by the subjective experience of its people. In this process, the film negotiates the constructive links between urbanity and sense of place.

Keywords: *Wonderstruck*; cinematic city; child's gaze; New York; film; mapping

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## Nueva York reformulado: la mirada infantil en *Wonderstruck*, de Todd Haynes (2017)

Este artículo ofrece un análisis de *Wonderstruck. El museo de las maravillas* (Todd Haynes, 2017) y explora las formas en que Nueva York, como ciudad fílmica, se transforma en la película a través de los ojos de los niños. Dados los ricos vínculos intertextuales que se pueden rastrear en la cinta, el artículo sitúa la Nueva York a la que alude la película —las representaciones de la ciudad en el cine durante las décadas de 1920 y 1970— como una urbe dominada por la alienación de sus ciudadanos. Se argumenta que la mirada infantil, en su forma sensorial

y no regulada de mirar el mundo, transforma esta imagen de una Nueva York alienada en una versión re-humanizada de la ciudad. Por medio del análisis textual, el artículo sostiene que Nueva York está así “mapeada,” tanto literal como metafóricamente, como una ciudad viva y un lugar definido por la experiencia subjetiva de su gente. En este proceso, la película negocia los vínculos dinámicos que pueden surgir entre urbanismo y sentido de pertenencia.

Palabras clave: *Wonderstruck*. *El museo de las maravillas*; ciudad fílmica; mirada infantil; Nueva York; cine; cartografía

## I. INTRODUCTION

Near the beginning of Todd Haynes's *Wonderstruck* (2017), Rose (Millicent Simmonds), a young deaf girl from Hoboken, is reading her scrapbook on film star Lillian Mayhew (Julianne Moore), later revealed to be her mother. As she turns the pages, she seems to long for an escape from the isolated life that she endures under the authoritarian rule of her father. As she looks out of the window, she realises that her way out is just there, in front of her eyes: the city of New York. A point-of-view shot shows the city skyline, the quintessential image of this cinematic metropolis. It then dissolves into a shot of an artisanal scale model of the city, made of paper skyscrapers, that Rose has built and displayed on her desk. This sequence is already hinting at the vital role that New York will play in her story; the place where she will seek, and eventually find, a world where she belongs. Most importantly, however, it epitomises a process essential to the film: the reconfiguration of the cinematic city of New York, as embodied by the skyline, into a different city, symbolised by the scale model, through the subjectivity of a child.

Set in 1927, Rose's story is one of the two narratives that the film intercuts. The other, set fifty years later, is that of Ben (Oakes Fegley), a twelve-year-old boy from Minnesota who, after the loss of his mother, embarks on a journey to New York to find the father that he has never met. Ben, like Rose, is also deaf. The film traces the parallel journeys of the two children—the one in the 1920s shot in black and white, the one in the 1970s in colour—as they venture into New York to discover the truth of who they are: the identity of his father in the case of the boy, and the place where she belongs in the case of the girl. That both children are deaf reinforces the narrative's attentiveness to visualization.

Maybe because it is a film for children, *Wonderstruck* has been widely viewed as a minor film in Todd Haynes's career.<sup>1</sup> It has often been reviewed as a bold formal exercise lacking dramatic depth, “an ambitious doohickey impersonating a work of art” (Gleiberman 2017, n.p.). However, other critics have emphasised its appeal as a “love letter to a lost New York City” (Rooney 2017, n.p.). New York is a pivotal element in the story, as important a character as the two children are. More than that, it is a chance for Haynes to revisit the cinematic representation of the city in two different time frames—the end of the silent era in the late 20s, and the “New Hollywood” cycle in the 70s—adding a new perspective, that of children. In this article, I aim to explore the ways in which the point of view of the child reshapes the image of New York as a cinematic city. In particular, I will suggest that the child's gaze—in its unregulated, sensorial way of looking at the world—transforms an alienated conception of New York into a rehumanised, vibrant version of the city. In this move, the city acquires a sense of place—understood as the ability of a place to foster a sense of belonging, to be perceived as a unified entity—that is absent in the cinematic New York(s) quoted by the film.

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<sup>1</sup> Haynes's interest in children, however, can be traced back to the ITVS short *Dottie Gets Spanked* (1993). See Hilderbrand (2007) for an analysis of queer boyhood in the film.

The slippery boundary between the notions of “material” and “cinematic” city is an issue in any approach to the field of cinema and the city, and New York is no exception. On the contrary, this relationship is central to writings on a city that, as Jean Baudrillard puts it, “seems to have stepped right out of the movies” (1988, 56). Some approaches to the subject have started from Baudrillard’s quote in order to assert the high degree of independence that a cinematic New York has over the real city. For James Sanders, “the mythic city is far more than a mere mirror” (2003, 4); for Murray Pomerance, New York onscreen “is a kind of dream and not exactly a place, an inspiration and not exactly a polis” (2007, 3). These authors do acknowledge the material city as a necessary point of reference for its cinematic construction, but they assert that the New York of imagination is a valid and independent object of study, regardless of its ties to the actual city. More sociological approaches interpret the New York from the movies as a window onto a real city in the process of post-industrial urbanization, gentrification, and globalization (Corkin 2011; Webb 2014). In these cases, the implied relation of dependence between the material and the cinematic city becomes the focus of attention.

It is not my intention to provide an answer to such questions, whose complexity could be traced back to enduring theoretical controversies over the nature of the filmic image. Rather, this article aims to define the contours of what we mean by “New York” in the specific context of *Wonderstruck*. The point of departure for the New York of the film is the cinematic city of the 20s and 70s, not the historical city of each of these periods. It is not so much the degree of analogy between the material and the movie city that is central to this film, but the reshaping of an already cinematic city—or two, one in the 20s and the other in the 70s—into something new. Just as *Far from Heaven* (2002), in Haynes’s words, was built out of “the language of ’50s cinema, not the ’50s” (2002, n.p.) themselves, the New York of *Wonderstruck* is built out of the city from the cinema, not the city itself.

This article emphasises a sort of “meta-cinematic” process of adaptation. There are other contemporary films—from *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York* (Chris Columbus, 1992) to *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (Stephen Daldry, 2011)—that screen New York through the eyes of children, but none of them engage with the cinematic representation of the city across the history of film. The cinematic New York of *Wonderstruck* is the result of the transformation of two cities—the mechanical, modern New York of the silent period and the sleazy, gritty New York of the “New Hollywood” era—through the eyes of two children. Just as Rose’s hands turn the city’s skyline into a paper scale model, her and Ben’s gazes reshape their cinematic referents and stage new versions of the city, in which a sense of place is regained. This article traces that process. It first situates the cinematic New York of the 20s and 70s as a city driven by alienation. Then, drawing on definitions of the child’s gaze as an unregulated and embodied point of view, it explores how the film transforms New York into a rehumanised metropolis. It goes on to argue that the film maps, both literally and metaphorically, the city as a living entity, as a place

defined by the subjective experience of people. In doing so, *Wonderstruck* emerges as a discourse on the constructive links between urbanity and sense of place.

## 2. NEW YORK AS A CINEMATIC CITY

1927 is a decisive date in the history of cinema, a year that stands out both for the coming of sound to the movies—with the release of *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland)—and for the outstanding quality of the silent features still being produced (Bergstrom 2005, 163). This significance is made explicit in Haynes's film. As Rose leaves a movie theatre, where she has seen her mother's latest film, the sign at the entrance reads: "This cinema will be closed during the installation of the sound system." Other posters encourage her to "see and hear" her favourite stars and to "experience 100% all talking." It is the end of the silent period; the beginning of the film industry's transition to sound. If this historical background is meaningful in the context of the story—the movies, a refuge for Rose's isolation as a deaf child, are about to exclude her as viewer—it also situates the cinematic New York that *Wonderstruck* refers to.

Although most studios were already based in Hollywood, New York still featured in a number of films from the late silent period, not only as a setting but as a shooting location. The city was the film location for Paramount's *The Shock Punch* (Paul Sloane, 1925), Fox's *East Side, West Side* (Allan Dwan, 1927) and MGM's *The Rag Man* (Edward F. Cline, 1925), *The Cameraman* (Edward Sedgwick & Buster Keaton, 1928) and *The Crowd* (King Vidor, 1928), among others. It was also the location of various avant-garde 'city symphony' films, documentary shorts produced outside Hollywood, such as *Manhatta* (Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand, 1921), *Twenty-Four-Dollar Island* (Robert J. Flaherty, 1926) and *Skyscraper Symphony* (Robert Florey, 1929). The relative lightness of cameras, before the arrival of sound, provided filmmakers with the possibility of shooting on location with relative freedom, and this influenced the city's screen image. In the films cited above, "the silent camera offered a direct, documentary-like portrait of New York, closely attentive to its developing character" (Sanders 2003, 42). The camera could follow Buster Keaton running through the streets to meet his lover; or Jackie Coogan (as Tim Kelly in *The Rag Man*) roaming the Lower East Side in the company of his partner in the junk business (Max Davidson). More than a mere establishing shot, then, the city was an integral part of these stories. This situation would come to an end with the introduction of sound, when the need for larger equipment tied productions to shooting entirely in Hollywood studios, even though many stories were still set in New York.

As a result of production practices, then, the cinematic New York of the 20s had a distinctive look and spirit. The type of visual strategies adopted in the shooting of the city, prior to the arrival of sound, shaped its representation at the time. The camera could be placed on a construction lift or tied onto vehicles and carried around. This way, it granted access to views of the city that could not be recreated in a studio: from aerial views of New York's skyscrapers or high-angle shots of the streets and their

bustling activity to images of the city in motion from cars, buses, or trains. This was a visual approach triggered by a fascination with the city's architecture, with a changing urban landscape that was being reshaped by modernity.

The resulting cinematic city was an ambivalent metropolis, a city with two sides. The first corresponded to the "roaring," optimistic city. It portrayed a city of growth and prosperity, in which business flourished as in any other place in the country. This was a city of opportunities, where both Americans and migrants from all over the world arrived to make their mark. In other words, it was a city in motion, a city of endless possibility. At the same time, the cinematic New York of the 20s had a second side: a dehumanised, impersonal city that was cold and mechanical. Individuals were alienated by the overwhelming structure of the metropolis. As the opening credits of *East Side, West Side* proclaimed, New York was the "city of enchantment, terrifying and alluring" at the same time. No movie encapsulated this ambivalence better than King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928). This film traces the story of a man's move to New York to make a name for himself, and his subsequent disappointment when he finds himself to be one among many others attempting the same thing.<sup>2</sup> The protagonist ends up a faceless worker in a large office, all his hopes swallowed up by the impersonal metropolis. Declared by Haynes as a major referent for his film, *Wonderstruck* responds directly to *The Crowd* (Haynes and Lachman 2018, n.p.).

In *Wonderstruck's* 70s storyline, the cinematic city alluded to is drastically different. The New York that Ben experiences in his quest for his father's identity is modelled on films such as *The French Connection* (William Friedkin, 1971), *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969) and *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973), all of them influences acknowledged by director of photography Ed Lachman (Haynes and Lachman 2018, n.p.).<sup>3</sup> It is, then, the New York of the "New Hollywood" period of the late 60s and early 70s. This stage in US cinema history, often characterised as a time of "European-influenced, character-driven *auteur* American films" (Kirshner and Lewis 2019, 4), saw a shift in many studio production practices, including a preference for location shooting. As in the late silent period, the lighter cameras—this time with sound—and processing equipment made shooting on location more feasible and cheaper than ever. This and other factors—the influence of the *Nouvelle Vague's* urban landscapes, the biographical ties of certain filmmakers with the city, the municipal policies in support of the film industry promoted by Mayor John Lindsay—meant the streets of New York became a prime movie location.

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<sup>2</sup> According to James Sanders, the film "captures the excitement and sense of possibility" (2003, 11) of the city, the dream of prosperity and greatness that draws the character to it. At the same time, however, the film also portrays the other side of the city; a sad, pessimistic vision of it.

<sup>3</sup> Other New York-set films from this cycle are Alan J. Pakula's *Klute* (1971), Sidney Lumet's *Serpico* (1973) and *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), together with Blaxploitation titles such as *Superfly* (Gordon Parks Jr., 1972) and *Black Caesar* (Larry Cohen, 1973).

The New York that features in these films is the scenario for narratives of crime, prostitution and degradation. The optimistic and prosperous side of the city has disappeared, or it is inaccessible to the characters. Young men venture into New York to make a fortune as hustlers but end up living in squats (*Midnight Cowboy*). Cops attempt to intercept a heroin deal in a city permeated by abuse and corruption (*The French Connection*). Youngsters get involved with the mafia and its business in a lawless Little Italy (*Mean Streets*). These are stories of moral decay, where the way out is almost invariably the death of one of the main characters—or their flight from the city before it is too late. Visually, this New York is filmed so as to emphasise a sense of seediness and alienation. Telephoto lenses are used to submerge the characters in the anonymous crowds. Lighting and colour are deployed to achieve a grainy texture and a muted palette, “as if high-quality light were in short supply in the city” (Rotella 2002, 113), thus intensifying the gritty look of realism. In a similar vein, camera movements are often raw, cuts are abrupt and frequent, and skewed framing dominates the visual repertoire.

Some critics, for example Pauline Kael, argue that these films “provided a permanent record of the city in breakdown” (1971, 114); that there was a close relationship between the life on the screen and the life of New York at the time. Others consider the cinematic city “a dark and alienated vision of the real city” (Sanders 2003, 392), one that restaged rather than captured the material New York. Regardless of the approach, however, they all agree on describing the cinematic New York of the 70s as a city in crisis; a sordid and ugly place, unsafe both for its inhabitants and its visitors. It was a city that fostered isolation instead of connection. In this sense, although 70s New York is far removed from the modernist city of the 20s, they are both linked by a shared sense of alienation.

### 3. THE NEW YORK(S) OF *WONDERSTRUCK*: THROUGH THE EYES OF CHILDREN

Coming from New Jersey and Gunflint Lake, respectively, Rose and Ben are strangers to New York when they first step into the city. This “arrival to the city” trope, Charlotte Brunsdon argues, is common to a wide variety of films in which the city plays a key role, as it serves to stage the cinematic city of that particular movie. The articulation of this cinematic city, she adds, depends on factors such as “the genre of the film, the character of the traveller, the nature of the journey or point of origin, and, finally, the elements of the city to which our attention is first drawn cinematographically in that moment of arrival” (Brunsdon 2012, 210). In *Wonderstruck*, Rose’s and Ben’s arrivals in New York are shaped by their condition as outsiders, and most importantly, as children. As outsiders, they are not familiar with the rhythms and realities of the big city. As children, they are presumed to represent a different way of looking, of experiencing the world in their own particular way.

Rose’s arrival in New York can be compared with that of John Sims (James Murray) in King Vidor’s *The Crowd*. Both characters get to the city on a ferry, from whose decks they can already see the magnificence of the metropolis as embodied by its skyline. In the

silent film, the city is presented in a montage sequence that starts with the character's arrival and ends in the office where he works. In between, a series of high-angle long shots show crowds of people walking on the sidewalks, cars flooding the streets, trains coming and going from a station. These images, dissolving into each other, are intertwined with aerial views of stunning skyscrapers and variously sized boats. This is a city seen from above, where the focus is on buildings and forms of transport. Point of view shots convey people as mere spots among the crowds, insignificant, overwhelmed by the city's giant structures. Even though the quick editing pattern implies a sense of dynamism, the final shot of the sequence counteracts this. John is seen as one among many faceless workers in a large office while a tragic tune plays on the soundtrack. The city that he is going to experience reveals itself as mechanical, static, and alienating.

This impersonal, dehumanised New York is not the one that Rose discovers when she steps out of her ferry. Although the elements in the landscape are the same—the skyscrapers, the cars on the streets, the crowds of people—the way these are presented, through her point of view, shifts our perception of the cinematic city. As she ventures into the streets, the camera frames her in shallow-focused eye-level shots, following her walking through smooth camera movements and elegant cuts. While she is constantly surrounded by people, she stands out from the crowd at the same time as she is immersed in the life of the city. The sequence then shifts to her own perspective. In a series of point of view shots, played subtly in slow motion, we see how she gazes at the small details that she comes across: the legs and stockings of a woman passing by, the delicate hands of a shoe shiner polishing a client's boots, the soft texture of a stroller's coat, the movements of a bell rung by a man holding a "God bless you" sign. Even though she also looks at the giant skyscrapers surrounding her, these are no more important than the smaller details. Her perspective moves freely from one image to the other, her subjectivity emphasised by shifts in focus within the frame and the dream-like quality of the soundtrack.

Rose's point of view exemplifies Karen Lury's ideas on the child's gaze. Drawing on Gaston Bachelard's notion of "seeing," Lury describes the child's gaze as "unregulated, timeless and ahistorical," implying "fascination and a sense in which effects (what is seen) are closer to affect (what is felt)." While adults' looking is directed, purposeful, children have the ability to "wonder at fireworks in the night" or "follow ants and beetles as they labour in the grass" (2005, 208). Through Rose's aimless, unregulated perspective, our attention is drawn to the smallest details of New York's daily life, from a bell ringing to a shoe shiner at work. What Rose sees, as Lury suggests, is closely connected to what she—and consequently viewers—feel while she is looking: despite her deafness, she seems to be experiencing the city with all her senses.

Rose's cinematic city emerges as a living entity. Her New York is a city seen and felt from within. It is what Charlotte Brunson defines as a "biographical" city, "a city understood from the point of view of life lived in it" (2007, 13). The anonymous, alienated people of *The Crowd* here become human beings devoted to their activities. Aerial views



of buildings and skyscrapers are complemented by extreme close-ups of bells, coats and boots. Rose's point of view transforms the impersonal, mechanical metropolis of Vidor's film into a rehumanised city, one in which the others and herself belong. That is why Rose, as the last sequence of the film reveals, will stay in New York and start a new life there: in this human, welcoming city, she will found a school for deaf children, learn sign language and eventually find a job at the Museum of Natural History.

In the 70s storyline, Ben arrives in New York by coach, in the middle of the night. Unlike Rose, what he gets to see first is not the emblematic view of the city skyline, symbol of the modernist New York of the 20s, but the seediness of Port Authority bus terminal. While Rose's experience of the city is staged as soon as she enters it, Ben's is preceded by the night he spends at the station. As he steps off the coach, he is welcomed by floors full of garbage, graffitied walls, and a mixture of vagabonds and travellers spread around the seats. A yellowish, artificial light fills the place and imbues it with the sordid atmosphere of 70s cinematic New York. Ben is mostly framed in long shots as he wanders through this run-down landscape. The visuals emphasise his helplessness in a place unknown to him. The boy eventually lies down in an empty corner and falls asleep.

Ben's experience of the city—the arrival sequence *per se*—is presented once he wakes up the next morning, leaves the station and is confronted by the streets of New York for the first time. As he opens the exit door, the background noises from the bus terminal are replaced by an R&B hit of the time, Esther Phillips' "All the Way Down," played non-diegetically. This shift in the soundtrack, which sets the 70s mood, also brings viewers closer to Ben's subjective state, to the limits of his perception as a deaf child. A similar move underpins Haynes's visual approach to the moment. Played entirely in slow motion, the sequence consists of a series of point-of-view shots of those elements in the city that catch Ben's attention. His gaze roams around freely. His focus, as might be expected of a child from a small village in Minnesota, is on the African Americans he sees. The camera frames, in close-up and shallow focus, the bare back of a woman passing by, Afro haircuts and a woman's sweaty skin. The child seems equally fascinated by the intense colours of people's clothes, the shirts with geometric patterns, golden tops and vivid dresses. Ben's subjectivity is intensified by the flowing camera movements and constant shifts in focus within a frame.

Ben's arrival sequence echoes that of Joe (Jon Voight) in *Midnight Cowboy*. Like Ben, Texan cowboy Joe Buck is an outsider that arrives in the city by bus, after crossing half of the country. This time, however, his first encounter with the streets of New York takes place in the affluent district of 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. This staging of the city lacks the sensorial element of Ben's gaze. Point-of-view shots of wealthy women are combined with tracking shots of Joe as he follows these women and tries to approach them. He does focus on bodies and clothes, but his look is purposeful; it objectifies what Joe sees and reduces it to a monetary interest. *Midnight Cowboy* deploys the "arrival to the city" trope to present New York as a mere source of economic profit.

*Wonderstruck* opts for a textural approach instead. Different conceptualizations of the child's gaze envision it as an embodied look with a specific emphasis on the senses. Karen Lury highlights the "importance of the encounters between the body of the child and its environment" (Lury 2010, 7); while Deborah Martin draws attention to the need to "translate the child's sensorium and gaze into the filmic medium" (Martin 2019, 24). They both hint at the key role the senses play in children's experience of the world, a condition expressed in film through an embodied point of view. In that sense, it is Emma Wilson who most thoroughly theorises this haptic, tactile child's gaze. Drawing on Laura Marks's ideas on the hapticity of the image, Wilson explores the aesthetic devices that can be deployed to evoke the sensory experience of childhood (2005). A focus on texture and touch, an emphasis on clothing, or the bodily proximity of the characters, in her view, add this sensorial element to the articulation of the child's gaze in film.

Tactility is indeed central to Ben's perception of New York in his arrival sequence. The feeling that a sensorial attention to detail prompts his point of view is underpinned by the slow-motion technique—resulting in a sense of smoothness to people's movement—in combination with the grainy look of the image. In this context, the child lingers on many of the elements identified by Wilson as integral to the embodied gaze: bodies, skin, clothing and colours, all of them emphasised in close-up. Ben perceives the city as an amalgam of textures, as a combination of visual impressions that evoke a sense of touch. As was also the case with Rose, he seems to be feeling the city rather than just seeing it. The cinematic city resulting from this embodied look is therefore a living entity, a vibrant place in which lots of things seem to be happening at the same time. Its multi-ethnicity, its blend of different cultures and skin colours is from Ben's perspective a source of richness and amazement. This does not mean that 70s New York is not an unsafe place for a child to be; in fact, Ben is robbed at the end of the scene and nobody comes to help him after his wallet is stolen. But still, in spite of the decadent social reality represented, Ben's eyes find the beauty within this troubled period of the city. In a later scene in which Ben walks through the streets of Harlem, when he has already been robbed, the child's point of view retains a sense of fascination for what he encounters.

As in the case of the 70s cinematic city that the film references—that of *The French Connection*, *Midnight Cowboy* and *Mean Streets*—the New York of *Wonderstruck* is a gritty place, shot in grainy vibrant colours and filled with dirt and decay. But this "rotten" city, seen from Ben's point of view, no longer provokes condemnation, as it did during the New Hollywood period. It is now a source of fascination. The child's gaze transforms the sleaze into the marvellous, his perspective highlights the beauty of that dirty, messy New York in crisis. The narrative also turns the city into a hopeful place, where Ben finds the family that he thought he would never find. A series of clues lead him to Kincaid Books, the bookshop where he meets Rose, now an old woman. The 60-year-old Rose (Julianne Moore) reveals to him the identity of his father, who was her son. He was a designer for the Museum of Natural History and met Ben's mum doing field work in Gunflint Lake. He died soon after. Rose and Ben, grandmother and grandson,

are thus reunited at the end of the film. New York in *Wonderstruck* thus becomes a rehumanised, fascinating city in which both find the place where they belong.

#### 4. MAPPING NEW YORK

The child's gaze recaptures a sense of place that was absent in the cinematic New York of both the 20s and 70s. The city is perceived by Rose and by Ben as a living entity, felt in its sensorial details and textures. Fredric Jameson, drawing on the work of Kevin Lynch, identifies this process of recovery as the "disalienation" of the city, and finds the act of mapping essential to it (1991, 51). Mapping involves representing discrete spaces as an "urban totality," a space that dwellers can identify and engage with. But this process exceeds traditional cartography. Teresa Castro writes:

In recent years, the idea of 'mapping' [...] is understood to cover much more than the conventional techniques and operations deployed in order to produce traditional cartographic objects. In this new critical context, mapping refers to a multitude of processes, from the cognitive operations implied in the structuring of any kind of spatial knowledge to the discursive implications of a particular visual regime (2010, 144).

According to this view, as a spatial artform capable of creating visual images of the world, film is also a form of mapping. Films can function as maps inasmuch as they attempt to represent space in a comprehensive way. *Wonderstruck* can be said to map the city metaphorically through the point of view of the child. The New York that emerges from this mapping is a rehumanised metropolis and finds its essence in the lives and emotions it contains rather than in its physical, material structure.

This shift in approach seems particularly apt in relation to the ending of the film, which is set at the Panorama in the Queens Museum. The Panorama of the City of New York, a room-sized scale model of the city originally built for the 1964 New York World's Fair, is chosen as the setting for Rose and Ben's final reunion. Rose is said to have been involved in its construction; she now works as curator at the Museum. In the scene, Ben reads the story of his father—written by Rose in a notebook—as the camera moves around the Panorama, locating the different spaces mentioned in the narration. Some buildings hide little mementos, secretly placed there by Rose, of his father's life. "This Panorama is not just a model of New York City," she warns Ben, "it is also the story of your father's life."

The choice to include the Panorama at this point, when the thread linking the two characters is finally revealed, resonates with the argument that Rose and Ben recover a sense of belonging to the city. New York is visualised as a unified whole; it is formed by a series of structures—e.g. buildings, bridges—that can be made into a coherent, consistent ensemble. The way the city is mapped in the scene highlights the status of New York as a living entity, a place that is felt rather than seen. Rose's words, in her understanding of the map as a fusion of the city with the lives lived in it, are evocative of

what Guy Debord termed “psycho-geography”: the idea that locations contain affective elements and emotions beyond their purely geographical reality (1981, 5).

The memories hidden by Rose within the scale-model of the city—a picture of Ben’s father as a baby behind the house where he was born, a drawing made by Ben behind the Museum of Natural History—bring back the idea that New York is defined by the subjective experience of the characters. The various sites acquire meaning from the characters’ experiences of them. It is, again, the human element that prevails over the structure of the metropolis. Visually, the idea is encapsulated in the shots of Ben and Rose walking through the scale version of the city. The contrast between the small buildings and the characters’ feet, dominating the frame, evocatively summarises human importance to the film’s cinematic New York.

Two different mapping practices operate in *Wonderstruck* at the same time. While the child’s gaze, in a metaphorical sense, maps the cinematic city of New York, this last sequence of the film, at the Panorama, maps the city in a literal way. Both mapping processes—metaphorical and literal—lead to the same conclusions. Through the child’s gaze, the film subverts the values associated with the earlier cinematic New York(s) it refers to, transforming architectures into life. This form of metaphorically mapping the city coincides with the real mapping of the Panorama, where the links between place and emotion similarly shape the city as a living entity. New York is thus configured as a “disalienated,” rehumanised city defined by subjective experience.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Owain Jones, in an analysis of the child’s gaze in relation to the rural idyll trope, explores how children are often used in rural films as tools to encapsulate anti-urban discourses (2007). He argues that while in rural settings “attachment of place, nature and landscape, and the depth of belonging in community gives you something,” in urban areas “all that is swept away by the mobility and anonymity of life” (Jones 2007, 192). His words hint at the belief, popular in both film and literature, that urban conditions of modernity invariably lead to a sense of alienation among citizens. *Wonderstruck*, with its focus on children in the urban world, can be seen to counteract this ideological notion. The child perception of the urban is not used to criticise the anonymity associated with life in the metropolis. On the contrary, the film articulates a pro-urban discourse which views the city in a positive light. Urbanity is portrayed as representing a solution to the children’s problems instead of causing their alienation. In other words, it is the city, and not a rural landscape, that provides them with a sense of belonging. *Wonderstruck*, reshaping a tradition that viewed the urban as an alienating force, reminds us that cities—New York in particular—are fascinating places where one *can* in fact find what one is looking for.<sup>4</sup>

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