

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Film</b>
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Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1989 Mar 07
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	New York Stories, Scorsese, Martin, 1989

BY AMY TAUBIN

**NEW YORK STORIES.** Produced by Robert Greenhut. Released by Touchstone. **Life Lessons.** Directed by Martin Scorsese. Written by Richard Price. Produced by Barbara DeFina. **Life Without Zoo.** Directed by Francis Coppola. Written by Coppola and Sofia Coppola. Produced by Fred Roos and Fred Fuchs. **Oedipus Wrecks.** Directed and written by Woody Allen. Produced by Robert Greenhut. At Cinema I.

**DREAM A LITTLE DREAM.** Directed by Marc Rocco. Written by Rocco, Daniel Jay Franklin, and D. E. Eisenberg. Produced by Eisenberg and Rocco. A Lightning Pictures production. Released by Vestron, opening March 3.

**I**nspired by the French *Paris vu par...* and the Italian *Boccaccio 70*, three auteur heavy hitters—Martin Scorsese, Francis Coppola, and Woody Allen—have made short comedy films about “this hell of a town.” Predictably uneven, *New York Stories* opens with a world beater (the Scorsese section), follows with a mess (the Coppola), and concludes with a riotous retread of a sour one-liner (the Allen)—it actually made me sick with laughter. The fact that all three are set in high-rent districts is probably more than coincidental, but I doubt that a conscious desire to preserve the dramatic unities figured in the massive overdetermination.

Scorsese’s “Life Lessons” starts out dreamy and hyperbolic and, over the course of 45-plus minutes, milks the incongruities of these two tonalities for wildly poignant, edge-of-hysteria humor. To the tugging organ strains of Procol Harum (“Whiter Shade of Pale”), a succession of iris shots alternately tunnels toward or opens out from ludicrously clichéd images of an artist’s studio—paint-smearred palette, encrusted brushes casually arranged like flowers in a tin can, half-empty brandy bottle. If not for the muted luminescence of the cinematography (Nestor Almendros), we’d be in George Kuchar-land. (And we are, to the extent that the act of painting is revealed as exuberantly scatological.) But the quality of the filmed image speaks a more controlled and self-conscious language of fetishism—very *Vertigoesque*. (And where has there been a more marked reference to the iris than in that film’s Hitchcock/Bass title sequence?)

Strikingly archaic, the iris not only isolates a detail from a broad visual field, it also calls attention to the act of seeing (in the way a conventional close-up would not). Which is appropriate, since the sub-

jects of this seemingly light-touch throw-away are nothing less than how painting and film are meshed in visual fetishism, and, to a lesser degree, how the interplay of ’50s pictures (still and moving) yielded the ’80s art world.

Bumbling, bearish Lionel Dobie (Nick Nolte) probably attained manhood in the Cedar Bar, but had to wait 30 years for Neo-Expressionism to propel him to art world glory. (He’s a kind of Julian Schnabel, but with a past.) Protected by limited intelligence and an excess of physical energy, he hasn’t a clue—as he bounds around his studio, hurling paint and basketballs with equal abandon to rhythms of vintage Bob Dylan and Puccini’s *Turandot*—that the ego-obliterating risk-taking of Abstract Expressionism has ossified into a cult of personality. And that

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the second time around, the myth of authenticity repeats itself as farce. Buoyed by his self-image as life force incarnate and by the recent infusion of big bucks, he’s engaged in an affair with a polished Golden Delicious apple of young womanhood, Paulette (Rosanna Arquette).

*Life Lessons* begins with the relationship ended but not yet over. Paulette (no surname!), who wants Dobie to recognize her for her painting, not her sexuality, has decided to move out. Her refusal of his attentions transforms his infatuation into full-blown obsession. Imagining himself still in control of the situation, Dobie magnanimously offers to let her stay on rent free and free of her sexual obligations. Of course, his calculations fall prey to his uncontrollable emotions, especially when she brings a series of young usurpers (Steve Buscemi and Jesse Borrego) into the picture. The comedy is in the split between mind and gut, and Nolte plays it with rare delicacy and wit. He can’t keep himself from barging into her bedroom on the pretext of rescuing misplaced brushes and basketballs flung out of bounds. Standing dazedly at the foot of her bed, he fixates (iris in) on her bracelet-adorned ankle. (He: “I had this impulse... I wanted to kiss your foot. It’s nothing personal.”)

Dobie’s the kind of guy who flirts with humiliation but stops short of suicide (or murder), and the film’s most startling

scene shows us exactly where that line is drawn. It’s his massive sense of self-preservation that makes Dobie a prolific artist and a fun guy to have around—at a distance. The reason that “Life Lessons” is a comedy of obsession (rather than a tragedy like *Vertigo*) is that we know from the beginning that this affair is far from a once-in-a-lifetime thing. The artist with “fire-power” can risk (psychic) castration because there’ll always be another adoring art student in whom he can restore his damaged cock.

But what of the young artist herself? In order to function as an object of desire, a fantasy projection, she must remain a glowing enigma, the pure embodiment of denial. Which is a pity. Because if this film is really about what art is at the end of the 20th century (as opposed to an amusing depiction of male megalomania), then surely the reasons she cannot succeed as an artist are as interesting as the reasons he can. The script makes a few superficial gestures in this direction, but, for the most part, her failure is written off as lack of talent (whatever that may be). I’m not saying that it’s Scorsese’s responsibility to give her an equal share (and especially not in a 45-minute film), only that “Life Lessons” would seem even richer if it were set in a film culture that acknowledged sexual dialectics.

This omission is even more an issue in Woody Allen’s “Oedipus Wrecks,” the ne plus ultra of Jewish Mother jokes. Returning to the center of his own picture (tenderly lit by Sven Nykvist), Allen plays Sheldon Mills, né Millstein, a 50-year-old attorney at a very conservative (read WASP) firm, engaged to a radiantly Rubenesque Mia Farrow, but still agonizingly in the grip of his overprotective, overcritical, relentlessly infantilizing Ma. Couched extremely skillfully at the edge of fantasy (with a first scene set in a psychoanalytic session), the film grants Mills-Millstein the fulfillment of his deepest wish—his mother disappears—and then plunges him into his worst nightmare. She returns as a giant projection floating above the city—a cross between Dreyer’s head “vampyr” and the beneficent, high-flying grandmother of De Sica’s *Miracle in Milan*—and exposing the secret of his origins, as well as his bed-wetting proclivities, to an attentive

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audience of eight million. Although Allen is dazzlingly and ruthlessly on the mark when he defines her image literally as his projection, he shows us nothing about either character that we haven't seen before. But the film becomes mildly unsettling when, with a flourish of a chicken leg, Allen takes a 180-degree turn from what seemed like unvarnished autobiography. What? Can midlife crisis be really resolved by "the girl just like the girl that married dear old Dad"? Should we keep our eye on Page Six?

Imagine a whimsical tale about a slightly older (say 11-years-old), much richer Eloise, who lives alone in the Sherry-Netherland, and gets her kicks bestowing Hershey's Kisses on grateful homeless people and going to costume balls thrown by even richer preteens in the Metropolitan Museum. In the end, she leaves New York to be reunited with Mom and Dad in the shadow of the Acropolis. Incongruously shot like a Michelob commercial (by Vittorio Storaro, who was probably only following the boss's orders), it was directed by Francis Coppola from a script cowritten with his daughter Sofia. I don't want to think about their relationship.