

# Cracks in the Urban Frame

## The Visual Politics of 9/11

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There is something about New York which made the September 11 attack on the twin towers both tragic and exhilarating for large numbers of people right across the globe. As Mike Davis says, the attack was “organized epic horror cinema with meticulous attention to mise-en-scène. The hijacked planes were aimed to impact precisely at the vulnerable border between fantasy and reality” (2002: 5). Like the unfolding of a classic action film with its climaxes and pauses, revenge and retribution, 9/11 is an event that offers many interpretations, each trying to understand it from different perspectives and frames. I enter the seamless labyrinth of diverse interpretations with some reflections on the relationship between architecture and cinema, photography and urban space to suggest that the politics of ‘mechanical reproduction’ over the course of the last century played a decisive role in setting up New York City as a stage for the full play of catastrophic action.<sup>1</sup>

Spectators who physically witnessed the attack on the twin towers saw the sky as a big screen where life had surpassed fiction. The cinematic spell was broken only by the smell of smoke. The aftermath of the attack is perhaps the most photographed disaster in history, communicated as an image even for the residents of the city. The aesthetics of wonder and power that usually shape the panoramic skyline of Manhattan suddenly transmuted into a tragic narrative with the city emerging as a ‘bruised victim’. The reproduction of the disaster through the media and the visual imagination associated with it played a crucial role in the mobilization of world opinion for the ‘War against Terror’. The ideological underpinnings and politics of New York’s visual journey over the last century of image technology need to be situated within the scramble to understand 9/11’s full impact on the world today.

### **Mechanical Reproduction & the Making of an Icon City**

When crisis befalls a global city like New York, its subsequent representations deal with the legacy that shapes the city’s iconicity. New York’s iconicity, as we all know, is mediated primarily through the powerful form of the visual media: photographs, film, television, and the internet. In postcards and stamps, in photographs and paintings, in spy thrillers and films, and of course through global television, New York has emerged as the most familiar, exciting and powerful city of the Western world. The skyline has been a major backdrop for innumerable print and television advertisements the world over. It has been used extensively



in popular Bombay film song sequences, MTV music videos, and as the opening montage for several American television shows. The city has also circulated through books, fashion magazines, design catalogues, comics and video games, inhabiting the world of our everyday lives. There is really no other city that has been mechanically reproduced through all forms of media so frequently. One of the reasons for the overwhelming global response to the September 11 events was the city's central place as an image within the realm of popular culture. Of all the American cities, there is little doubt that New York provides the architectural grandeur best suited for a visual cartography. The images produced of the city range from picturesque city paintings and photos to modernist poems celebrating the skyscraper as the emblematic symbol of modernity. The camera's gaze has navigated the city's dense labyrinth, moving up and down, horizontally and vertically, providing us as spectators the chance to experience thrill and excitement.

On September 11, the most photographed city became a stage that drew us in as spectators to both watch the drama of action and crisis as well as bemoan the loss of its towers. In the aftermath of the attack, it is the familiarity with the city's topography that aided in the sudden transformation of a powerful visual city into that of a 'victim city'. The towers that once indicated wealth and domination now seemed vulnerable and helpless. Tragedy in the case of New York was seen as universal, spectacular and all consuming. The experience of tragedy therefore needed to be repeated, for only repetition of an already

saturated image in its moment of destruction could have the desired effect. Through television and the Internet, people across the world saw the Twin Towers crashing. The subsequent retaliation and production of a revenge narrative unfurled through the cartographic imagination of a bruised city, justifying the 'War against Terror'. All other spaces of destruction were obliterated. When the multibillion dollar deadly cargo fell on Afghanistan, the cameras were crucially absent.

What does it mean when New York is associated with the power of the United States? After all, the attack on the Pentagon in Washington, DC, hardly generated the kind of immediate screen response we saw after the towers were attacked. Given the wide circulation and dissemination of the city, it is not surprising that millions identified with the tragedy almost instantly. Suddenly the attack on the towers seemed to have surpassed all other catastrophes as the Western world consolidated itself around this single image of the towers in flames. The cinematic appeal of the towers under attack had acquired the quality of an independent genre, circulating and creating meaning in the midst of a massive coalition of the so called 'civilized world' in their 'War against Terrorism'. The historical representation of New York as a panoramic image and as an autonomous site of utopian imagination was mobilized as the legacy that was under attack. This transformation and destruction of the New York skyline, both in reality and in cinematic practice raises important questions for the future. Clearly the visual power of 9/11 was different from any other catastrophic event. Director Robert Altman blamed Hollywood for 9/11, suggesting that the idea itself was first created in the movies. Jean Baudrillard's prophecy about 9/11 as the coming together of two elements of mass fascination – terrorism and the cinema – seems singularly appropriate (2002: 413). And yet what makes the spectacle unique is the visual play of architectural creation and destruction.

### **Cinema, Architecture & Urban Space**

Cities are produced through representations. The spatial practice of negotiating the topography of urban space takes a unique form in the realm of the visual. Film takes the lead in the art of visual cartography. The urban landscape is a space that exists both physically and through its filmic incarnations. Our sense of familiarity, of recognizing the marks of a place can be produced both by the physical street, as also by its reproduction on screen. As Guiliana Bruno says, "The genealogical architectonics of film is the aesthetics of the tourist practice of spatial consumption. As in all forms of journey, space is filmically consumed as a vast commodity. In film, architectural space becomes framed for view and offers itself for consumption as travelled space that is available for further travelling. Attracted to vistas, the spectator turns into a visitor. The film 'viewer' is a practitioner of viewing space – a tourist" (2002: 62).

The cinematic eye usually encounters symbolic and recognizable sites that help situate any city geographically. The towers as the emblematic sign of New York embody the architectural aesthetics of the skyscraper, standing above the entire city. Through the cinematic gaze, the towers emerge as the ubiquitous visual trope and display item signifying the urban imagination of New York. America is framed via the city – a semiotics of capital, globalization, architecture and urban space. Bruno's assertion about the relationship



of film to architecture can be most vividly seen in the reproduction of New York as the spectator/tourist's gaze travels the city's iconography, assimilating and recognizing its powerful place in the world.

While New York may be seen as a city that envelops all the five boroughs, it is Manhattan that holds the key to its power and magic. This is a city with a powerful financial centre, a space of wild and dramatic architectural extravaganza, a unique organization of streets and avenues, and a centre for global fashion, arts, theatre and film. The French historian Bernard Fay described New York as "a city of rectangles, harsh and brilliant, the centre of an intense life which it sends out in all directions" (cited in Abbott, 1973). Some have called it a modern city, analogous to the mythical phoenix. This image of power and brilliance was captured vividly in many of the photographs taken by Berenice Abbott in the 1920s and 30s. Subsequently, many photographers created iconic images of the city, playing with the jagged light and shadow texture of the myriad buildings piercing into the sky, evoking both power and the drive for domination in the world. The iconicity of the photographic image of New York was only enhanced by the moving image.

It was the Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein who first saw the relationship between Manhattan's unique grid and the experience of moving through space and time in film. Manhattan's spatial organization lends itself to a range of perspectives that has enabled the city to emerge throughout the twentieth century as the quintessential cinematic city. The

low angle view displaying the wealth and power of the financial district, the high angle view from the former twin towers and the Empire State building, the aerial perspective landscaping the density and texture of the city and the tracking across streets – all these techniques have been used to generate a series of iconic images of the city and its magical skyline. Jean-Paul Sartre reflected on this unique relationship of the cinema to urban architecture: “When we were twenty, we heard about the skyscrapers. We discovered them with amazement in the movies. They were the architecture of the future, just as the cinema was the art of the future” (cited in Sanders, 2001: 105).

Like in an urban trance of a futuristic panorama, the skyscraper resides both in the real and the ‘mythic city’ of cinema. Hollywood’s fascination for urban topography has always been a powerful force with the ‘idea’ of the American city emanating primarily from the movies. For Baudrillard, the American city is like a space out of the movies. Its secret can be grasped only if we move outward from the screen to the city and not from the city to the screen. Baudrillard’s reflections hold true particularly for New York whose status as a ‘world city’ has been mounted most powerfully via cinema.

James Sanders, in his book *Celluloid Skyline*, suggests that the cinematic New York transcends its purely geographic and economic status and turns into a locus of image, style, memory and dreams. Sanders takes us through a journey of well-known Hollywood films to reveal the imagined space of New York in the filmed image. In *Skyscraper Souls*, made in 1932, we see the era’s fascination and apprehension of tall buildings as the city becomes the site for an exploration of “heroic achievement and frenzied speculation” (2001: 123). In the film, the character David Dwight says the skyscraper “goes halfway to hell, and right up to heaven, and its beautiful!” In the *Fountainhead*, released in 1949, the modernist architecture of the post-war period is deployed to aggressively push the individualistic ideology of its plot. Based on Ayn Rand’s novel and also screen written by her, *Fountainhead* uses the city as a dynamic and dominating presence. The view of the skyline is placed behind all the sequences of the movie’s interiors (Sanders, 2001: 128).

In film after film, Sanders reveals Hollywood’s fascination for New York and its mix of public and private spaces. The aesthetics of the window looking out at a concrete ensemble was spectacularized in cinema through unusual backdrops. The lights glinting across the city at night creating a shimmer whose magic is available in frozen images of postcards and posters, T-shirts and mugs, is now perhaps generic, but the familiarity of the image is related to the prolific reproduction of a city through a range of perspectives and approaches. The attraction to this city of magic has been the result of a spectacular photographic/cinematic imagination that has fed back into the reinvention and rejuvenation of the city’s architecture. Despite a number of films that look at its darker side, it is the grandeur of the skyline and the dynamic presence of its architectural grid that has been most popularly established in numerous ways through films. The panoramic vision, as some have suggested, “creates a pleasure rooted in the senses”. The establishing shot of innumerable films places the skyline to locate the narrative world. Sanders sees the skyline view as a proscenium, like a “metaphoric arch” that frames the story world of many films, offering the spectator both a reassuring familiarity and an unpredictable experience. The skyline symbolizes wealth and power, adventure and fantasy. It operates like a “cinematic passport,

a rite of passage that may last only a few moments but sets us up for the civic hyper-reality that lies in store for the next two hours" (Sanders,2001: 91).

There is little doubt that the symbolic power of the attack on the twin towers was understood clearly by those who masterminded the operation. But the image of the towers in flames was equally important for the vengeful mobilization of a retaliatory attack by the US government. Baudrillard's bleak prognosis of the media may seem overstretched in a different situation, but in the context of the 9/11 attack, the media became part of the event and the terror, playing a role on both sides. The air strikes were intended to shame a nation that had sought to humiliate others, a defiant act whose symbolic value lay precisely in the unfolding of a duel for the world to watch simultaneously. The power of the event lies in its symbolic value, since ordinary violence can be banal (Baudrillard, 2002: 412). The staging of this event and the massive response it received all over the world could hardly have been possible without the visual iconicity of New York. It is the intersection of cinema, architecture, photography and urban space that prepared the ground for the spectacle of 9/11. The magic of Manhattan systematically constructed by technologies of vision became the symbolic site for a catastrophic event that will continue to unfold in the years to come.

### The Catastrophic Event Today

What does it mean to deal with a catastrophic event after the arrival of the Internet and global television? 9/11 was the first catastrophic event watched by millions across the world simultaneously. It was also an event that was spectacularly televised and shown as it was happening. An organized attack on the towers, clearly viewed and shot by several television channels, distributed across the internet, spread over postcards for tourists and captured in innumerable art exhibits, surely this is already the most mediatized event in the history of catastrophic events. Monumentalized almost immediately, 9/11 has now become a new commodity, inscribed on T-shirts, emblems, postcards, tea mugs, bags and posters. "We shall not forget" stares at you from a series of postcards of Ground Zero being sold across the United States for ten times the amount one usually pays for a postcard. The image is now certainly part of the event as thousands of photographers and amateurs reproduce the site of disaster.

Just a few weeks after 9/11, an exhibition titled *Here is New York, Images from the Frontline of History: A Democracy of Photographs* opened in New York. Comprising of 7,000 photographs, the exhibition has now been seen by more than 1.5 million people across the world, making it the largest archive of its kind and the most looked at exhibition of our time. A book along with the exhibition and television reporting on the exhibition are now part of this steady journey of the exhibition across the world. A digital archive of the



exhibition has logged more than one million hits. A video and oral history of the exhibition has also been travelling. There are other initiatives in place as well, such as the ebay (commercial website) posting of a 9/11 CD-Rom that says, "This archive will give you the experience of having been at ground zero. It's an experience you will not forget". As the absent towers now showcased in their moment of destruction circulate with blinding speed across the world, we need to take stock of what this means for the future.

"The externalization and objectification of memory, and the infinite repeatability of the event", says Brian Masumi, "distances cause from effect. The event floats in media suspended animation, an effect without a cause, or with a vague clichéd tone" (1993: 26). As the most photographed event becomes monumentalized and commodified in our everyday lives, leaving little room for reflection, the politics of remembering becomes a dubious project. The many sub-narratives that make up the context of 9/11 are consistently marginalized in favour of an institutionalized master-narrative that produces the concept of an 'American People' in a war against 'evil'. The obsession with this memory in our contemporary times is spectacularly mediated through visual technologies. As photographs and art, film and video travel far and wide, we lose touch with the how and the why of the event. Instead, the face of tragedy and death staring at us from the world's most familiar city becomes the new instrument for furthering the iconicity of Manhattan in the making and unmaking of the world today. "The globalization of fear", says Mike Davis, "becomes a self fulfilling prophecy... Terror has become the steroid of Empire. And Imperialism is again politically correct" (2002: 18). The persistence of New York's imaginary production through architecture, film and photography has played no small role in the creation of an 'invincible power'. And the subsequent persistence of 9/11 as an unforgettable image functions like a steroid, a sign moving in pure suspension, aiding the political journey of American exceptionalism in the world today.

In the first weeks of the recent war in Iraq, American exceptionalism inaugurated a new genre of war spectacle. Both the CNN and the BBC were engaged in an information war, a play with words, images and music intended to shape world opinion in favour of the attack on Iraq. The BBC created a montage of war images with background effect music, as if to draw us into the latest Hollywood action film. The montage combined images of the weapons used, the latest so-called precision technology, men in tanks, orange clouds over Baghdad, as the bombs fell. This iconography is familiar. It continues to remind us of the powerful ways in which cinematic images shape television reportage and vice versa, and it also reminds us that war today unfolds before our eyes as visual spectacle.

In a sense 9/11 and its aftermath seem like a textbook case for a media theory of modernity – witness the proliferation, saturation and circulation of images combined with the speed of contemporary globalism. The freezing of world media time into the binaries, of those who mourned and those who celebrated, was a tragedy that seemed so pure, so perfect, so completely overwhelming and draining of our collective energy. This process has been unending and relentless – the war in Afghanistan, the build-up and the eventual war on Baghdad, all part of that cruel cluster of time that 9/11 inaugurated. Those who cannot partake in this moment appear demonized, animal-like in their

opposition. This ceaseless drive for representation, however, relies too much on the perfect machinic impulse of imperial power. If the capture of Saddam Hussein and the carefully staged media effects that followed boosted imperial morale, a few sharp attacks could equally render these media strategies vulnerable. A world in constant mourning and war for 9/11 cannot sustain itself.

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