

# On Edge, Again<sup>\*</sup>

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New York is still the city that never sleeps. Fear will do that.

Fear of death borne in the air: a jet, a microbe. In Lower Manhattan, the dust has been scrubbed away. Night and day trucks rumble off with more rubble. But the fear persists: there are letters to open, cross-country trips to take. The fear is a psychic anthrax, an almost invisible powder creeping under the windowsills of thought, sifting into the corners of each mind.

Fear and this city are no strangers. History reminds us that New York has burned and been occupied by soldiers. It has been besieged by epidemics and riots. Our popular culture has been in dress rehearsal for the city's destruction for decades: in books, at the movies, in computer games, although no amount of history, no number of rehearsals, could prepare New Yorkers for Sept. 11 and the days of grief and worry that followed.

It was the most perfect and horrific demolition job. Two quarter-mile-tall towers exploding, then imploding, one-acre floors falling through the next one, 200 times over.

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<sup>\*</sup> This is a revised version of a talk Max Page gave at the Conference which was later published in the *New York Times*, October 21, 2001, Section 14, 1:2.

The survivors, blanketed in the gray mist of urban disaster, headed north and east. The attacks' human spores bearing their stories, their fear, throughout the city.

That unleashed energy was finally absorbed by each resident here, metastasizing into a malaise that has lingered as the country has gone to war and the specter of bioterrorism has grown.

Virginia Woolf wrote in "A Room of One's Own" that after World War I, it was not possible to hum poetry. On the surface, lively lunches at Oxbridge proceeded as before the war. But the "humming noise, not articulate, but musical, exciting" was gone. The war had "destroyed illusion and put truth in its place."

Many suggest that such is the case with Sept. 11: our world has changed. A controlled fear — a constant hum of worry, rather than poetry — seems part of this new world, this new New York. But, after the initial silence, then the muted tones, the city is still somehow humming. Perhaps, Sept. 11 has not created a new city, but in many respects ferried us back to an older, more visceral New York, where it was understood that the city was at risk. And while today the rest of the country is on edge, New York is even more so. New Yorkers understand again that their city is a target.

To nineteenth-century New Yorkers, who may have been told stories of the city's burning during the seven-year British occupation in the Revolutionary War, or who lost family members to the cholera epidemics of the 1830's, who perhaps watched the burning of much of Lower Manhattan in 1835, or who later

saw rioting mobs rage through the city in 1863, the notion that the city was forever was absurd.

Even the city of the 1940's and 1950's was not immune to fears of sudden catastrophe, the distinct possibility of nuclear attack. Sept. 11 bombed us back to the atomic age, when a roar in the sky could instantly evict daydreams from New Yorkers' minds and substitute apocalyptic visions.

Fear and New York are words that have often gone together. Usually, it was been the rest of the country fearing New York, rather than New Yorkers fearing their city. New York, ascending to dominance by the early 19th century, became the most feared city of all. In New York, Americans saw the poor, the immigrants, people of all races. In New York, crowding, crime, disease and radicalism were not only found but nurtured and propagated.

AMERICAN movies and television, books and newspapers have projected images of urban fear for more than a century. Urban catastrophe movies and novels, paintings and comic books — many created by New Yorkers themselves — have used New York to try to reveal the dangers of the American city.

American popular culture has returned to the theme of New York's destruction time and again, almost as a leitmotif that resonates with some of the most longstanding themes in American history: the ambivalence toward cities, the troubled reaction to immigrants and racial diversity, fear of technology's impact, and the tensions between natural and humanmade disasters.

In a nation as religious as the United States, with a strong apocalyptic strain in its popular culture, it is not surprising to find so many examples of

catastrophe. But more regularly than any other, New York — not only our largest city but "the city" of platonic ideal — has repeatedly met its death by art.

In moments of social upheaval, visions of how New York would be demolished, blown up, swallowed by the sea, or toppled by monsters have proliferated in films and in science fiction novels, as well as in photography, painting and the graphic arts.

In Joaquin Miller's 1886 novel, "Destruction of Gotham," a great fire engulfs the city as lower-class mobs attack the homes and stores of the wealthy. Only when Manhattan had "burned and burned and burned to the very bed-rock" was the apocalypse complete.

Jacob Riis, the photographic chronicler of the slums of the Lower East Side, encapsulated the fears of many Americans in 1890 with his metaphors of the waves of radical immigrants flooding onto the beaches of Brooklyn in his landmark book, "How the Other Half Lives."

At the nearby immigrants' paradise, Coney Island, tenements were routinely set on fire at Dreamland, giving those same immigrants a chance to witness from afar the tenuous world they inhabited on the Lower East Side.

In paintings by the futuristic artist Chesley Bonestell from the cold war 1950's, in popular magazines like Fortune and Collier's, Manhattan is repeatedly devastated by atomic bombs.

In the SimCity software of the 1990's, users could pick what disaster would strike New York, or just watch past disasters play out before their eyes.

And in movie after movie, as has been noted in the past weeks, Hollywood has found inspiration in destroying New York: through earthquake ("Deluge"), tsunami ("Deep Impact"), asteroid ("When Worlds Collide" and "Armageddon"), and monster ("Godzilla" and "King Kong").

Just this summer, in what had become an almost annual rite, New York was destroyed repeatedly on movie screens. The Japanese animated movie "Final Fantasy" showed a devastated Lower Manhattan beneath a dome, to protect it from the assaults of viruslike aliens. In "A.I.," the child robot finds himself drawn to a forbidden zone, called "Man-Hattan," overflowing with water. The World Trade Center towers stand above the water line, one tipped, leaning against the other.

In the millions, we have read these books, watched these movies, played these games, thrilled to the skyscrapers of Manhattan toppling as if it were somehow culturally cleansing. In other words, despite the repeated statement that the events of Sept. 11 were unimaginable, our culture has been imagining, rehearsing, these events for years.

Of course, New Yorkers themselves have been less concerned with catastrophic visions of the city's end, and more preoccupied with the very real catastrophes they have had to confront. José Martí, the Cuban revolutionary who lived in New York in the late 19th century, admired the city's resilience after the crippling Blizzard of 1888.

New York, "like the victim of an outrage, goes about freeing itself of its shroud," he wrote. The democracy of snowfall, covering aristocratic Fifth Avenue

as heavily as Mulberry Bend on the Lower East Side, had brought out a "sense of great humility and a sudden rush of kindness, as though the dread hand had touched the shoulders of all men."

The city's early history is studded with events in which distinctions of wealth and race were swept aside by disaster. In a city where rich and poor coexisted, with pigs and prostitutes living alongside Astors and Lenoxes, natural and human disasters were more likely to include everyone.

In the twentieth century, disasters have tended not to directly affect the whole city, like the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911. Even the anthrax attacks, on the news media and at Gov. George E. Pataki's New York office, have been localized. Right now, strangely enough, it is an office problem, a disease that has been spread through the mail, in the windowless mailrooms of the new economy, and eventually landing on cubicle desks. Yes, some workplaces have been threatened, but so far the city as whole has not been at risk, though it feels as if it is.

It's important to remember that New York has always been better at celebration than fear. New York has always prided itself on humming: ticker tape parades down Broadway, the tall ships at the Bicentennial, that memorable V-J Day kiss (caught by Eisenstaedt) in Times Square: these are New York's emotional landmarks.

If the "unexpungeable odor of the long past," as E. B. White wrote in 1948 in *Here Is New York*, "persists in the city, in the endless sediment of New York's people and their histories, it has been overcome by the daily odors of city life.

New Yorkers' notoriously short memories have, even so, kept room for celebration.

ALL this is why we continue to destroy New York in books, on canvas, on movie screens and on computer monitors: because it is so unimaginable for us, in reality, not to have this city. We have played out our worst fears on the screen and in our pulp fiction because, as the city's oracle, Mr. White, wrote in the shadow of the atomic bomb: "If it were to go, all would go — this city, this mischievous and marvelous monument which not to look upon would be like death."

Maybe fear is the wrong word for what New Yorkers feel now. There is anxiety, there is uncertainty. New York is no longer an invulnerable porcupine of skyscrapers that can never be attacked. Instead, the city has been rediscovered as a fragile community.

A community built on a delicate mix of people and buildings, the solace of anonymity and the thrill of cosmopolitanism, what Jane Jacobs famously called "organized complexity" in her classic study, "The Death and Life of Great American Cities." Only beyond the five boroughs, in the hinterlands, does the city appear to embody raw chaos.

This new uncertainty has brought New Yorkers together in repeated moments of empathy and concern over the recent weeks. But uncertainty could also lead to a pulling away from public life, New York's enduring justification for being, and a mimicking of the fortress mentality that has rolled across the country.

It might, finally, also remind New Yorkers again of the precariousness of this place, its indispensability to a personal and national identity. It might make

New Yorkers want to defend the city even more, by starting an era of unprecedented creativity.

The city that never sleeps because of fear of airplanes, fear of powder, might again become a city that never sleeps because it is too busy creating and telling, building and imagining, eating and singing. Jonathan Larson's words in the musical "Rent" could only have been written in and for New York: "The opposite of war is not peace, it's creation!"

E. B. White wrote: "New York is to the nation what the white church spire is to the village — the visible symbol of aspiration and faith, the white plume saying the way is up!"

The white plume we saw on Sept. 11 was the cloudy debris of two massive towers collapsing, shrewdly demolished to turn gleaming symbols of the city into burning signs of terror. Our fantasies and nightmares made real, we now wait, almost expectantly, for the next plume, a puff of powder from a No. 10 envelope.

Still, in this time of New York's haunting, I think White was right. New York will remain the way up for us all, the home of our ideals, and the place to which the world looks, for ideas, for success, for art and for a new start.