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‘Something Like a Circus or a Sewer’: The Thrill and Threat of New York City in American Culture

Keith McDonald and Wayne Johnson

‘And with the awful realisation that New York was a city after all and not a universe, the whole shining edifice that he had reared in his imagination came crashing to the ground.’

F Scott Fitzgerald, *My Lost City.*

New York City exists, as Lou Reed wrote in his song *Coney Island Baby* (and quoted in the chapter title), as a precarious and often oppositional space, as an illusion and as an all-too jarring reality. It is both a ‘geographical entity’ and a ‘cultural production’ (Pomerance, p.3). New York is also the popular culture city par excellence, with the beguiling otherworldliness of skyscrapers juxtaposed with the dystopic social realities of its street level. Like any other object of popular culture, the city is ‘constructed like a text’ (Campbell, p.200); it is an ever-changing cultural product that has multiple meanings which raises the question of authenticity and mediated simulation which in many ways, is where it exists. It is both a living place (culture) and an abstract image (idea). The location and inspiration for the evocative photography of Alfred Stieglitz, the nation defining songs of Tin Pan Alley, the improvisation, in music and in life-style, of the Jazz age, the political expressionism of the Harlem Renaissance, the kinetic energy in the music of Leonard Bernstein, the creative artistry of the comic book (with Metropolis and Gotham standing in as thinly veiled references to New York), the modern narrative collages of John Dos Passos, the post-modern recycled composites of Robert Rauschenberg, and the celebrity art of Andy Warhol’s Factory studios, the drag balls of *Paris is Burning* (Dir. Jenny Livingstone, 1990), the raw dexterity of hip-hop and the neon overload of advertising in the Broadway Theatre district of Times Square. New York City is a cultural coliseum, a collision of chaotic and incompatible images and multiple voices that somehow forms a strangely authentic whole.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's view of New York, quoted above, is integral to his masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby* (1925); it is an extremely well-studied and well-worn examination of New York's alchemic charm. Nonetheless, Fitzgerald’s ideas are still pertinent to this chapter and to leave him out would be perverse. Similarly, Gatsby as a character is a fiction of his own creation, a reinvention of a damaged yet optimistic and romantic individual. That he exists in Fitzgerald’s fictional depiction is also appropriate here too. He is a simulacra bound within a simulacra which still resonates today, a man caught between two lives, one desperately romantic and yet desperately corrupt, lurching (in a dizzying car and a soothing swimming pool) towards a tragic end. However, he and his peer characters live on in print, theatre productions and films, proving the allure of the power of the narcotic space of New York, and its simulated charm, its authentic/inauthentic contradiction. This

can be illustrated in Gatsby's library, with its unopened and unread books (and which are in fact hollow cases), a 'heterotopic' space (which we will explore) and a show of style and wealth rather than a base of true depth. This can be seen in the re-interpretation of *The Great Gatsby* in Baz Lurhmann's filmic depiction of the novel in 2013. It is an exercise in postmodern simulation with a disregard for commitment to authenticity. This is most clearly accentuated in the use of hip-hop on the soundtrack with the inclusion of the song *100$*. This incorporation into the film both illustrates the filmmaker's take on New York as a manifestation of revolving artifice defined in part by its own matrix of reinvention heavily tethered to commercial gain. This mirrors in some ways, Frank Sinatra's legendary rendition of *New York, New York* (in which in the title itself attests to the sumulacra) which ends with the line '*it's up to you* New York, New York…New York (our italics).

In many ways, and like many heterotopic spaces, New York is in a constant state of 'morphication'. Of course, this is the state of many places in world history (the restoration of London emerging out of its great fire and the effect on Bilbao after its radically charged art influx, prove this point). However, New York and in particular Manhattan Island, is arguably the most mediated place on earth and as such, is under a magnifying glass as a presence in a constant state of flux, polarised between a historic cultural grounding and a driving force into the future. If considered then as a cultural organism it raises questions about the futuristic and paradoxically elusive nature of the postmodern text, as Brian McHale states:

> 'Postmodernist'? The term does not even make sense. For if 'modern' means 'pertaining to the present', then 'postmodern' can only mean 'pertaining to the future', and in that case what could postmodernist fiction be except fiction that has yet to be written (McHale, p.4).

Jacques Derrida, in *Spectres of Marx* (2014), developed the concept of 'hauntology', where (in this case in relation to the ideological traction of Marx) he formed a notion that cultural thinking is constantly reliant on other previous input and is self-consciously or sub-consciously aware of prior incarnations, concepts and correspondences (this is how genres and continual discourses are birthed and maintained). When considering this, the self-conscious nature of New York as a curated yet inconsistent cultural entity, striving towards the new, yet melancholically tethered to the past, this concept then serves as a useful lense. Derrida also stated:

> That the without-ground of this impossible can nevertheless take place is on the contrary the ruin or the absolute ashes, the threat that must be thought, and, why not, exorcised yet again. To exorcise not in order to chase away the ghosts, but this time to grant them the

> right, if it means making them come back alive, as *revenants* who would no longer be *revenants*, but as other arrivants to whom a hospitable memory or promise must offer welcome without certainty, ever, that they present themselves as such. (Derrida, p.162)

New York, like many other places, and specifically in terms of Western popular culture, both epitomises the fresh yet nostalgic aesthetic, and exists in a state of hauntology, always looking to the past to inform the future in a melancholic state which wants to both move on, remain static yet return to previous romantic states of being. This is perhaps spatially typified by the monument of the Twin Towers in the wake of the attacks of 9/11 named *The Tribute of Light*, which consists of 88 searchlights beamed into the night sky. Fittingly, in the context of this chapter, the monument is both dazzling, beautiful and somehow ethereal and considering its form, in search for some future, not unlike the poetic ending of *The Great Gatsby* which reads

> Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . And one fine morning—So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past (Fitzgerald, p.171-2).

James Baldwin acknowledged the uniqueness of New York City and pointed out the relative lack of monuments and historic pomposity of other cultural meccas. He did though, identify a key point relating to the binary tensions which are both fascinating and daunting when he wrote "[A]ll other cities seem at best, a mistake, and at worst, a fraud. No other city is so spitefully incoherent." (Baldwin, p.7) Although one could of course identify 'traditional' edifices such as the Empire State Building and The Statue of Liberty, we would argue that the steam-filled vents of the city streets, the hot-dog stands and the Staten Island Ferry are equally important to its cultural currency. This is of course relevant to other cities also; London's tube system is iconic and historic, for instance. However, in terms of popular culture, New York seems to have a unique traction with regards to the mix of 'high' and 'low' cultural meshing like no other place in the Western world. This is not always successfully achieved; the recent trend, in a time which has witnessed a new crisis in affordable housing in the city of New York for a 'super-skinny, super-tall' new style of skyscraper', epitomised by 432 Park Avenue, completed in 2015, which, standing at 425 metres and with 96 floors, and built without planning permission or indeed any municipal scrutiny, is the tallest residential tower in the world at present; it embodies a new form of absentee property ownership, standing as empty 'silos of billionaires…casting ever-longer shadows across Central Park' and which represent a new form of currency in a post-2008 global financial world, the new 'age of technical ingenuity and extreme

inequality' (Wainwright, 2019, 34-8). Ever ironically, these can be compared to Gatsby's empty book 'cases', purporting to be populated.

Michael Foucault explores the notion of what he calls a heterotopia in relation to spaces which are projections of cultural practices, ambitions and at times, tensions and simulations of authentic experiences. These include spaces such as tropical gardens which simulate other climates, art galleries and other cultural exhibition sites which curate creative expressions and monuments to the past, etc. As perhaps the world's biggest and most certainly most documented space (never sleeping, constantly evolving and yet retained) New York epitomises the heterotopia in the terms which Foucault describes:

> There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society — which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted (Mirzoeff, p.231).

Adding to this discussion regarding the cultural imagination in a psycho-geographical sense Edward Soja posits the concept of a dialogic offspring between material reality and imagined fantasy (which he terms as the 'second-space') which then results in what he calls a 'third-space', which he explains as 'a creative recombination and extension, one that builds on a first-space perspective that is focused on the 'real' material world and a second-space (in which) everything comes together in third-space' (Soja, p.56). Soja further argues that this approach involves acknowledging 'a mode of thinking about space that draws upon the material and mental spaces of the traditional dualism but extends well beyond them in scope, substance and meaning' (Soja, p.11). This concept is fundamentally a creative one and as an idea is impossible to define, as are any city's fundamentally true identities. However, in the case of New York City, this is amplified and broadcast around the globe.

Although these examples represent numerous case studies which could suitably act individually as demonstrative texts to the ideas presented here, New York is perhaps best understood as a complex hypertext, a mediated bricolage of both contradictory and complimentary texts which have embedded themselves in the cultural imagination. It is a utopian and dystopian polarising entity, best described as an imaginative heterotopian force under constant scrutiny and change (for good or worse). For the writer Thomas Wolfe, New York was:

> a cruel city, but it was a lively one; a savage city, yet it had such tenderness; a bitter, harsh

> and violent catacomb of stone and steel and tunnelled rock, slashed savagely with light, and roaring, fighting a constant ceaseless warfare of men and machinery; and yet it was so sweetly and so delicately pulsed, as full of warmth, of passion, and of love, as it was full of hate (Heyes, p.76).

It is though, through popular culture that this is best captured, as Cohen and Taylor state, these bricolage entities combine in a flow which is enamoured with opportunity:

> All around us-on advertisement hoarding, bookshelves, record covers, television screens these miniature escape fantasies present themselves. This, it seems, is how we are destined to live, as split personalities in which the private life is disturbed by the promise of escape routes to another reality (Cohen and Taylor, in McHale, p.38).

First, the above accentuates the complex and confusing environments and situations which inhabitants must navigate. Second, it pits the urban, multicultural 'human world' against a backdrop of a far more complex and unreadable myth which makes some of the concerns of the tourist to be petty and fleeting. Third, it makes all viewers, readers, etc. migrants, in that we are all experiencing these languages as non-natives drawn into the mythical 'native' mechanisations.

Clearly, cinema is a particular medium that many have focused on with the goal of producing excessive superfluity in terms of artistic representation. There are an abundance of filmed representations of the city which are incredibly diverse in terms of genre and which have made an indelible mark on film-lore. David Clarke states that cities are particularly cinematic in their qualities because filmmakers can offer multiple interpretations to suit their narrative and mise-en-scene. Clarke further states that the American city is particularly fitted to a hyperreal, cinematic experience and quotes Baudrillard who contends 'to grasp its secret, you should not, then, begin with the city and move inwards towards the screen; you should begin with the screen and move outwards towards the city' (Clarke, p.1). Depictions of New York in cinema often relish in its dizzying and intoxicating chaos. For instance, in musical film traditions, both *On the Town* (dir. Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1949) and *West Side Story* (dir. Robert Wise, 1961) score and choreograph the narcotic hit of the sensation that New York appears to be. Filmed in glorious technicolour and on location in the city itself, *On the Town* (music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green, although with new songs by Roger Edens), like any number of examples of popular culture, has been through many incarnations; it was initially a ballet by Jerome Robbins called *Fancy Free*, it then became a Broadway musical, before becoming a Hollywood musical. It captures the *carpe diem* of three sailors on shore-leave in the city for only 24 hours; New York is presented as an

intense high. This idea, of constant re-making, acts as a suitable metaphor for the place itself, which is an ever-evolving simulation of itself. In addition, there is a moral chaos often depicted in films such as *Working Girl* (dir. Mike Nichols, 1988), *Wall Street* (dir. Oliver Stone, 1987) and *The Wolf of Wall Street* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 2013) which all depict a hedonistic mix between big business, play and human consequence, individual status elevation and re-invention. Carl Boggs sums this up with the following statement which embodies 'the New York state of mind:

> The capacity of sprawling business empires, banking systems, governments and international agencies to manage economic, political, and cultural life coincides, paradoxically, with a civic life that is anything but stable and orderly (Boggs, p.2).

Other genres include horror *(Rosemary's Baby,* dir. Roman Polanski, 1968), the romantic comedy (*When Harry Met Sally,* dir. Rob Reiner, 1987), the sci-fi dystopia (*Escape From New York,* dir. John Carpenter, 1981), the monster movie (*King Kong*, dir. Merian C. Cooper & Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933) the superhero adventure film (*Avenger's Assemble*, dir. Joss Whedon, 2012*, Spiderman 2,* dir. Sam Raimi, 2002) and the children's fantasy film (*Elf,* dir. John Favreau, 2003).

From *Coney Island* (dir. Ralph Ince), a silent comedy made in 1928, through to the recent *Ready Player One* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2018), New York is represented as a location of chaos. In *Ready Player One,* set in 2045, the world can escape the dystopic realties of the present by retreating into their imagination, represented by OASIS, a virtual universe which provides freedom for its players. On the hunt for an 'Easter-egg', as part of a treasure hunt, Wade Watts engages in a race through New York into Central Park, accompanied by the mayhem inflicted by King Kong and Godzilla. In the film the whole of New York City becomes a virtual reality city, a roller coaster ride. This chaos is of course both alluring and threatening, which echoes the iconic scenes in the original *King Kong* where the intoxicating spectacle (at street level) of the unveiling of the exotic creature all too quickly leads to violence, threat and fatality in a dizzying celluloid fantasy. Kong himself is anything but ordinary and it is no surprise that the thrill is revealed and the calamity which follows takes place atop the Empire State building, whilst others look on speechless as Kong roars amid this celluloid spectacle. As Foucault states:

> Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy syntax in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together'. This is why utopias permit fable and

> discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the fabula; heterotopias … dessicate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences (Foucault, ppxvii-xix).

This common lexicon, is of course reliable yet ultimately dull, which so many depictions of the city rally against for romantic, exhilarating and sinister outcomes. *On the Town* symbolises freedom for the three sailors, in stark contrast, *Taxi Driver* (dir; Martin Scorsese, 1976) New York is a hellish prison for Travis Bickle (and literally so in the case of John Carpenter's *Escape from New York*). In *Taxi Driver*, a damaged Vietnam veteran, Bickle drives a taxi at night through the decaying, dystopic streets of a New York of nightmares, encountering other misfits, the seedy and the corrupt. The film explores Bickles' insomnia-fuelled alienation from society and his growing sociopathic obsessions as he attempts to assassinate a liberal presidential candidate. Failing in that act he becomes, bizarrely, a vigilante hero for killing undesirables; yet again demonstrating the polarised tensions of the city itself.

Much has been made of the 'urban renewal improvements' made by Mayor Ed Koch in the 1980s (he was mayor from 1978-89). Whether it was more his imaginative rhetoric (his 'how'm I doing' slogan) rather than his actual policies which accounted for the transformation in public confidence in the city is difficult to gauge, as in reality the homicide rates remained high throughout his time; indeed it was Rudolph Giuliani, the Republican Mayor from 1993 with his 'broken windows' crackdown on anti-social behaviour which led to a greater social transformation and which addressed the root causes of crime; in the process it reduced the murder rate in the city by nearly 75%. The 'I love New York' logo, also designed in the 1970s, although to promote tourism through the state rather than the city specifically, showed how a brand could create a popular emotional response and a self-definition and re-appropriation by inhabitants of Manhattan itself.

Considering the dystopian depiction of New York in the 1970s and early 1980s (which Koch claimed to be solving), films such as *Serpico* (dir. Sidney Lumet, 1973), and *Fort Apache: The Bronx* (dir. Daniel Petrie, 1981) it would be safe to assume that New York in the pre-Koch era (and in many ways during it) is a place to be endured, wary of and ultimately escaped (as referenced in John Capenter's take on the matter). However, revealing its' inherent contrary nature(s), New York is often depicted culturally across media as a magnetic place to be sought out as an environment for progression and transgression. This is no more cinematically evident than in the work of filmmaker Mike Nichols, who clearly saw New York as a place of transfiguration in terms of post-war developments with regards to the politics of gender and sexuality. This commitment, in a vast body

of work, which includes a mass of theatre, can also be exemplified in three films: *Carnal Knowledge* (1971), *Working Gir*l (1989) and *Angels in America* (2003). In these films, New York is the theatre on which a discussion about sexual politics takes place, a prism by which social change, struggle and negotiation is performed on screen. What is key here and in much of Nichol's other New York-based material (perhaps most clearly seen in *Working Girl*) are the ways in which identity politics are so closely connected to commerce as seen in the huge success of the TV show *Mad Men* (2007-2015) which could not have been as successfully rendered outside of New York and whose central character is an attractive fraud. In this context, New York is as much of an imaginative destination as it is a geographical one. This is psycho-geography through art, sound, vision and storytelling, albeit a highly monetized one.

What can be further observed, moreover, in American popular culture set in New York, ranging from advertising to any number of Hollywood movies, is an ever-shifting perspective. There is the abstract built environment of the city, as seen from above, where 'the skyline becomes a "storied" place' (Sanders, 115) providing a façade of moral certainties, while the 'awkward and unromantic realties' of the street level are, more often than not, portrayed as a war zone with its festering social ills (Campbell, 204). What then also emerges in these films is the juxtaposition of the skyscraper, as 'the architecture of corporate capitalism' (Lindner, 19), and the 'public' space of the street level; the former, as in *Avengers Assemble* and *Spiderman 2*, 'disconnecting people from traditional ways of life' (Sanders, 115). As such, it is the thrill and the threat of New York which has been reflected in Hollywood's representations of the city. In this sense semiotics and ocular tourism are key in a postmodern sense in that simulation is at their core. Most of us don't physically visit New York yet culturally and visually we have visited the place even though in an inauthentic manner. As John Urry states, 'generally, we are well aware that most tourism involves, at least in part, the activity of *sightseeing.* In most discourses surrounding travel, there is an emphasis on the centrality of the seeing and collection of *sights'* (Urry, p. 176). This is no more amplified to the level of the hyperreal as it is in cinema's infatuation with New York.

The French high wire artist Philippe Petit recorded in his diary his first impressions of New York in the early 1970s; 'it's old, it's dirty, it's full of skyscrapers, I love it' (Petit, 12). Petit had arrived into a squalid New York of fiscal stagnation (which would culminate in the New York blackout in 1977), abandoned buildings, high crimes rates, drug problems, gang warfare, police corruption and institutionalised prejudice, epitomised in *Serpico* (1973) starring Al Pacino and the landmark TV series *Kojak* (1973-8). The Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre seemed to represent a physical denial of this decline; they were 'vertical constellations' (Lindner, p.21). In his memoir, *To Reach the*

Clouds (2002), Petit wrote about how he planned and then executed the audacious, and illegal, tightrope walk 1350 feet above the ground between the Twin Towers in 1974 (the building of which had been completed the previous year at a cost of $1.5 billion). The so-called 'artistic crime of the century' was later made into the documentary film *Man on Wire* (dir. James Marsh, 2008) and the 3-D feature film *The Walk* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 2015); fittingly, a cultural re-invention from memoir, to documentary, through to feature film. Petit spent nearly an hour on the wire, walking back and forth, kneeling and lying down. What he performed would have remained nothing more than a spectacular circus act were it not for the tragic events of September 11, 2001, and the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers, and when the towers collapsed, with over 2000 casualties. In his book on the visual representations of 9/11, Thomas Stubblefield argued that 'the paradox of the visual culture of 9/11', in which media coverage Hollywood-ized and spectacularized the event itself 'foregrounds the image and the visual experience in general', but also, and because of the 'unrepresentable' nature of the disaster, 'steeps the events of that day in absence, erasure and invisibility' (Stubblefield, pp.5-7). Thus, 'le coup', as Petit termed his wire walk of 1974, has now assumed celestial significance. Petit had read about the plans to build the Twin Towers in a French newspaper in the 1960s. From the off his dream was an illusion. As he stated in the documentary: 'the object of my dream doesn't exist yet.' The walk itself was inspired by Petit's refusal to acknowledge that New York could only be seen from the street level, since the Towers, as they certainly appeared to him for the first time he saw them, in a *Paris Match* magazine article in 1972, were 'already out of reach' (Petit, p.8). And on physically seeing the Towers for the first time Petit perfectly described the tension, as he stared up, between 'the vertical aluminium panel' of the buildings' facade climbing up 'into azure' (elevating, thrilling, clean, aspirational,) and 'the horizontal concreter slab' of the ground he stood upon (mundane, threatening, dirty, desolate). He described the tower as 'a landing field for extra-terrestrial vessels' or a 'limitless runway into heaven'. Either way, he went on, 'it is definitely not man-made, nor of any use to us humans'; and yet humans engineered their destruction (Petit, p.14). As one of his co-helpers on the roof stated in the documentary, 'I remember the vastness of New York. It was magnificent. And the sounds as well, the police sirens all night long…It was all so alive. We were kings!'. And on reaching the rooftop, the city, for Petit simply vanished, and humanity, with all its social, economic and political ills, had 'ceased to exist' as Petit was gracefully balanced between earth and heaven, his material tightrope, a wire cable, serving as an exquisite metaphor for the equilibrium (Petit, p.15).

In important ways then, the verticality of New York allows it to be a 'playground for superheroes', or as in the case of Petit, a super human, or a coliseum for monsters and villains, and an all too real hell for its inhabitants (Sanders, p. 120). In *Avengers Assemble*, for example, the action

is played out in the abstract, high above street level, as if the superheroes are on fairground rides. Action is unconnected to street life; indeed the mayhem is 'scarcely visible from the street' as civilians are evacuated (Sanders, 115). Upper buildings offer 'a whole landscape of ornament, statuary…temples, obelisks, pyramids' (Sander, p. 115), but 'without any exposure to its interior reality' (Sanders, p.97). In *Cloverfield* (dir. Matt Reeves, 2008), New York is well and truly 'under siege'. Presented as discovered lost film footage held by the *U.S. Department of Defence* and deliberately mimicking the horror of 9/11, unknown and half-glimpsed monsters wreak havoc on Manhattan, bringing floating debris, panic, bewilderment and then evacuation to the local populace. Again, there is the curious juxtaposition of the differing sensation of the street level and the subway underground with the roofs of buildings as Rob, the lead character, and his friends, search for Beth, his ex. It is as if, and according to Sanders, 'New York's skyscrapers seemed designed not for human beings…but for some sort of new race', echoing Petit's reflection (Sanders, p.100). Clearly the film-makers wished to replicate the sensation of theme park rollercoaster rides, thrilling as well as frightening (but with an added sense of horror), since there is no coincidence in the fact that the discovered camcorder film is framed between previous footage taken by Rob, of him and Beth, first talking about Coney Island, the leisure and beach destination on Long Island, and then on the way to it, followed by 'actual' footage of the couple at said Island, where Beth states finally: 'I've had a good day'. A simulacrum over a simulacrum.

Film theorist Murray Pomerance stated that 'New York is an eidolon, surely-an image which is possessed of a phantasmatic, apparitional, haunting quality, and that rests out of history as a mark of aspiration, memory and direct experience' (Pomerance, p.4). Cinematically and in many other incarnations (or perhaps incantations) New York in representations provides us with the artistic display of a polarised dream/mixed with a nightmare vision of hyper, urban America. The haunting quality here is worth attention. Derrida maintains that the political figure looms large on most political discourse after the publication of *The Communist Manifesto.* This concept has of course been enveloped in the wider cultural studies field in terms of discursive patterns. To extend the metaphor of hauntology, if Marx exists as a figure of looming gravitas in a gothic scenario, depictions of New York enter a melting pot of spectral voices and images (perhaps stirred on occasion by Fitzgerald) each pulling in their own disparate directions but ultimately contributing to the perverse disparate whole.

The final example of the heterotopic realisation of New York is the extraordinary performance by Alicia Keys featuring Jay-Z of her song *Empire State of Mind* delivered in Times Square on October 9th, 2016. There has never been a more demonstrative live example of space as 'text' other than in

fiction and in particular Science Fiction. The stage on which they perform is simply a part of a wider canvas where buildings, vast screens and other platforms converge in a cacophony which demonstrates the place as both as a dizzying chaos (utterly manufactured) and somehow a coherent whole and as part of a media explosion (bizarrely authentic). The whole event is a finely crafted escapist dream in terms of the lyrics, music, production and distribution in the digital form of a virus. Typically, the footage involves an immense amount of product placement of the most American of recognised products (Coca Cola, Budweiser etc.). Of course, after being a continuation of the ongoing cultural voice (as 'heteroglossic' as a voice can be) which includes Literature, Visual Arts, Music and Film and TV, the performance has found a huge audience online with over 13 million views to date. What is interesting and poignant is the amount of the audience seen recording their experience on smartphones, creating a simulation of a simulation which in itself is a serpentine space which defies and defines the postmodern mediated environment. New York is perhaps best thought of as a self-generating and multifaceted fiction, and organism which culturally at least, is in a constant state of metamorphosis. McHale makes a point regarding postmodernism and narrative but this is equally applicable to this city as a text, he writes:

> Typically, in realist and modernist [fiction, the] spatial construct, is organised around a perceiving subject, either a character or the viewing position. The heterotopian zone of postmodernism [narratives] cannot be organized in this way, however. Space here is less constructed than deconstructed by the text, or rather constructed and deconstructed at the same time (McHale. p, 45).

Perhaps New York is best considered as a fiction in this sense, existing in resonating ways in cultural imaginations, elusive yet memorable and destined to respawn whilst retaining a sense of history and a glamour and squalor which is now encoded into its DNA. Contradiction is the life-breath of New York in artistic, iconic and iconoclastic senses (being both authentically American and simultaneously utterly fake). It is fixed yet fluid, past yet futuristic and fundamentally, un-fundamental.

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