Envisioning the Human Self:

(Re-)Constructions of the Human Body

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Destruction and Deconstruction: New York City (1981-1988): From Science Fiction to Architectural Culture

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Abstract
Throughout the eighties, New York City experienced specific cultural architectural activity and production based upon urban concerns. With significant resonances between science fiction and real-life, Manhattan would be depicted as an open canvas for similar visual and formal interpretations. Theory and practice approaches to understand that grid island turned out extremely alike. From 1981 to 1988, literature, cinema and architecture had to represent the city as a place of alienation and accident, of concentration and fragment, of plans and sections, superimposed all at once. Both in fiction and architecture, a cinematic ruin representation was searched for. In fiction there was destruction and in architecture there was deconstruction. The place would be a permanent motif for the representation of the aftermath. From John Carpenter's film *Escape from New York* (1981) to Paul Auster's novel *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), the city image would change from a violent and prison-like territory to a decadent and ruined walking map. During those years, throughout different media and genres, human and urban conditions reflected the real politics, economics and cultural demands. Figures like vagabonds, resilient individuals and military agents turned out to be main characters living in those Cartesian streets. Simultaneously, this very same place would be the object of several studies on the urban and architectural uncanny feeling of the cityscape. From Bernard Tschumi's graphic manifesto *The Manhattan Transcripts* (1981) to Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley's exhibition *Deconstructivist Architecture* (1988), New York City was acknowledged as a palimpsest and a place subject to fracture. The chapter aims to define the echoes and proximities between science fiction and architectural culture as an attempt to characterize and symbolise this contemporary and postmodern great western city.

Key Words: Science fiction, architecture, New York City, urban, island, dystopia, limits, ruins, destruction, deconstruction.

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1. Incompleteness

   In 1937, and after travelling to New York City (NYC), Swiss architect Le Corbusier has noted that 'New York is not a completed city. It is a city in a process of becoming. Today it belongs to the world'.[1] So the myth of Babel may as well have been associated with the city. It seems, though, that the myth has been living in this global metropolis ever since, laying somewhere between fiction and reality. In addition, the city's recent history has been recurrently assisting to events that

represent either the vigour of the vertical conquest or the fall of those same vertical icons. In a merely abstract although critical reading, 9/11 may suggest that corollary right on the edge of the 3rd millennium.

Since the *Commissioners' Plan* (1811) was put in action, about two centuries ago, Manhattan Island and borough had experienced a continuous urban and architectural revolution emphasized by its surface. Nowadays, Manhattan belongs to a city accomplished within a 100 years. Its construction has reached adulthood and peak between last century's twenties and thirties, with the total occupation of hundreds of orthogonal blocks. Between World Wars, the area and the use of the grid were fulfilled. In fact, it is rather interesting to notice that the city's urban growth happened during the time of the great depression. Even if Le Corbusier's text *Quand les Cathédrales etáient Blanches* (1937) stated that NYC skyscrapers were low and squat structures, in proportion, the whole idea of progress and modernism was on the verge of being remade and reviewed for the next 50 years. Like a resilient human and urban creation, as Max Page argued,[2] the city could represent to the post-WW2 occident culture what the Classical Rome meant to the Mediterranean civilisation during the 1st millennium.

Considering popular culture, the visions represented in Louis Biedermann's *New York City in 1999* (1900) or the ones in Harvey Wiley Corbett's magazine *City of the Future* (1913), with their sectioned streets and buildings, showed a powerful-layered city anchored to circulation systems and complex pathways. In Leon Kroll's illustration *Building New York* (1916)[3] the whole metropolis is maintained under construction. On the back of the image, a NYC Hall like building emerges as an ivory 'Babel tower', dominating the cityscape, while the rest of the image is nothing less than a work-site. On one hand, it is hard to tell if the picture aims to represent a scenario or an ideal reality. On the other hand, it is easy to obtain the uncompleted march to the continuous progress and simultaneous fragmentation of things. By this time, the closeness between the discipline's practice and theory and the everyday charm of the place was already evident. The human appeal to that particular urban scape was also visible. It is told, for importance, that director Fritz Lang decided to make his science fiction masterpiece *Metropolis* (1927) on the night he docked at the city port. It was after one autumnal Atlantic journey, alongside his friends the UFA director Erich Pommer and the expressionist architect Erich Mendelsohn.

Regarding architectural culture, cases like Hugh Ferris's *Metropolis of Tomorrow* (1929) or Raymond Wood's graphic study *Proposal for Manhattan 1950* (1929) were monumental and epic, showing a tendency to blur fiction with reality. By then, NYC was already a place filled with motion and emotion. A spirit of vertical domain and technological achievement had emerged from the Cartesian plan with their high steel and brick extrusions. It seems that either city marvels or city problems were pretty based on the grid itself. Due to Manhattan's unique matrix and its likely surface congestion, there arose zoning ghettos and some mob

areas. The place became overcrowded,[4] daily and nightly. As alleys turned dark and shadowy, popular entertainment occupied the avenues with a gazing charm. Everyday life was together noisy and attractive as one may perceive from Lang's *Broadway* night photos (1924), or Edwin Porter's short *Coney Island by Night* (1909), with their lights trading places with invisible volumes. In Porter's silent film, for instance, carousel and towers were transformed in two-dimensional surfaces instead of three-dimensional shapes. It seems the plan was destined to take over the solid.

Regarding science fiction, it is curious that films like the already cited *Metropolis* or David Butler's *Just Imagine* (1930) projected a territory of lights and upright structures. *Metropolis*, the first case, projected the homonym city a 100-years in the future; and *Just Imagine*, the second case, envisioned NYC specifically in the eighties, 50-year ahead but exactly at the date we begin this study.

About the state of the art, once more, one may point out Max Page's non-fiction writings on the history of the destruction of NYC. The author's *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900-1940* (1999) showed this stated desire as an inevitable concept since the early 20th century, again, combining reality and fiction. Proving that the rapprochement between architecture culture and science fiction have not stopped, and as Page argued, fiction and architecture seem somehow to have been converging as a response to complete the city.

2. Destruction

In 1843, Nathaniel Hawthorne notes in *The Celestial Railroad* that 'Not a great while ago, passing through the gate of dreams, I visited that region of the earth in which lies the famous City of Destruction'.[5] The above-mentioned 'city of destruction' appeared in the Epigraph to Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), a novel we believe aimed to partly depict NYC. Even if Auster never tells the name of the place where the story is set, one gets to recognize it quite easily. 'When you live in the city, you learn to take nothing for granted. (…) The streets of the city are everywhere.'[6] The frontier *country* in Auster's book is a confined and walled place, apparently with no order than its grid, in which the described windy and garbage set streets resemble Manhattan urban structure. In a comparable territory to the island, the protagonist Anna Blume unfolds in *dérive* and constant risk in the search of her journalist brother. She drifts in an obsolete and centripetal space, founding herself as a refugee in an enclosed urban camp, and dealing with armed and male behaviours. In Auster's book the young woman lacks her personal safety whenever she wanders through the streets. At the same time, back to reality, NYC's public space was also, at some point, turning into an intimidating place. Criminal rates were the highest ever while buildings, parks, streets, and dead ends became degraded. The city was struggling against social and marginalized tribes. Drug problems had been rising since the end of the Vietnam War, population decline had reached the highest numbers ever, and some boroughs

had turned part of themselves into ghetto-styled urban spaces. In the late seventies and early eighties, the distance between poverty and power touched unbearable levels, leading NYC to an insecure, and in a certain way devastated place.

By then, in fiction, Manhattan was characterized as a place of disaster, gang geographies, and security issues. Examples like Enzo G. Castellari's *1990: I guerrieri del Bronx* (1982) and *Escape from the Bronx* (1983), or Sergio Martino's *2019 - Dopo la Caduta di New York* (1983), each one a trashy and low-profiled science fiction film, chose to represent devastation and war narratives out of the indigent and abandoned zones located in the city. Private houses were outdated and public spaces had almost vanished. It seemed that, in those films, not only disorder was the new order; even in these non-plausible films one could capture convincing veracities. Anyway, with a *realism* variation, Jim Jarmusch used some of these locations in *Permanent Vacation* (1981), one academic filmic exercise to develop his idea about rambling in the shanty zones of Manhattan. Like Castellari and Martino's future dystopias, Jarmusch's present vision was somehow different to *Just Imagine*. Wreckage was everywhere; Manhattan was a continuous space of barbarism in a struggle for dominance. In addition, it could be a closed and guarded space, as the discipline subject came as one of the metaphors for that territory in the eighties. More than ever, NYC could be understood as a battlefield and a captive place. In John Carpenter's B-movie *Escape from New York* (1981), the anti-heroic protagonist Snake Plissken is supposed to rescue the president of the USA from Manhattan, suggested as a detention centre in 1997. The film, then, develops a narrative about controlled freedom and privacy. As it is said in the beginning of the picture that in '1988 The Crime Rate in the United States Rises Four Hundred Percent'.[7] The storyline tells us, in order to solve those social and spatial problems, 'the once great city of NYC becomes the one maximum-security prison for the entire country'.[8] In Carpenter's film, Manhattan was surrounded by 'a fifty-feet containment wall (…)';[9] erected on the outer banks of the Hudson. The city-prison became violent, and the convicts therein made their own laws. Likewise, the later Brian Wood and Riccardo Burchielli's comic series *DMZ* (2005-2012) could be a kind of alternative version to the same story, which is setting Manhattan as a De-Militarized Zone caused by political and economic scandals. *Escape from New York*, *In the Country of Last Things*, and *DMZ* are all the type of dystopian narratives based in NYC that use the city as a battlefield. It seems pretty well that *DMZ* protagonist and journalist Matthew Roth could be the avatar of Anna Blume's disappearing brother in a degenerate place as described in *Escape from New York*.

Still, and associated with destruction, the vertical issue continued to be a matter in the Manhattan context. The myth of Babel appeared embedded in one previous Paul Auster's work. In his *New York Trilogy* debut (1986), *City of Glass* (1985), the volume's first short story seems to use and look to the allegory contextualizing it in some blocks. The city, known for its high structures, seems fragile, built and

unbuilt in the same place and at the same time. In the way to solve an identity mystery, Daniel Quinn, the wannabe detective and protagonist, falls into craziness together with the brownstone buildings and his failed memories. Like a vagabond from Jarmusch's film, Quinn wanders through Manhattan alley spaces looking towards high-rise building shadows and glass storefronts. Another approach, yet using the vertical as target, was Ronald Neame's film *Meteor* (1979). The motif, this time, was launched by an outside sky menace over the city, especially over its tall buildings, almost feeling that verticality can be desirable when it becomes dangerous and frightening. In this order of things, it is significant that, in *Escape from New York*, the spot Plissken chooses to secretly land in Manhattan is nonetheless the highest place in the city: the top of one of the *World Trade Center* twin towers (1966-1973), the 'two biggest letters in the world'[10] (as the French essayist Michel De Certeau called them). Nevertheless, if these two vertical and powerful monuments were the way to fictionalize the destruction of the city, in 1981, they could also have meant the way out to historicize the trauma of destruction living in there in 2001. In Brian Wood's graphic volume *Channel Zero* (1997), the author almost anticipates the violence and dark moral ethics and aesthetics of 9/11. Said Wood, later in the preface to the 2003 volume's edition 'New York City in the late 1990's was not a happy place, at least for people like me. The City government was repressive, violent, greedy, high on its power and bigoted.'[11] It seemed the city has always been a belligerent place, a notion fairly important to the now NYC based Iraqi artist Wafaa Bilal. Having faced the loss of freedom and consequent violence during the eighties and nineties in Iraq, Bilal selected Manhattan to live and transform his own trauma into a hyper-real one. He found himself victim of a ruthless and authoritarian regime. During the Iran and Golf wars, Bilal moved to the USA and developed his personal manifestoes. As it is brilliantly introduced and articulated in Jenna Ann Altomonte's chapter *Virtual Trauma and Simulation: Cybernetic Performance in Wafaa Bilal's Virtual Jihadi* (2013), one's real experience may certainly reach an outcome as a meaningful method to enhance either fictional or virtual contexts. In post 9/11 Bilal's *Virtual Jihadi* (2005), a first person-shooter videogame, the player's character is a terrorist planning to attack the North American institution. In the end, even if the videogame territory is neither *DMZ* area nor *In the Country of Last Things* old site nor *Manhattan Maximum Security Prison* territory, it could be an urbanscape to every one of them.

From another point of view, it stands noteworthy that Blume insists in detailing a comprehensive categorization of the classes produced by a living and deadly environment. For the record, *In the Country of Last Things* the unique novel in which Auster brings up a feminine protagonist, maybe assuming a critique to the feminist role upon a nearly martial or female-aggressive territory. Nevertheless, Anna finds herself either rootless in the outer space or stuck in the inner one. Now,

could this individualist symptom expressed in Auster's book be a pre-condition ahead of time of the 'post-humanist feminism', as expressed by Jennifer Cotter?[12]

Apparently, paradoxically, the Blume surname sounds the same as the urban and human moods Anna was into during her mission. Similar to bloom, the character's name means both birth and uprise, confinement and melancholy, as it is unequivocal in one of the novel's dialogues ''Blume as in doom and gloom, I take it'. 'That's right. Blume as in womb and tomb. You have your pick.'[13] Although being one heroic and fragile character, she accepts this antagonist condition to herself. Basically, Anna Blume is an urban dweller representation of the 20th century *malaises*; just like Auster said: '"*Anna Blume walks through the twentieth century*". That's the phrase I carried around in my head while I was working on the book.'[14]

3. Deconstruction

In 1977, Jacques Derrida argued in one interview for *Du Tout* that 'The sense of trembling'[15] in architecture is inevitable. If the idea of building is intrinsically linked to the structure, the idea of deconstruction is intimately associated to the instability of the structure. The dialectic canon that links form to function rises to the opposites and their causes. Themes close to Manhattan identities gain preponderance in architecture and in science fiction. The grid and its dissidences, its fragments and wreckages, all became motifs of speculative architecture and fiction. Dilemmas, oppositions and assemblages,[16] reproductions and sections became of great value to enlighten the architectural and fictional discourse. Architectural actions and fiction positions became political reactions, while authors outside the architecture and science fiction fields attached a different meaning to NYC. With the arrival of the eighties, one could still capture the emergency of the negativist visions for the redevelopment of urban and human languages with architectural and literary similarities. And so, between 1981 and 1988, either in architecture or in science fiction, Manhattan borough appears to have exhausted its Modernist options and validities.

Regarding architectural culture, in fact, since the fifties European authors had been playing their game. The idea that the Modern Project had failed took place in various situations. Guy Debord's *Guide Psychogeographique de Paris* (circa 1955) presented a shattered city with apparently disconnected paths. Thus, it demonstrated a rupture within the linearity and continuous urban experience, as it was ambitioned by the canonical *Carte d'Athens* modernism. Examples like the *collages* Alison and Peter Smithson made to the *Golden Lane Housing* project (1959), in London, were of great impact to the architecture culture. Architectural design laid no more upon a virginal or green topography but inside a devastated landscape. Orthodox modernism was no longer possible as Team X and the late CIAM have been proving. More than being radical, the Modern revision aimed at

approaching the human to the urban core; it proposed a new premise to the contemporary city.

Between the late sixties and early seventies francophone essayists like Derrida, De Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, along Italian architectural thinkers like Aldo Rossi and Manfredo Tafuri, and American architects placed the speech fragment in the foreground. With them it came back as the grand narrative discourse crisis in all its power. The ruin and the section became active responses to the redefinition of a new architecture praxis. Then, and after the consolidation into architecture of Derrida's work, some foundations of the Modern as well as its Postmodern evolution seemed to be appropriate for a new variety of shapes and discourses. Since 1967, with Derrida's *De la Grammatologie* publication, and The Institute for Architecture & Urban Studies (IAUS) foundation in NYC, one could point a rising affinity between theory of architecture and language construction issues. Throughout those years it was held the *New York Five* exhibition (1967-1969), at the local Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), promoting an acknowledgment to five local and later global architects. Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, Charles Gwathmey, John Hejduk, and Richard Meier appeared as a heterogeneous ensemble using the city and the thirties architectural modernism as matter of critique and reflection. During the event, again at MoMA, a Conference of Architects was held for the Study of the Environment (CASE), in which authors, thinkers and the 'whites', the architects named above, debated politics and, supposedly, architecture's context and future. From the exhibition and discussion result the *Five Architects* book (1972), organized by Arthur Drexler and Colin Rowe. Another important step against the classic Modernism was taken and followed right after by the IAUS's *Oppositions* journal. By then there was no doubt that the architectural narrative had dispersed and scattered, as Rossi referred to in the 'Dieses ist lange her' sentence, in 1975, labelling one of his drawings.[17] In addition, in 1976, Eisenman advanced the position of reasserting the Modern through his text entitled 'Post-Functionalism'. Architecture had to be understood from a post-structuralism perspective. Summarizing, Eisenman claimed, the solution could be found in the language domain instead of pure functionalism. Only two years later, in 1978, and dedicated to a resourceful analysis of the city, the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas wrote *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto of Manhattan* proposing a comprehensive review about congestion and 'Manhattanism', he called. One should look for a different normative of the Modern.

> Manhattanism is the one urbanistic ideology that has fed, from its conception, on the splendours and miseries of the metropolitan condition (…) without once losing faith in it as the basis for a desirable modern culture.[18]

In the late seventies and early eighties, architecture in Manhattan was changing its celebrated territory and objects. Vertical monoliths like Mies Van Der Rohe's *Seagram Building* (1958) or Gordon Bunshaft's *Lever House* (1950-1952) were giving place and fame to buildings like Donald Scutt's *Trump Tower* (1979-1983) or Philip Johnson's *AT&T Building* (1981-1984).[19] It was time for the theory of Simulacrum and the age of Postmodernism in North-American culture. Jean Baudrillard's treatise *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) and Fredric Jameson's text *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1984) stated that condition in distinct order, though matching one another. It was clear that architecture, which is a way to mean space and built environment, intended something else than physical planning and construction. Furthermore, there was Tom Wolfe's book *From Bauhaus to Our House* (1981) commanding populist attacks against 'the whites' at the same time as valuing the narrative discourse over form and function. There were other values in the materials and practices used, he stated.

Throughout these years, studies and projects for Manhattan arose easily on the margins of fiction and reality. Raimund Abraham's study *Times Square Tower* (1984) could be contextualized in both imaginary fiction and valid architecture. Bernard Tschumi's graphic project *The Manhattan Transcripts* (1981) seemed closer to comic boards than to an urban imagery essay. In this work, the technical appeal of the architectural design becomes graphical and cinematic. Tschumi's boards told stories drawn in space and time. Practically parallel, in 1982, *Storefront for Art and Architecture* was inaugurated in the city with the intention to present and discuss contemporary architecture and its needs along with art and design.[20]

In the late eighties the fragment was already everywhere. NYC based architect Lebbeus Woods developed his *Centricity* series (1987-1988) depicting 'an otherworldly portrait of *the immense void of being* through a series of concentric landscape plans and fields of weathered towers'.[21] Meanwhile, Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley were organizing and opening the *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition (1988), which somehow brought the importance of deconstruction in architecture to the public and to another level of practice and theory debate. Even if the exhibition was not about architectures specifically implemented in NYC; it was nonetheless about plural architectures and specific styles.[22] Spaces could be moulded against their common architectural rigidity and gravity. They appeared dislocated and too graphical to be built, like architecture fictions. Often difficult to read, the designs from such authors like Daniel Libeskind, Zaha Hadid, Coop Himmelb(l)au, Frank Gehry, and again Eisenman, Tschumi, and Koolhaas, showed ubiquitous sections, with neither front nor rear façades. On the other hand they seemed very attractive, as if they were born 50 years after the soviet constructivist expression. At a glance, they were familiar with their (de)constructivist title. The section emerged, then, as the extraordinary architectural element in NYC; as maybe it could be in deconstruction. It took command over the plan. Like the early

Diego Rivera's *fresco Frozen Assets* (1931-1932), 'a cross-section through the City,'[23] Manhattan was better understood by its verticality than its horizontality. Like Paul Rudolph's *Lower Manhattan Expressway* design-project (1967/1972), or Gaetano Pesce's *Church of Solitude* (1974-1977), the city was better presented from its guts, from its subterranean architectures and sections, as if it were an organ. Its essence was closer to the 'archaeology of a section'[24] than to an abstract and planned space. It was afterwards clear 'that many a complex structure is defined first and foremost in relation to its section',[25] in a way to comprehend the over, the under, and the juxtaposition of the objects and their meanings.

In the early nineties those architectural projects acted like disfigured objects and organs in a void. Anthony Vidler's *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992), for instance, developed this issue, exposing the description of the mutilated architectural form as an analogy to the human composition. Buildings could be undertaken as bodies 'as (…) cities [were] the seat of the body social and politic'.[26]

Regarding science fiction, the formerly optimistic modern city became, by then, a territory of dirt, density, and anguish. Harry Harrison's book *Make Room! Make Room!* (1966), and its cinematographic version, Richard O. Fleischer's *Soylent Green* (1973), present the story in which NYC demographics have grown up to unsustainable levels. In the film, people's basic requirements augment along with corruption, poverty and military devices up to cannibalistic levels. Either in the book or in the film, topics such as different classes and privileges, aesthetics of war and surveillance, hedonisms and limits were permanent problems to be solved. Hence, the fascinating city from the beginning of the century seemed incapable to deal with these old but growing problems.

Furthermore, NYC also appeared as an unlimited and centrifugal space, with no more standard dimensions. For the record, one could mention various cases like William Gibson's *Burning Chrome* short story (1982) or *Neuromancer* novel (1985), John Wagner and Carlos Ezquerra's *Judge Dredd* comic volumes (1977), or J. G. Ballard's *Hello America* (1981). In *Neuromancer*, NYC became part of a giant urbanscape simply called 'the Sprawl'; a highly dense megalopolis spread from Boston to Washington DC with the urban aesthetics of the human 'conventional prosthetics'.[27] In *Judge Dredd*, NYC became also part of 'Mega-City One'; a continental conurbation spread from Canada to Florida. On the other hand, in *Hello America,* NYC could as well be an open, natural and abandoned space in Ballard's revelation of the uninhabited North America in 2114. In the storyline, NYC had turned into a wild desert and dry place. The 155 Cartesian streets and 12 avenues were now part of an empty and left space. The book's narrator even described that one 'could see dunes that filled the floors of these deserted canyons'.[28] Manhattan lost its congestion to an arid landscape. In this case, curiously, it remains the resemblance to Lebbeus Woods' *Lower Manhattan Project* (1999) in which the Hudson River had also dried up.

It appears that the eighties began as an escape but turned out to be a dead-end. The broken narrative became ordinary, as it happens in Auster's *The New York Trilogy* (1986). Nevertheless, Manhattan territory remained a space of writing and walking, of wander and detachment. In the city, the vagabond subject turned out to be a mark of the urban. As in Baudrillard's *Amérique* (1986), 'In New York, the mad have been set free'.[29] Plus, in Auster's *The New York Trilogy*, and in Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Homeless Vehicle Project* (1987-1989), the main character is the homeless one. Daniel Quinn, the hobo-detective in Auster's story, looks for meaning in his urban routes. His daily drifts become planned letters and sentences leading him to disappearance, even if his steps have no significance. Unintentionally, Quinn writes and maps some letters of *The Tower of Babel* sentence roaming through the streets, designing a Daedalus between identity and place. In this sense, one could also recall Jarmusch's black and white film *Stranger than Paradise* (1984), specifically its first act, fully set in NYC in 1982. The 30-minute segment entitled *The New World* handled, as well, with language problems, almost as a recognized Tower of Babel symptom within family issues. The narrative based in only three dysfunctional characters presents the effortless decision to re-arrange history. With a deconstructed jazz soundtrack by John Lurie, right after the homonymous Lounge Lizards' *debut* (1981), the action is basically centred in one too small apartment for too much domestic difference.

The nineties have begun, though, as a reverse response to the eighties. Just to mention one example that is Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* novel (1991) in which Patrick Bateman, the nihilistic and bored main character, is placed in the opposite side of the status. If the main figure to the eighties was the vagabond or the anarchic-type people Carpenter, Jarmusch, Auster, and Wodiczko have tested; they turned somehow into the wealthy Wall Street yuppies like Bateman, with no other aim than to react versus those same people.

4. Unbuilding

In 1968, Japanese architect Arata Isozaki developed a graphic study about a devastated territory. In the panoramic montage made for the *Electric Labyrinth* installation there was Hiroshima's ground reduced to ashes with slightly traces of the formerly urban structure. *Re-Ruined Hiroshima*, the photomontage, showed an almost annihilated place sufficiently potent to be considered and built upon. In order to accomplish it, Isozaki designed two instable objects that seemed oblique and fragile, with no recognizable shape other than their sections. Those mega structures in Hiroshima's grid and arid landscape seemed nothing else than unbuilding bodies. Supposedly to be presented in the 14th Triennale di Milano,[30] *Re-Ruined Hiroshima* came out to public with some problems, as the exhibition was oddly devastated. Occupied and damaged on the opening day on May 30th, the exhibition did reopen in the following late June, although its main reports and news became the ones about the Triennale occupation and destruction. The participants'

works, including the ones from the Smithson couple or the Archigram group, or the ones from Aldo van Eyck or the New Yorker professor and architect Shadrach Woods, were nearly forgotten. It is fascinating though that today one could only look at Isozaki's original plates in the MoMA archives.

In 1988, twenty years after the ruined Milan Exhibition, Lebbeus Woods argued about his *Centricity* exhibition, held at *Storefront*, that his 'forms [were] very constructed, meant to seem very *built*,'[31] even if they were drawings or models. Now and then, NYC remains incomplete in fiction and reality. Manhattan rests 'unbuilt'[32] and unerected. As the myth of Babel, in continuous destruction and deconstruction, the eighties only came out to represent one episode of that very perpetual process in the city. Afterwards, and since that decade, there have been no stable solutions to apprehend this contemporary scape, neither in architecture culture nor in science fiction. The plausible thing is that there is neither difference nor distance between destruction and deconstruction in the human and urban realm of NYC. As Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory put in one interview with Paul Auster, it 'seems (…) this urban nightmare scene [in *In The Country of Last Things*] is (…) not too different, in fact, from what you can find right here in New York'.[33] It looks like there is only indistinctness within the fictional and the real mechanisms. Moreover, and to complete this impression, let us just remind ourselves, when asked about the novel's post-apocalyptic science fiction tone, Auster argued that it had never been on his mind though, he continues

> Even though the book is quite fantastical at times, that doesn't mean it's not firmly anchored in historical realities. (…)
> There are specific references (…) to events taking place in the Third World today - not to speak of New York, which is rapidly turning into a Third World city before our eyes.[34]

In Max Page's volume *The City's End* (2005) the architectural historian puts one hypothesis for the continuing celebrations within destruction of the *Stone Colossus*. As the author entitled the opening chapter *One*, NYC has been dealing with unique characteristics on 'beauty and terror',[35] from the mid 19th to the early 21st century. Fear became a premonition. Through disaster fiction, Page numbered and analysed dystopias gathered in the city, until its real and predicable 'end' in September 2001. Today, after the tragedy and trauma, it remains written both on the pages and the walls that 'everyday is 9/11'.[36] It seems both science fiction and architectural culture came from the same assemblage reality. In the end, there are no oppositions within this city.

Notes

[1] Le Corbusier, 'I Am an American', *When the Cathedrals were White: A Journey to the Country of Tiny People* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947), 44-45.

[2] Max Page, *The City's End: Two Centuries of Fantasies, Fears, and Premonitions of New York's Destruction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 101.

[3] Leon Kroll, 'Building New York', *The Literary Digest* 52.12 (1916), cover.

[4] It is significant to realize that the city population in 1930 was much the same as in 1980.

[5] Nathaniel Hawthorne, Epigraph to *In the Country of Last Things*, by Paul Auster (New York/Toronto: Penguin Books, 1988), vii.

[6] Paul Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, 1-2.

[7] John Carpenter, *Escape from New York*, dir. John Carpenter, released 10 July 1981 (Santa Monica: MGM Home Entertainment, 2000), min1.

[8] Ibid., min2.

[9] Ibid., min2.

[10] Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

[11] Brian Wood, 'Creator's Notes (on the 3rd edition)', *Channel Zero* (San Francisco: AiT/Planet Lar, 2003).

[12] Jennifer Cotter, 'Posthumanist Feminism and the Embodiment of Class', *Visions of Humanity in Cyberculture, Cyberspace and Science Fiction 2013*. Viewed on 5 August 2014.
http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/critical-issues/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/jcotter-visions8-wpaper.pdf.

[13] Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, 101.

[14] Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, 'An Interview with Paul Auster,' *Contemporary Literature* 33.1 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, Spring, 1992), 18.

[15] Mark Wigley, 'Unbuilding Architecture', *The Architecture of Deconstruction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 55.

[16] Curiously, the names of two former prominent architectural journals founded in that era in the United States of America: *Oppositions* (1973-1984) and *Assemblage* (1986-2000).

[17] K. Michael Hays, *Architecture's Desire: Reading the Late Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 14-15.

[18] Rem Koolhaas, 'Introduction', *Delirious New York* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1994), 10.

[19] One could still add that Johnson's building is often considered the first architectural Postmodern suited example.

[20] One could recall the headquarters building, designed by architect Steven Holl

and artist Vito Acconci, in 1992, mostly recognizable by its definition of the private and public schemes reproduced on the front façade.

[21] 'Lebbeus Woods drawings and models on view at SFMOMA'.
Viewed 10 May 2013, http://www.designboom.com/architecture/lebbeus-woods-drawings-and-models-on-view-at-sfmoma/.

[22] In opposition to Philip Johnson and Henry Russel Hitchcock's previous *International Exhibition of Modern Architecture* (1932), also held at MoMA, that *defined* one 'International Style'.

[23] Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, 224.

[24] Jacques Guillerme and Hélène Vérin, 'The Archaeology of Section,' *Perspecta* 25 (1989): 226.

[25] Ibid., 236.

[26] Anthony Vidler, 'Architecture Dismembered', *The Architectural Uncanny* (Cambridge-Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992), 69-84.

[27] Elizabeth Hayes, 'The Prosthetic Paradox: Body and Identity in William Gibson's Sprawl', *Visions of Humanity in Cyberculture, Cyberspace and Science Fiction 2013*, Viewed on 5 August 2014. http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/critical-issues/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/hayesvisionspaper.pdf.

[28] James Ballard, *Hello America* (London: Granada, 1983), 23.

[29] Jean Baudrillard, 'New York', *America* (London/New York: Verso, 1991), 19.

[30] Themed and titled 'The Greater Number: International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts and of Modern Architecture'.

[31] Joseph Giovannini, 'Currents; Visionary's Dream City on Paper,' *New York Times*, February 18, 1988. Viewed 15 May 2013,
http://www.nytimes.com/1988/02/18/garden/currents-visionary-s-dream-city-on-paper.html.

[32] Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction*, 35.

[33] McCaffery and Gregory, 'An Interview with Paul Auster', 18.

[34] Ibid., 18-19.

[35] Page, *The City's End: Two Centuries of Fantasies, Fears, and Premonitions of New York's Destruction*, 1.

[36] Brian Wood and Riccardo Burchielli, 'On the Ground,' *DMZ* Vol. 1 (New York: Vertigo/DC Comics, 2006), 9.

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