

MIKE DAVIS

THE FLAMES OF NEW YORK

Lower Manhattan was soon a furnace of crimson flames, from which there was no escape. Cars, railways, ferries, all had ceased, and never a light lit the way of the distracted fugitives in that dusky confusion but the light of burning . . . Dust and black smoke came pouring into the street, and were presently shot with red flame.¹

THIS IMAGE, part of a long warning note about the ‘Massacre of New York’, slumbered for nearly a century on a back shelf of the New York Public Library. H. G. Wells, that socialist Nostradamus, penned it in 1907. The American edition of his *War in the Air* includes an extraordinary illustration (is it not from CNN?) of a firestorm devouring Wall Street, with Trinity Church smouldering in the background. Wells also offered some shrewd and unfriendly thoughts about New York’s messianic belief in its exemption from the bad side of history.

For many generations New York had taken no heed of war, save as a thing that happened far away, that affected prices and supplied the newspapers with exciting headlines and pictures. The New Yorkers felt that war in their own land was an impossible thing . . . They saw war as they saw history, through an iridescent mist, deodorized, scented indeed, with all its essential cruelties tactfully hidden away. They cheered the flag by habit and tradition, they despised other nations, and whenever there was an international difficulty they were intensely patriotic, that is to say, they were ardently against any native politician who did not say, threaten, and do harsh and uncompromising things to the antagonist people.²

When a foreign policy dominated by the Trusts and Monopolies entangles America in a general War of the Powers, New Yorkers, still oblivious to any real danger, rally to flags, confetti and an imperial Presidency.

And then suddenly, into a world peacefully busied for the most part upon armaments and the perfection of explosives, war came . . . The immediate

effect on New York . . . was merely to intensify her normal vehemence. Great crowds assembled . . . to listen to and cheer patriotic speeches, and there was a veritable epidemic of little flags and buttons . . . strong men wept at the sight of the national banner . . . the trade in small arms was enormously stimulated . . . and it was dangerous not to wear a war button . . . One of the most striking facts historically about this war, and one that makes complete the separation between the methods of warfare and democracy, was the effectual secrecy of Washington . . . They did not bother to confide a single fact of their preparations to the public. They did not even condescend to talk to Congress. They burked and suppressed every inquiry. The war was fought by the President and the Secretary of State in an entirely autocratic manner.

But the Americans, blinded by the solipsistic delusion that they live in a history solely of their own making, are easy targets for that scheming New Assyria: Wilhelmine Germany. Surprise-attacked by the Imperial zeppelin fleet, ragtime New York becomes the first modern city destroyed from the air. In a single day, haughty Manhattanites are demoted to slaughtered natives.

As the airships sailed along they smashed up the city as a child will shatter its cities of brick and card. Below they left ruins and blazing conflagrations and heaped and scattered dead: men, women and children mixed together as though they had been no more than Moors, or Zulus, or Chinese.³

I

The Mask. Look at the Mask.

Sand, Crocodile, and Fear above New York.

Federico García Lorca⁴

If Wells, looking through his Edwardian spyglass, foresaw the end of American exceptionalism in eerily accurate focus, his is only one of myriad visions hurled back at us since the World Trade Centre became the womb of all terror. Lorca's New York poems, for example, are so saturated with fear and prophecy that he originally entitled them 'Introduction to Death'. On the original Black Tuesday in 1929, the Andalusian poet wandered through the canyons of Wall Street,

¹ H. G. Wells, *The War in the Air*, New York 1908, pp. 210–11; hereafter WA.

² WA, pp. 181–82.

³ WA, pp. 182–83, 186, and 211.

⁴ 'Dance of Death' (1929). See *Poet in New York*, New York 1998, p. 41.

watching in amazement as ruined investors flung themselves from windows of monstrous buildings. 'The ambulances collected suicides', he wrote, 'whose hands were full of rings.' Amidst the 'merciless silence of money', Lorca 'felt the sensation of real death, death without hope, death that is nothing but rottenness.' It was easy, then, for him to visualize the inevitable destruction of lower Manhattan by 'hurricanes of gold' and 'tumults of windows'—a Gypsy intuition, perhaps, of the deadly black cloud that engulfed Wall Street in September.⁵ Or maybe the deathcloud was actually that 'storm blowing from Paradise . . . piling wreckage upon wreckage' that Walter Benjamin warned about.⁶ In either case, it was not only 'what we call progress' (that is to say, the real history of the American imperium in the Middle East) that has blown back, but also all of our imagined catastrophes, vengeful angels and days of reckoning.

The walled suburb on End of History Lane turned out to be only one subway stop from *The War of the Worlds*. The *fatwa* from a cave in Afghanistan sent amock every invader and monster that ever thrilled fans of *Amazing Tales* or Universal Pictures. Wells's zeppelins rain fiery death on Wall Street. King Kong and Godzilla pulverize Fifth Avenue. Extraterrestrials broil Soho in brimstone and pitch. Nightmare spores turn Radio City into a ghost town. Fu Manchu and the evil Ming have a cousin in Afghanistan. Sci-Fi happens. Indeed, anything can happen. But the frisson is different than we expected.

Fear studies

Indeed September 11 has been societal exorcism in reverse. It is important to recall the already fraught collective condition before Real Terror arrived in a fleet of hijacked airliners. The *X-Files* defined the 1990s in the same way that *Honeymooners* had defined the 1950s. It was an age of inexplicable anxiety. Although it seems laughable now, millions purportedly trembled before the occult menaces of black helicopters, killer asteroids, maddog teenagers, recovered memories, Lyme disease, Satanic preschools, road rage, Ebola fever, Colombian cartels, computer viruses, Chinese atomic spies and the like. There was a diagnostic consensus amongst social scientists and culture theorists that Americans

⁵ *Poet in New York*, pp. 192–93.

⁶ 'This storm is what we call progress.' Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, New York 1969, p. 257 ff.

were suffering from acute, possibly terminal, hypochondria. On the eve of the Y2K non-apocalypse, ‘Fear Studies’—or ‘Sociophobics’ as it is sometimes called—had emerged as the hottest new niche in academia. Dozens of pundits were raving about the ‘mainstreaming of conspiracy culture’, the arrival of ‘risk society’, the ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’, the ‘plague of paranoia’, the ‘mean world syndrome’, or the newly discovered role of the amygdala as the ‘centre of the [brain’s] wheel of fear.’⁷

In the best of the genre, Barry Glassner systematically debunked some of the more common goblins—young Black men, street drugs, terrorist political correctness, and so on—that deliberately spook the path toward public understanding of such social problems as unemployment, bad schools, racism and world hunger. He carefully showed how media-conjured scares were guilty ‘oblique expressions’ of the post-liberal refusal to reform real conditions of inequality. Fear had become the chief ballast of the rightward shift since 1980. Americans, in his view, ‘were afraid of the wrong things’, and were being hoaxed by the latter-day equivalents of Orson Welles’s notorious ‘War of the Worlds’ broadcast. ‘The Martians,’ he underscored, ‘aren’t coming.’⁸

But, alas, they have come, brandishing box-cutters. Although movies, like kites and women’s faces, are banned in the Hindu Kush version of utopia, the attacks on New York and Washington DC were organized as epic horror cinema with meticulous attention to *mise en scène*. Indeed the hijacked planes were aimed to impact precisely at the vulnerable border between fantasy and reality. In contrast to the 1938 radio invasion, thousands of people who turned on their televisions on 9.11 were convinced that the cataclysm was just a broadcast, a hoax. They thought they were watching rushes from the latest Bruce Willis film. Nothing since has thrown cold water on this sense of illusion. The more improbable the event, the more familiar the image. The ‘Attack on America’, and its sequels, ‘America Fights Back’ and ‘America Freaks Out’ have

⁷ Some representative studies: Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling and Making Mock*, New York 1998; Jane Franklin, ed., *The Politics of the Risk Society*, Oxford 1998; Nancy Schultz, ed., *Fear Itself: Enemies Real and Imagined in American Culture*, West Lafayette 1999; Paul Newman, *A History of Terror: Fear and Dread Through the Ages*, New York 2000; and Robert Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, New Haven 2001.

⁸ Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things*, New York 1999, p. 203.

continued to unspool as a succession of celluloid hallucinations each of which can be rented from the corner video shop: *The Siege*, *Independence Day*, *Executive Decision*, *Outbreak*, and so on. George W. Bush, who has a bigger studio, meanwhile responds to Osama bin Laden, as one *auteur* to another, with his own fiery wide-angle hyperboles.

Has history, then, simply become a crazy montage of prefabricated horrors crafted in Hollywood writers' huts? Certainly the Pentagon thought so when it secretly conscripted a group of famous screenwriters, including Spike Jonze (*Being John Malkovich*) and Steven De Souza (*Die Hard*), to 'brainstorm about terrorist targets and schemes in America and to offer solutions to those threats'. The working group is based at the Institute for Creative Technology, an Army joint venture with the University of Southern California, which mines Hollywood expertise to develop interactive war-games with sophisticated story paths. One of its products is *Real War*, a video game that trains military leaders to 'battle against insurgents in the Middle East'. When on 20 September an unidentified 'foreign intelligence agency' warned the FBI of a potential attack on a major Hollywood studio, it was the last twist in a Möbius strip weaving simulation into reality and back again.⁹

The interminable uncanny

Mere scepticism seems powerless to remove the fantastic mask worn by such events. When hypochondriacs actually contract the plague of their worst fear, their ontologies tend to be thrown out of kilter. Watching the South Tower of the WTC collapsing on its thousands of victims, a friend's child blurted out: 'But this isn't real the way that real things are real.' Exactly. Nor does it feel real the way real things do. There is a proper name, of course, for this eerie sensation of reality invaded by fantasy. 'An *uncanny* effect', Freud wrote, 'is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality.'¹⁰

I am not sure, however, that Freud anticipated such a Walpurgis Night of uncanny doubles and repetitions. The Israeli psychoanalyst Yolanda

⁹ *Los Angeles Times*, 21 September 2001; and Reuters, 8 October 2001.

¹⁰ 'The Uncanny' (1919), in *Volume 14: Art and Literature*, The Penguin Freud Library, London 1985, p. 367.

Gampel, an expert on second-generation legacies of the Holocaust, has addressed this more extreme condition which she calls 'interminable uncanniness'. It is a sensibility—now perhaps being mass franchised—that usurps the lives of those who have witnessed an 'astounding, unbelievable, and unreal reality', like mass murder. 'They no longer fully believed their own eyes: they had difficulty distinguishing between this unreal reality and their own imagination. [Moreover] such an assault on the boundary between fantasy and reality becomes traumatic in itself and leads to great fear of one's thoughts and expectations.'¹¹

Unquestionably there is also a large and perhaps short-lived dimension of old-fashioned hysteria. When the mayor of Chicago has to reassure his citizenry over television that a glob of guacamole on a sidewalk is not some deadly andromeda strain, then we are back in the realm of familiar panics like Welles's radio Martians in New Jersey or the Japanese 'bombing' of Los Angeles in the aftermath of Pearl Harbour. But when hysteria subsides, the uncanny will likely endure, as Gampel explains, 'not [as] a symptom, behaviour, or neurotic organization', but as 'lived experience': a permanent foreboding about urban space as potential Ground Zero.

II

*The bourgeois' hat flies off his pointed head . . .
Trains fall off bridges.*

Jakob van Hoddis¹²

From a psychoanalytic perspective, of course, there is more to the story. Freud defined the uncanny as always involving some 'return of the repressed', as when, 'after the collapse of their religion, [a people's] gods turn into demons.'¹³ (Or their skyscrapers into infernos?) But what is the repressed root of modern urban fear? What is the ultimate psychosocial substrate upon which politics (and what else is it?) has deposited

¹¹ Yolanda Gampel, 'The Interminable Uncanny', in Leo Rangell and Rena Moses-Hrushovski, eds, *Psychoanalysis at the Political Border*, Madison, 1996, pp. 85–96.

¹² 'World's End' (1910); see Johannes Becher, 'On Jakob van Hoddis', in Paul Raabe, ed., *The Era of German Expressionism*, Woodstock 1985, pp. 44–45.

¹³ 'The uncanny [*Unheimlich*] is something which is secretly familiar [*heimlich-heimisch*], which has undergone repression and then returned from it . . .' 'The Uncanny', pp. 358 and 368.

layer after layer of spectral dangers: fear of the poor, fear of crime, fear of Blackness, and now fear of bin Laden?

The most interesting answer, at least within the Marxist tradition, comes from Ernst Bloch. Although primarily known as a dialectician of hope, Bloch was also attentive to the uncanny qualities of the big city. As the one unrepentant Expressionist in the ranks of Western Marxism, he retained that apocalyptic sensibility that had first burst forth in the revolutionary poem 'World's End' that Jakob van Hoddis read in the *Das Neopathetische Cabaret* in late 1910. 'Something uncanny was in the air', and *Expressionismus* was the lightning rod that captured urban fear on the brink of the First World War and converted it into a prefigurative vision of the horrors to come.¹⁴ The poems of George Heym and Georg Trakl, and the canvasses of Franz Marc, Ernst Kirchner, Erich Heckel and, above all, Ludwig Meidner were ablaze with clairvoyant images of murder victims, tumbling tenements, exploding cities and flying bodies. Indeed Meidner—who wrote that 'the street bears the apocalyptic within itself—could not look out of his window without being shattered by the imminence of disaster. 'My brain bled dreadful visions', he wrote of the torrid summer of 1913. 'I could see nothing but a thousand skeletons jiggling in a row. Many graves and burned cities writhed across the plains.'¹⁵

Black utopia

In the equally ominous year of 1929, Bloch returned to this eschatological nervousness. In 'The Anxiety of the Engineer', he explains the 'fearful bourgeois', intriguingly, in terms of the contrasting urban ecologies of capitalist and precapitalist cities. In the latter (he uses Naples as an example), there is no delusion of total command over Nature, just constant ecological adaptation. The city is an imperfect and carnivalesque improvisation that yields to the fluxes of a dynamic Mediterranean environment. 'Things are allowed to remain in a half-way real condition, and delight is taken in the way things come to their

¹⁴ 'These two stanzas, these eight lines [van Hoddis's poem] seem to have transformed us into different beings, to have carried us up out of a world of apathetic bourgeoisie which we despised . . .' Becher would call it the 'Marseillaise of the Expressionist Revolution': 'On Jakob van Hoddis', p. 44.

¹⁵ Quoted in Carol Eiel, *The Apocalyptic Landscapes of Ludwig Meidner*, Los Angeles 1989, pp. 65 and 72.

own equilibrium and completion.’ Although the objective hazards (volcanoes, earthquakes, landslides and tsunamis) are arguably greater than for any other large European city, Naples is on familiar terms (*heimisch* in Freud’s sense) with the ‘old dragon’ of catastrophic nature. Anxiety does not infuse daily life on the slopes of Vesuvius.

In the ‘Americanized big city’, by contrast, the quest for the bourgeois utopia of a totally calculable and safe environment has paradoxically generated radical insecurity (*Unheimlich*). Indeed ‘where technology has achieved an apparent victory over the limits of nature . . . the coefficient of known and, more significantly, unknown danger has increased proportionately.’ In part, this is because the metropolis’s interdependent technological systems—as Americans discovered in the autumn of 2001—have become ‘simultaneously so complex and so vulnerable’. More profoundly, the capitalist big city is ‘extremely dangerous’ because it dominates rather than cooperates with Nature. (Although Bloch has the old-fashioned centralized industrial city in mind, his argument would presumably apply to the networked and polycentric metroregion as well.)

The Uncanny is precisely that ‘nothingness [non-integration with Nature] that stands behind the mechanized world’. Although Bloch is acutely aware of the imminent dangers of fascism and a new World War, he insists that the deepest structure of urban fear is not Wells’s war in the air, but ‘detachment and distance from the natural landscape’.

The subject is teetering on the brink of absolute nihilism; and if this mechanization with or without purpose, this universal depletion of meaning, should come to fulfilment, then the future void may prove equal to all the death anxieties of late antiquity and all the medieval anxieties about hell.¹⁶

Years later in *The Principle of Hope* (1938–47), Bloch again reflected on the relationship between modern anxiety and urban-technological ‘perversion.’ This time he focused on science fiction and catastrophe. His pretext was J. Grandville’s bizarre 1844 book, *Another World*, with its images of a monstrously technologized Nature: giant iron insects, gas-lamps as big as the moon, men with amazing mechanical prostheses, and so on. In Bloch’s interpretation, the ‘schizophrenic petit

¹⁶ ‘The Anxiety of the Engineer’, in *Literary Essays*, Stanford 1998, pp. 306–8 and 312.

bourgeois' Grandville (who 'died three years later in a madhouse') was the Hieronymus Bosch of the steam age, and his book is a huge anxiety-dream 'full of the terror of the technological challenge and of what it is calling'. Yet the landscape of terror is also, as in Bosch, voluptuous and nearly infinite in irony. Reminding us that hell is full of laughter, Bloch calls this cataclysm where everything bad is foretold in dark humour a '*black utopia*.'¹⁷ He might have been thinking of New York.

III

*All these April nights combing the streets alone a skyscraper has
obsessed him—a grooved building jutting up with uncountable
bright windows falling onto him out of a scudding sky.*

John Dos Passos¹⁸

'Irony,' of course, is now an illegal alien in the land of liberty. Even professional ironists like Christopher Hitchens police the sacred 'no irony' zone that surrounds the ruins of the World Trade Centre. Otherwise it might be possible to draw various parallels between Jimmy Herf's nightmare in *Manhattan Transfer* of a skyscraper falling on him and the hatless bourgeois of the Expressionist apocalypse. Urban anxiety snakes like a 50,000-volt current through Dos Passos's famed novel (called 'expressionist' by many reviewers), written a few years after Italian anarchists had exploded a wagon-load of dynamite in front of J. P. Morgan's offices on Wall Street in September 1920, resulting in 40 deaths and 200 injuries.

The horse and wagon were blown to bits. Glass showered down from office windows, and awnings twelve stories above the street burst into flames. People fled in terror as a great cloud of dust enveloped the area. In Morgan's office Thomas Joyce of the securities department fell dead on his desk amid a rubble of plaster and glass. Outside scores of bodies littered the streets. Blood was everywhere.¹⁹

Dos Passos's New York, like Bloch's Berlin, is a great engine roaring down tracks that engineers have yet to build, toward destinations

¹⁷ *Principle of Hope*, vol. 1, Cambridge, MA 1986, pp. 434–35.

¹⁸ *Manhattan Transfer*, New York 1925, p. 365. 'Skyscrapers go up like flames, in flames, flames': p. 253.

¹⁹ Paul Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background*, Princeton 1991, p. 205.

unknown. The sheer out-of-control velocity of the metropolis, including the drunken swaying of its arrogant skyline, is the master theme of *Manhattan Transfer*. It is not surprising that passengers on this runaway train should be more than a little anxious. In the end, Jimmy Herf answers his own rhetorical question—‘But what’s the use of spending your whole life fleeing the City of Destruction?’—by hitching a ride out of town. (‘How fur ye goin?’ asks the truck driver. ‘I dunno’, he answers. ‘. . . Pretty far.’)²⁰

It was the hubris of New York’s landowners and cops in the 1990s that ruthless ‘Zero Tolerance’ could expunge this constitutive anxiety: the ‘edginess’ that generations of twenty-somethings have sought with the desperation of junkies. The Gotham express was shunted into a suburban siding, a national showcase that ‘big cities were again safe’. Ruling from his so-called ‘bunker’ (Emergency Command Center) on the 23rd floor of the World Trade Centre, Mayor Giuliani reshaped Manhattan into ‘an electric urban theme park as safe and, some said, sterile as a suburban mall.’²¹

The worm in the apple

In a fierce new biography of Giuliani, the *Village Voice*’s Wayne Barrett shows how a police department with a dangerously high testosterone level became the city’s urban planning agency.

The bunker was emblematic of an administration that had unconstitutionally closed City Hall Park to all but mayorally sanctioned public spectacle, blockaded bridges to kill a cab protest, barricaded midtown crosswalks to regulate pedestrians and yanked the homeless out of shelter beds on the coldest night of the year to enforce ancient bench warrants for open beer can violations.²²

The media generally viewed the fascistic bullying of squeegee men, panhandlers, cabbies, street vendors and welfare recipients as a small price to pay for the triumphs of having brought Disney (the ultimate imprimatur of suburban safety) to Times Square and tourism back to New York.

²⁰ *Manhattan Transfer*, pp. 366, 404.

²¹ Wayne Barrett, *Rudy! An Investigative Biography of Rudolph Giuliani*, New York 2000, p. 2.

²² *Rudy!*, p. 6.

Now folks in Iowa watch grisly television footage of the FBI raking the rubble at Fresh Kills for rotting body parts (fireworks are used to keep the landfill's huge turkey vultures away) and thank God that they still live on the farm or, at least, in a gated suburb of Des Moines. However much they may admire the Churchillian pose struck by Giuliani or the fortitude of New York's rescue workers, family vacations are not usually envisioned as exercises in 'overcoming fear'. So they stay at home in droves: as do the myriads of low-wage, largely immigrant hotel and restaurant workers laid off by the tourist depression. Every ancient connotation of the Big City as the sinister abode of danger, death and infection has been revalorized by the almost weekly 'terrorist alerts' and sanctioned panics that have followed the September attacks.

Although many surprises undoubtedly lurk down river, it is already clear that the advent of 'catastrophic terrorism' in tandem with what may likely be the worst recession since 1938 will produce major mutations in the American city. There is little doubt, for instance, that bin Laden et al have put a silver stake in the heart of the 'downtown revival' in New York and elsewhere. The traditional central city where buildings and land values soar toward the sky is not yet dead, but the pulse is weakening. The current globalization of fear will accelerate the high-tech dispersal of centralized organizations, including banks, securities firms, government offices, and telecommunications centres, into regional multi-site networks. Terror, in effect, has become the business partner of technology providers like Sun Microsystems and Cisco Systems, who have long argued that distributed processing (sprawling PC networks) mandates a 'distributed workplace'. In this spatial model (of which the Al-Qaeda network might be an exemplar), satellite offices, telecommuting and, if the need be, comfortable bunkers will replace most of the functions of that obsolete behemoth, the skyscraper. Very tall buildings have long been fundamentally uneconomical; indeed the absurdly overbuilt World Trade Centre—a classic Rockefeller boondoggle—was massively subsidized by public-sector tenants.²³ (Will the hijacked airliners someday be

²³ Robert Fitch points out that the clearances for the WTC displaced 30,000 jobs and, through leveraging the development of adjacent Battery Park City, eliminated the critical lower Manhattan docks as well. 'Something had gone seriously wrong with the priorities and politics of a city where 30,000 people can be made to disappear from their jobs and stores for a state office building [the WTC is owned by the Port Authority].' *The Assassination of New York*, New York 1993, pp. 140–41.

seen as having played the same role in the extinction of skyscrapers as the Chixulub asteroid in the demise of dinosaurs?)

Meanwhile, the 'Fear Economy,' as the business press has labelled the complex of military and security firms rushing to exploit the national nervous breakdown, will grow fat amidst the general famine. Fear, of course, has been reshaping American city life since at least the late 1960s; but the new terror provides a powerful Keynesian multiplier. Thus the already million-strong army of low-wage security guards is expected to increase 50 per cent or more in the next decade; while video surveillance, finally beefed up to the British standard with face-recognition software, will strip the last privacy from daily routine. The security regime of airport departure lounges will likely provide a template for the regulation of crowds at malls, shopping concourses, sports events, and elsewhere. Americans will be expected to express gratitude as they are scanned, frisked, imaged, tapped and interrogated 'for their own protection'. Venture capital will flood into avant-garde sectors developing germ-warfare sensors and threat-profile software. As the evolution of home security already illustrates, the discrete technologies of surveillance, environmental monitoring and data-processing will grow into a single integrated system. 'Security', in other words, will become a full-fledged urban utility like water and power.

Despite massive plans for 'hardening' and 'terror-proofing' downtown public spaces and monumental buildings, however, most white-collar workers and managers will prefer to consume enhanced security closer to their suburban homes.²⁴ Physical security retrofits—the reinforcement of building structures, vapour-and-trace detection systems, bollards and traffic barricades, bomb mitigation containers, smart doors, metal detectors, bomb-proof trash cans, biometric surveillance portals, reduced surface and underground parking, and so on—will impose huge and unavoidable expenses for cities trying to shore up their downtown economies, but they are unlikely to stem the new exodus of jobs and tax resources. Massive public-sector subsidies to developers and corporate tenants likewise may slow but probably won't reverse the trend toward

²⁴ For a sobering discussion of the costs of protecting Times Square, Grand Central, St. Patrick's Cathedral and the Statue of Liberty, see David Barstow, 'Envisioning an Expensive Future in the Brave New World of Fortress New York', *New York Times*, 16 September 2001.

deconcentration. In addition, as self-advertised ‘world cities’ hunker down for the long siege, urban economists and fiscal analysts must wrestle with the new demon of ‘de-globalization’: the portion of global service production and international tourism that may be lost forever.

Needless to say, all this adds up to a fiscal crisis of a magnitude that may dwarf the notorious municipal meltdown of the mid-1970s. Certainly this is the case in New York City where Felix Rohatyn, the city’s bank-appointed financial overlord from 1973 to 1993, has warned of approaching bankruptcy as City Hall grapples with a projected \$6 billion deficit in a \$40 billion budget.²⁵ His forecast is especially grim for the new immigrant working class already buried under the rubble of the city’s fallen tourist and service industries. As failed Democratic mayoral candidate, the robotic Mark Green, liked to warn, the reconstruction of Lower Manhattan ‘may require sacrifice from others’. Since Giuliani-era crime control is sacrosanct, as is the goodwill of big business, budget-cutters will hack away at lifeline public services—housing, libraries, sanitation, recreation, job programmes, and the like—in New York’s neglected Black and Latino neighbourhoods. Whatever twin-tower replica or monumental novelty eventually fills the void in Lower Manhattan, it will likely be financed by savage retrenchment in Washington Heights, Mott Haven and Brownsville. So much for the famous ‘solidarity’ of New Yorkers.²⁶

IV

*In an immediate and inclusive way, suspicion
of the Arabs became second nature.*

Franz Fanon²⁷

Long ago a tourist in New York sent a postcard home. ‘If all the world became America’, wrote the poet Sayyid Qutb, ‘it would undoubtedly be the disaster of humanity.’ Seconded by the Egyptian government to

²⁵ ‘Fiscal Disaster the City Can’t Face Alone’, *New York Times*, 9 October 2001.

²⁶ ‘In the new ethic of shared sacrifice, what sacrifice will he [the next mayor] ask of the business community? Neither Bloomberg nor Green could give me a satisfactory answer.’ James Traub, ‘No-Fun City’, *New York Times Magazine*, 4 November 2001, p. 41.

²⁷ ‘Racist Fury in France’ (1959), in *Toward the African Revolution*, New York 1967, p. 163.

study US educational methods, Qutb disembarked at the 42nd Street Pier in autumn 1948 an admirer of liberal modernity. But he was revulsed by Truman America and underwent a deep religious reconversion. He returned to Cairo two years later a fervent adherent of the Muslim Brotherhood and was soon arrested as its leading propagandist. After eleven years in prison, he was hung in 1966 on trumped-up charges of conspiring to overthrow Nasser. Qutb is universally acclaimed as the major philosopher of radical Islamism, if not literally, as the *New York Times* alleges, the ‘intellectual grandfather to Osama bin Laden and his fellow terrorists’. His masterpiece, *Milestones* (1964), is routinely described as the Islamist version of Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?*²⁸

Why did Qutb become the Anti-Whitman, recoiling in disgust from the legendary excitement of Manhattan? Understanding his hostility to the self-proclaimed ‘capital of the twentieth century’ might shed some light on the genealogy of the Muslim milieu that have applauded the destruction of US capitalism’s most monumental symbol. Pop analysis, of course, fits the person into the prefabricated stereotype. Thus for Robert Worth and Judith Shulevitz (writing separately in the *New York Times*), the 42-year-old Egyptian literary critic and poet was, like all Muslim fanatics, a prude scandalized by big city ‘decadence’, by the Kinsey Report, by dancing and sexual promiscuity. Indeed Qutb did complain about the ‘pornographic’ content of much American popular culture, just as he criticized the national obsession with tending lawns to the neglect of family life and the crass materialism that smothered charity. But the great scandal of New York—and his reaction was the same as García Lorca’s twenty years before—was ‘evil and fanatic racial discrimination’. No doubt Qutb, a black man from Upper Egypt, had wounding encounters with Jim Crow.²⁹

²⁸ Robert Worth, ‘The Deep Intellectual Roots of Islamic Terror’, *New York Times*, 13 October 2001; and Anthony Shadid, *Legacy of the Prophet: Despots, Democrats, and the New Politics of Islam*, Boulder 2001, p. 58. For a balanced assessment of Qutb’s thought—a fascinating combination of anarcho-humanism and Koranic chiasm—see Ahmad Moussali, *Moderate and Radical Islamic Fundamentalism*, Tallahassee 1999, chapter 5.

²⁹ Worth, ‘Roots of Islamic Terror’; Judith Shulevitz, ‘The Close Reader: At War with the World’, *New York Times Book Review*, 21 October 2001; and *Legacy of the Prophet*, p. 57. See also John Calvert, ‘The World is an Undutiful Boy: Sayyid Qutb’s American Experience’, *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2000.

Qutb's tourist experiences today might be more traumatic. He might be in solitary confinement, without access to relatives or a lawyer, for the 'terrorist' crime of having overstayed his visa or simply having aroused the suspicion of his neighbours. The real burden of the new urban fear—the part that is not hallucinatory or hyperbolized—is borne by those who fit the racial profile of white anxiety: Arab and Muslim Americans, but also anyone with an unusual head-covering, Middle Eastern passport or unpopular beliefs about Israel. For those caught squarely in the middle of this paranoid *gestalt*—say, a Pakistani cab driver in New York or a Sikh electronics engineer in California—there is the threat of violence, but, even more, the certainty of surveillance by powers 'vast and cool and unsympathetic'.³⁰ 'Otherness'—Arabs, Korans and spores—has become the central obsession of that interminable Pentagon briefing and George W. Bush celebration that passes for American television. Indeed, the 'Threat to America' (another network branding) is depicted as essentially extraterrestrial: the Middle East is the Angry Red Planet sending its monsters to live amongst us and murder us.

Tous martiens

Very little of the violent domestic backlash has been reported in the mainstream media. The big city dailies and news networks have shown patriotic concern for the US image abroad by downplaying what otherwise might have been recognized as the good ole boy equivalent of *Kristallnacht*. Yet even the fragmentary statistics are chilling. In the six weeks after 11 September, civil rights groups estimate that there were at least six murders and one thousand serious assaults committed against people perceived as 'Arab' or 'Muslim', including several hundred attacks on Sikhs.³¹ The *Texas Observer*, a progressive weekly that has refused to low-profile domestic terror, reported in early October on the violence that had 'ricocheted' through Dallas suburbs in the immediate aftermath of the New York and DC attacks. In addition to the hate murder of an immigrant Pakistani grocery proprietor, three mosques were bombed or shot at, a Romanian jogger was beaten because he looked 'Middle Eastern', and two Ethiopians were stabbed while touring the Fort Worth botanical gardens. Local Muslim leaders

³⁰ H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds*, London 1898, p. 1.

³¹ Tally of hate crimes from Council on American–Islamic Relations, 22 October; murders, see *Washington Post*, 26 October 2001.

blamed the news media, particularly the Dallas *Morning News*, for helping instigate violence with inflammatory headlines like ‘Soldiers of Terror Living Next Door!’³²

If such incidents recall the ‘Arab hunts’ in metropolitan France during the Algerian War that Franz Fanon denounced (‘even a South American was riddled with bullets because he looked like a North African’),³³ then the Justice Department’s frenzied search for Al-Qaeda ‘sleepers’ stirs memories of that other great ‘terrorist manhunt,’ the notorious Palmer raids of 1919–20 when thousands of immigrant radicals were arrested without warrant or cause, and then hundreds deported, after a series of package-bomb explosions in Washington DC. (The bombing of Wall Street was assumed to have been anarchist revenge for the deportations.) This time the *New York Times* reports that 11,000-plus have been arrested and detained in the course of the government’s ‘terrorism investigation’.³⁴ Many of these have disappeared into a secretive federal maze, where they have been denied lawyers, beaten by guards and inmates, blindfolded, subjected to sensory deprivation, and forced to take lie-detector tests. At least one detainee has died and scores, against whom no criminal charges have been filed, are being held under the indefinite detention permitted by immigration law. Only four are rumoured to have any direct connexion to bin Laden. Most simply have overstayed visas or used false IDs: a not uncommon status in a nation where an estimated ten to twelve million undocumented immigrants provide indispensable cheap labour.

Fanon probably would not be surprised that frustrated FBI investigators, like the French *Sûreté* before them, are lobbying to take recalcitrant suspects down to the scream-proof basement where the batteries and electrodes are kept. For the first time in American history there is a serious public campaign to justify torture in police interrogation. With the op-ed support of leading liberals like Jonathan Alter in *Newsweek*, the FBI wants access to methods that the *Washington Post* euphemistically characterized as ‘employed occasionally by Israeli interrogators’. If US courts balk at such rough work, the alternative is to export the task to overseas professionals like the Mossad. ‘Another idea’, the *Post*

³² Karen Olsson, ‘Letter from Dallas’, *Texas Observer*, 12 October 2001.

³³ Fanon, ‘Racist Fury’, p. 163.

³⁴ 10 November 2001.

explained on 21 October, 'is extraditing the suspects to allied countries where security services sometimes employ threats to family members or resort to torture.'

Short of electrodes, however, Congress (minus an opposition party) has recently given the Justice Department a cornucopia of vaguely worded and sinister powers. The 'Proved Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act' (PATRIOT) cages non-citizens, including millions of Latino and Asian immigrants, within ruthless new categories of surveillance, prosecution and liability to deportation. But it is only a cornerstone for the full-fledged Homeland Security State envisioned by the junior Bush administration. At a Halloween press conference, Colin Powell, sounding like he had just finished reading *Neuromancer*, gloated over plans for a vast centralized data warehouse that would store 'every derogatory piece of information' on visitors and would-be immigrants. Federal law enforcement is being restructured so that the FBI can permanently focus on the War against Terrorism—meaning that it will largely become an elite immigration police—while a mysterious new Pentagon entity, the Homeland Defence Command, will presumably adopt the Mexican border as a principal battlefield. Both Mexico and Canada are under tremendous pressure to tighten their immigration policies to Washington's standards. Indeed, to the delight of nativists and neo-fascists everywhere, the entire OECD bloc seems to be raising drawbridges and bolting doors against the rest of humanity.

The globalization of fear has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Automatically, the Security Council endorsed the blank cheque that Congress issued the White House to 'rid the world of evil', leaving American fighter pilots to drop cluster bombs chalked with the names of dead Manhattan firefighters on the ruins of Kabul—a city infinitely more tragic than New York. Terror has become the steroid of empire. However nervously, the established order everywhere has rallied around the Stars and Stripes. As a gloating and still undead Henry Kissinger has pointed out, it is the best thing since Metternich last dined with the Czar.

From *Dead Cities*, to appear in 2002.