The Void in the Celluloid Skyline

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The idea of the New York skyline is critical to the general discussion of the film influence of New York, as although the skyline has long been employed as a key identifying element in film, it is also one of the pieces of film set that has been altered to suit the mood, budget and technological limitations of the film. The degree of manipulation has varied widely as a function of the use of created environments versus on-site shooting. Since the creation of the "Mayor's Office of Film, Theatre and Broadcasting" in 1966, much of the literature written to date has concentrated on the more historic films, as well as live action filming that has taken place in New York[1], and has ignored much of the more recent digital and model based work.

There have been thousands of films that have been purposefully set in New York. As of May 6, 2007, IMDB.com[2] listed: 8,940 films with "New York City" in their list of film shoot locations, "Manhattan" 1,921, "Empire State Building" 67, "World Trade Center" 36, and "Chrysler Building", 77. Technological developments over the last 40 years have seen a slow shift to the incorporation of digital manipulation in almost all films, resulting in an almost seamless blending of digital and actual environments. Therefore the accuracy of the representation of the skyline has varied throughout the history of film due to a multitude of factors – some less "visible" than others. This has resulted in a host of others, less easily counted, that have been set in a verisimilitude of New York, where alternate urban environments – full scale set, miniature, model-based or CGI generated -- mimic a distinctive style comprised of skyscrapers, density and *skyline* - that has been accepted as the *essence* of this modern Metropolis.
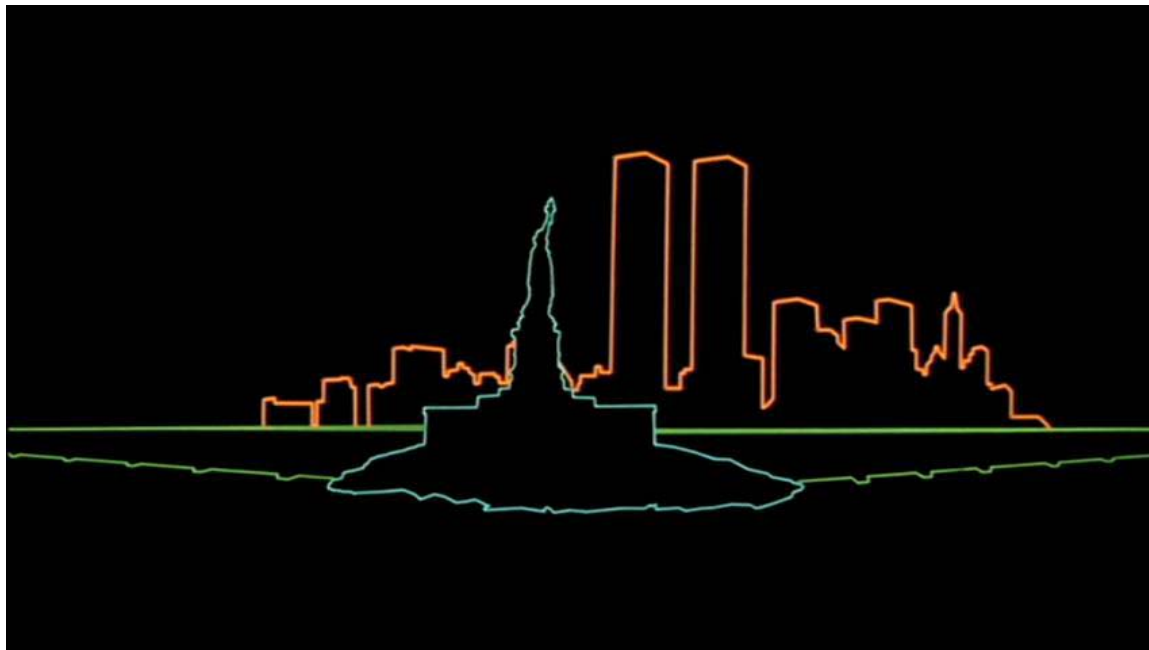

Fig 1: *Escape from New York* (1981): The manipulated identity skyline of New York City – ingredients: Statue of Liberty, Empire State Building, World Trade Towers.

This technologically manipulated, film-generated architectural vision of New York City, which tends to focus on architecturally recognizable icons, transcends and replaces the physical urban reality of New York. In instances this perception chooses to ignore a New York that has undergone a modernizing architectural evolution. This intense visualization of New York City is historically based upon the work of Hugh Ferriss through his 1929 book, "The Metropolis of Tomorrow"[3]. Ferriss' text, in its instructional explanation of the massing implied by the 1916 landmark zoning by-laws, and seductive charcoal images illustrating the setback style, came to strongly define what has now come full circle, post 9/11, to be the essential representational influence guiding the cinematographic idea of the urban character of New York.

> "Ferriss' collection of urban designs quickly became the single most important text to influence Hollywood's interpretations of future cities in the 1930s."[4]

From a conversation regarding the creation of the almost entirely digital New York City environment for *Spiderman* (2002):

> "…animation tests led to a realization that the architecture of New York dictated its own rules. "When we first started placing buildings…we set them up as modular pieces to use as a 3D construction set. But when we tried that, Alex Whang, our modeler – who has an architectural background, found there was a very specific feel to the way the city blocks of New York were laid out. Human engineering and historical perspective have dictated where architects can build"…they would have to respect zoning laws, distances and height variations."[5]

Ferriss' "Manhattanism"[6], as coined by Rem Koolhaas in "Delirious New York" (1978) has seeded some of the most advanced and futuristic interpretations of the city. Both in terms of massing as well as the otherworldly representation of light and texture, the images created by Ferriss had lasting impact in the delineation of film based Metropolis' for years to come. Harvey Wiley Corbett, a contemporary of Ferriss extended this charcoal rendered proposition for New York to create proposals for relieving traffic congestion. Corbett escalates, rather than relieves the pedestrian versus vehicular conflict in his futuristic view of the year 1975.[7]

Visionary Architecture and Film Media
The development of the film industry in the 20th century supported a major shift in the means to express visionary architecture. Where watercolor, ink and charcoal defined the two dimensional palette of architects such as Boullée, Ledoux, Ferriss and Corbett, cinema was able to bring fantastic architectural dreams to life.

Early film made extensive use of painted backdrops as well as physical scale models or miniatures as its means of illustrating the city. These means made issues of scale, which would have prevented most previous visionary propositions from being constructed, less an issue, and the technicians of the industry excelled at supporting the realization of challenging environments and dreams. Most films were shot in studios where controlled interior spaces and artificial lighting provided the best results given the lack of sophistication of early cameras. This type of production created a dichotomy. On one hand it freed the imaginations of the director and set builders from accurately depicting existing places, as would have been restrained by location shoots, while on the other, restricting what could be produced due to constraints of technology and budget.

The resultant innovation allowed for the New York inspired creation of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). *Metropolis* has been characterized as "a film of powerfully expressive architectural metaphors, a gallery of contemporary visions, and an important turning point in the development of film architecture."[8] Erich Kettelhut and Otto Hunte's set designs are reputed to have been influenced by Lang's 1924 trip to New York, which occurred in the midst of a skyscraper boom unequalled in Europe. The setback style, as used in the 20 foot deep scale model of the central urban street scene, became the prototype for the city of the future. Early views of this type of Metropolis are characterized by axial views down "Ferriss inspired" streetscapes, as well as internal aerial views of the city. Such directed views, although technology driven, gave some sense of anonymity to the particular identity of Lang's city. These types of views did not give a true sense of the distant skyline of the city, just the massing.

Just Imagine (1930), Fox Studios parody of Lang's *Metropolis*, created a more lighthearted look at the issues presented by urban density and traffic congestion. Where *Metropolis*, created a higher and denser version of Ferriss' vision of New York, with vehicular traffic interlacing via bridges over the streets as a means of heightening the action (similar to Corbett's proposition), *Just Imagine*, added multi-layered air travel, to a series of bridged and raised highways to create a more spacious, more futuristic version of a similar urban environment.[9] Their model based city construction closely approximates some of Ferriss' later work, such as "The Skyscraper Hanger" 1930 and Corbett's "Street with Separated Traffic", 1926, both of which drew some sensibility from the New York Regional Plan of 1922.[10] The set, designed by Stephen Gooson and Ralph Hammeras was at the time the largest ever to be constructed, measuring 250 feet by 90 feet and included skyscrapers 200 stories high.[11] Again, views are internal and aerial, using generic tall buildings, denying the ability to truly identify the city proposition as New York.

Models, matte paintings and location shoots existed as the status quo for the inclusion of architecture in filming until the advent of bluescreen[12] and chroma key filming and then digital/CGI animation, advancing visionary efforts. However, this combination of representational techniques, when modifying architecture to suit its "film role" results in a distortion of the way that space has been characterized and understood since the Renaissance. This type of spatial manipulation has been referred to by Anthony Vidler, in various essays and books as "warped space"[13]. It yields a representative architectural and urban space that is substantially close to our impression of what it "should" look like, yet its purposeful manipulation is apparent enough to arrive in Sigmund Freud's realm of the "uncanny", resulting in feelings of anxiety in the viewer.[14]

Representation, Site Manipulation and the Role of Icons
Skyscrapers have been a focus and pride of New York architecture since the construction of the Singer Building (1907) and Woolworth Building (1913). Visions of imaginary skyscrapers dominated advertisements of the period, ranging from seemingly disconnected sales of refrigerators to tires.[15] The romance between New York, her skyscrapers and her skyline had begun its long, pervasive run. By the 1930s, with a proliferation of actual skyscrapers available (Chrysler and Empire State Buildings both completed in 1930), the film industry refocused attention from a modeled vision of an imaginary future, to one that used the actual architecture of New York as the subject, set, and sometimes star of films. The footage was often created as a large matte painting of the "impression of the" skyline that was placed behind the constructed set. These reference images of the New York skyline came to be known as "establishing shots", which served the purpose of telling the film audience the location of the film.

The 1933 version of *King Kong* brought the model based image of the Empire State Building, then the tallest structure in the world, to the forefront of the public eye, through the establishing shots created for the film. The movie role of the building was close in significance to that of the giant ape or Fay Wray. In the 2005 Peter Jackson remake of the film, the CGI version of the aerial view of New York City offers a super realistic and somewhat uncanny recall of the state of the city in 1933, and continues to allow the identifiable architecture of the Empire State Building to take a dominant role in the film cast.

Fig 2: *King Kong* (1933) Although quite advanced for the time, the techniques used to both animate and superimpose King Kong against the New York skyline in 1933 leave the viewer knowing that special effects have been employed.

Advances in representation and filming, and a changeover to from studio and back lot to location filming in the 1970s and 80s, began to allow film makers to step back from the city, and easily include the actual skyline as a key identifier. This took the cityscape well beyond its former role in the "establishing shot". Location shooting was far less expensive, more realistic and more flexible than the construction of vast model based or full size sets that existed on the New York modeled back lots in California. Advances in sound editing made this possible as the noise of the physical city had driven filmmakers to abandon location shoots for the isolation provided by sound stages and back lots, when silent films gave way to "talkies".

Although John Carpenter's *Escape from New York* (1981) was largely shot at night in a burnt out area of St. Louis, Illinois, it is believably blended into the film by the additional live film footage taken on Liberty Island[16] and the overview shots that include notable icons

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such as the World Trade Centre, Empire State and Chrysler Buildings. This was typical for many films as New York became prohibitively expensive or difficult for general location filming, in spite of the efforts of the Mayor's Office of Film to promote the same. Shoots tended to be done in replacement cities whose architectural appearance was sufficiently similar to particular sections of New York and so the scenes could be intermixed quite successfully, as long as the classic images of the New York "identifiers" were included.

During this transitional period in film – pre CGI – many films explored the "noire" or "dystopic" theme, whose general dark hue allowed for fairly seamless amalgamation between location, matte, set and model views. The combination of the modes allowed for more creativity and flexibility. 1982 marked the year of Ridley Scott and Syd Mead's *Blade Runner*. Although set in L.A. 2019, Mead's vision of L.A. was more akin to the density and height of New York, and some of its ideas were directly derived from Lang's *Metropolis*.[17]

Tim Burton's Gotham City in *Batman* (1989) employed fictional environments that were in based upon New York, inspired by her density, skyscrapers and form, but were otherwise disguised to suit the story, lacking recognizable iconic identifiers. The constructed sets covered most of the 95 acre back lot at Pinewood Studios in London, with street scenes that would be extended laterally and vertically with miniatures and matte paintings.[18] Antoine Furst, production designer for *Batman* tried also to include a more eclectic look to the city, in reaction to the unrealistic uniformity presented by the architecture of Lang's *Metropolis*.[19]

> "So starting with the look of Gotham in the comic strip, we then combined that with the worst aspects of New York City – imagining what might have happened to New York had there been no planning commission and had it been run by pure extortion and crime. For example, we completely threw out any concept of zoning or construction laws that insure skyscrapers are built so that light will still fall on the streets below. Instead we maximized space, bridged over streets … it was just a hell that had erupted through the pavement and kept on growing."[20]

Warren Beatty's *Dick Tracy* (1990) positioned the film in pre-war America, as for him it was still a naïve time that understood good, evil, law and order.[21]

> "Although Chicago might have been an obvious choice for the setting – Chester Gould had established a clear relationship with that city in the strip – the set hints more clearly at New York City. It has a clear 30s and 40s feel to it, a period which Beatty considered quintessentially American…"[22]

Hero based films, be they based on DC or Marvel/Timely Comics, both New York based companies founded in the 1930s, or more contemporary heroes, like Korben Dallas in Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element* (1997) had a very clear notion of good and evil, and its relationship to the spatial occupation of urban New York.

In Besson's *The Fifth Element* we see a vision of New York City 300 years in the future. This powerful futuristic extrapolation of an intensified New York, designed by Jean-Claude Mézières, has been compared to Syd Mead's revolutionary vision of Los Angeles in *Blade Runner* (1982). The film extrapolates the key elements of the present day metropolis of New York City to create architectural and urban environments that have an uncanny sense of familiarity with the New York City we know, yet create such a dystopic vision, so to elicit fear and disbelief. Mézières' matte painting illustrates New York 2259 at a time when sea levels had dropped and made the city virtually landlocked. As a result the iconic Statue of Liberty can be clearly seen soaring far above her 1997 height, distorting our accepted vision of the New York skyline. This bleak future also presents a canyon like cross section of mid-

town where there is a clear vertical hierarchy created that somewhat parallel's Lang's *Metropolis*, with the exception that it occurs entirely above grade. The upper portion of the towers represent good and light. The mid section is used for day to day living, and the ground level is devoid of light, citing a limitation of the effectiveness of the Ferriss cross section, and provides a foggy, lurid environment. This future New York thereby repositions the danger that was once constrained to the back alley, to a complete occupation of the ground plane of the city.

Fig 3: *The Fifth Element* (1997) Jean-Claude Mézières' New York skyline for *The Fifth Element*.

This reallocation of "evil" to occupy the entire ground level of the city is facilitated by a change in transportation. The intensity of traffic resulting from Mézières' flying cars exceeds anything that was proposed by Harvey Wiley Corbett. Multi levels of aerial traffic swarm the canyon-like voids of the city, making the air traffic presented in *Just Imagine* look quite tame. Filming techniques based upon a combination of scale models, matte paintings, motion control[23] and greenscreen filming permitted extreme exacerbation of the urban condition of New York as this studio produced film, free from the constraints of location shooting, could completely manipulate the space.

The Fifth Element uses some clear architectural identifiers to support its depiction of New York. Although the Mézières aerial view of the skyline, save for the landlocked Statue of Liberty, mostly depicts an exaggerated density and height, with towers whose silhouettes closely resemble the Empire State and Chrysler buildings, some of the internal images clearly seem to show us the Brooklyn Bridge and several other more clearly identifiable icons, leading to a warped and uncanny view of New York.

The Impact of 9/11
The psychological and iconographic understanding of the Metropolis of New York City is intrinsically linked to the image of her skyline. Through ethereal imagery, based both on fact and invention, these film images have frequently come to transcend the reality of New York. In spite of the shift of the film industry to Hollywood mid 19th century, New York maintained her status as the historic cultural center and idea of "America". The Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, and ultimately the World Trade Center Towers, came to be intrinsically linked to the notion of a "Free America". What then is the film industry to make of the obviously incomplete New York skyline, post 9/11?

"Celluloid Skyline is an exploration of two cities, both called New York. One is a real city, an urban agglomeration of millions. The other is a mythic city, so rich in memory and association and sense of place that to people everywhere it has come to seem real…A dream city of the imagination, born of that most pervasive of dream media, the movies."[24]

James Sanders' definitive work, "Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies"[25] was first published in December 2001, just a few months after the fall of the World Trade Towers. Its publication marked the end of an era for a particular freedom inherent in the film version of the city. The disaster spawned a general change in the way that the skyline and architecture of New York were to be appreciated, both as elements of urban identity, as well as presences in film.

Immediately prior to this point in history, a number of disaster films had been set in New York and freely depicted destruction to the architecture and inhabitants of the city. *Armageddon* (1998), directed by Michael Ray, saw the Chrysler Building snapped in two.[26] Roland Emmerich, in the productions of *Independence Day* (1996) and *Godzilla* (1998) also felt quite at ease destroying recognizable elements of New York.[27] *Independence Day* sees the total destruction of the Empire State Building as well as a violent "topping" of the World Trade Towers as a result of a collision with the Alien spacecraft, which viewed post 9/11 seems uncanny. However film reviews of the period accepted this destruction with full-hearted glee, characterizing the long accepted role of these special effects to entertain, while sidestepping any relationship to the "moral" use of architecture in film.

9/11 changed everything. Disaster films that were scheduled for release were put on hold due to their now sensitive subject matters. Arnold Schwarzenegger's terrorist-themed action film *Collateral Damage*, and Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* had their releases delayed. Jackie Chan's *Nosebleed*, about a plot to blow up the World Trade Center was dropped entirely.[28] The film industry stepped back to reassess violent content and the depiction of New York architecture in film. Externally imposed censorship to this point had developed with respect to nudity, violence and language in the representations of people in film, but had never dealt with buildings.

Fig 4: *Independence Day* (1996) The Statue of Liberty and the World Trade Towers as illustrated in the destruction of New York by aliens in *Independence Day*.

Where the inclusion of live footage of the World Trade Towers in the New York skyline pre 9/11 had been used to proudly symbolize a modern New York, one that had ultimately escaped the overriding nostalgic influence of Hugh Ferriss, post 9/11 resulted in a different appreciation of the Twin Towers as they could no longer be viewed casually. The event resulted in a strained relationship between viewers and the New York skyline. Much of this had to do with the obvious void in the new skyline. To catch glimpses of the towers employed as mere "city identity backdrops" in earlier films such as *Men In Black* (1997), positioned a tragic element in a comedic view that to this day can elicit feelings of anxiety or guilt. In reaction, directors have taken varying approaches to dealing with this potentially sensitive issue.

Fig 5: *Men In Black* (1997) The World Trade Towers form an establishing backdrop behind a comedic scene in *Men In Black*

Fig 6: *Gangs of New York* (2002) In *Gangs of New York* the 1863 skyline fades into a pre 2001 version that includes the World Trade Towers along with other iconic elements of the 20th century.

Some directors have purposefully included the former New York skyline as a statement. In *Gangs of New York* (2002), the film ends by fading from a view of the burning 1863 skyline into a pre 9/11 skyline featuring the Twin Towers. In this way Scorsese is using the pairing to make a statement about the cycles of violence that have befallen New York. Steven Spielberg's film *Munich* (2005), which is also themed on reprisal violence, also includes a pre 9/11 image of the Twin Towers.

Films that were largely CGI based could take a more inventive approach. Sam Raimi's *Spiderman* was in production as of 1999. Its initial promotional trailers and posters depicted criminals caught in a huge web that was woven between the World Trade Towers.

> ""The World Trade Center was featured very prominently in the teaser trailer," noted John Dykstra (of Imageworks). "That became a point of pain to a lot of people, and that was not the business of this movie, so the studio removed it. However no changes were made to add or delete the towers from any scene of the film, because they were not featured in any of the scenes.""[29]

Much has been written in technical literature regarding the production of *Spiderman* as to the creation of its mid town cityscapes and their relationship to the more historic idea of New York. Interestingly, one fleeting scene does remain where the reflection of the World Trade Towers can be clearly seen in Spiderman's eyes – a subtle reference to an architectural element otherwise extraneous to the plot of the film.

Fig 7: *Spiderman* (2002) The reflection of the World Trade Center can be seen in Spiderman's eyes in the 2002 release of the film.

Roland Emmerich continues to make disaster films of New York, wrecking somewhat limited havoc on its iconic architecture, albeit minus the World Trade Towers. Where terrorists from this planet or others might be considered unacceptable plot lines when looking at New York in films post 9/11, environmental disasters seem to be quite in line. *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) sees the destruction of the majority of the inhabitants and nature related damage to the buildings in the city due to the effects of a rapid and catastrophic ice age that has been caused by Global Warming. In contrast to *Independence Day* and *Godzilla*, the Empire State Building, Chrysler Building and Stature of Liberty are all left standing. Emmerich and a suite of digital effects companies joined forces to create an environmentally based disaster film that left previous water, wind and ice based effects in the dust. The accuracy of the post 9/11 New York cityscape and skyline were brought into the film using

Lidar based CG which used a customized laser scan to digitally scan the forms and details of the city. The impetus was to make the ice covered buildings look in scale and not as if they were miniatures or CG – a problem when the normal brick, glass and stone textures were to be replaced by ice. The composite ending shot of the film consisted of more than 300 layers.[30]

Fig 8: *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) The CGI view of the frozen New York skyline, featuring the Statue of Liberty.

It is one of the few fictional films of this brief period that allows itself to step back and view the (digitally manipulated) skyline of post 9/11 New York City – minus the World Trade Towers. It seems to be able to do this with some dignity by positioning the Statue of Liberty very much in the foreground.

The Nostaligic Element
Complete avoidance of the skyline left directors searching for more immediately acceptable ways to continue to cast New York in a film role. The post 9/11 filmic return to an urban architecture more closely aligned with the 1930s setback style of Ferris, served two purposes. Firstly, it allowed for a comforting, nostalgic view of a New York that did not dwell on the gaping hole in its skyline. These views concentrated on an internal experience of Manhattan, rather than one that viewed the island from across the river. Secondly, such architecture could provide a perfect stage for the return of the super hero (nostalgic, fantasy based escapism) who originated in the same period. This provided for a level of healing and pride in the highly recognizable architecture of the earlier period as well as a degree of associated diversion, similar to the use of film in the Great Depression.

Such can be seen in films such as Kerry Conran's *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (2004). A high degree of realism was sought in the creation of the set of a very recognizable 1930s New York City. Conran employed a wide range of methods to achieve an accurate depiction.

> "To help build New York City environments … a one week digital photo safari, gathering static photographic textures of period urban architecture. WOT then referenced the textures to develop a 3D model representing a four-block area of the city. … fashioned landmarks such as the Empire State Building and Chrysler Building as positionable models, which artists could place and adjust to compose backgrounds."[31]

Conran also employs a pseudo sepia tone as well to create a highly stylized, nostalgic version of the city. At one point in production the film was also to have an aged "grain" applied, but tests proved it too distracting so this was abandoned.[32] They did, however, freely move the images and ghostlike silhouettes of the Empire State Building around the setting, to better position them for the scene – much like characters in a photo shoot. Iconic images of New York architecture of the period in the "establishing shots" were central to the understanding of the context.

Fig 9: *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (2004) The Flatiron Building provides the immediate setting for *Sky Captain*, with shadows of the skyscrapers hovering in the background.

Traditional super-heroes emanating from the 1930s had come to use the spaces of the city quite differently than the typical pedestrian or set of characters that normally populate modern films, who tend to, well, walk on the ground plane. Super-heroes had already developed a very physical relationship with ledges, balconies, gargoyles and other distinct notable architectural features of the period. In this way the setback style had created architecture rich with potential for escalating and supporting plot development in film. Such has never been the case with sealed glass towers that usually required an invasive "blast" to rip open the envelope, or with the exception of Spiderman, whose spider-like appendages can deal with scaling modern curtain wall buildings, but whose film plots tend to use articulated stone façades instead, in part due to the higher level of interest and texture provided by the building.[33]

In *King Kong* (1933), *Ghostbusters* (1984), *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and *The Fifth Element* (1997), setback style buildings were traditionally chosen over other thin-skinned notables, primarily for the high level exterior spaces, rooftop gardens, balconies and stone ledges. Peter Jackman's remake of *King Kong* in 2005 provided a highly realistic update of the original 1933 film. The use of CGI in the film facilitated the creation of an uncannily realistic view of New York City as it might have existed at the time. The pinnacle of the Empire State Building again provided a thrilling and precarious architectural setting for the action of the film.

"New York City is vast," stated Letteri. "We knew it would be impossible to build every building, so we researched into what the city was like in 1933, used original blueprints of landmark buildings, like the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building, then picked city views that were key to the story and built around those landmarks."[34]

Fig 10: *King Kong* (2005) King Kong climbs to the top of the Empire State Building, making physical use of the detail provided by the architectural style of the period.

In contrast, the 1976 remake of *King Kong* by Dino De Laurentis chose to replace the Empire State Building with the newly constructed World Trade Center towers – which had at that point surpassed the former in height and significance to a modernized New York City, as they assumed their dominant role on the skyline. Although a relative success at the box office, critics felt that the use of the towers significantly detracted from the film, noting that the climb up the face of the towers was monotonous, due to the relentlessness of the architecture, and that the climax scene on the roof level was less exciting due to the expansive size of the roofs.

"The shape of the Trade Center, in contrast (to the Empire State Building), fought the story all the way…New York's newer office buildings offered so little to the fantasies of the movie city - or to fantasies of any sort."[35]

Excitement was instead provided by having Kong leap from building to building. Interestingly in *Escape from New York*, the sheer expanse of the top of the towers is recognized by Carpenter who uses the roof to land Kurt Russell's plane, a highly nerve wracking part of the film owing to the relative insufficiency of the platform for such a purpose.

The use of high level ledges in films has required special effects, whether based upon miniatures, such as *King Kong* (1933) or larger scale models combined with greenscreen, such as in *The Fifth Element,* or with CGI as used in any of the three *Spiderman* films. More contemporary blending techniques have resulted in a higher degree of realism and diminished the feelings of skepticism that are felt when viewing older films employing less accurate techniques. These scenes can, however, illicit feelings associated with the uncanny given the sensibility of most viewers that understand the scenes not to be live action shoots, however realistically portrayed. Such feelings can arise from suspicious use and placement of key architectural elements and icons that due to the manipulation afforded by filming techniques may be slightly "off" normal.

Fig 11: *The Fifth Element* (1997) Leeloo walks along a projecting stone ledge in *The Fifth Element*

Saved by the Super Heroes

In May 2002 post-9/11 audiences were re-energized by a slate of superhero films that has seen New York City saved by Spider-Man (three times), the Fantastic Four, and Superman.[36] *Batman*'s Gotham City and *Superman*'s Metropolis had previously been seen as powerful fictional metaphors for New York City. In Tim Burton's 1989 version of *Batman*, strong use was made of building imagery that tied to Lang's architecture in Metropolis and Ferriss' visionary drawings, in the creation of an enormous purpose built set inside of Pinewood Studios in the U.K. Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* revisits the darkness of Burton's original film, albeit using the setback style architecture of Chicago to create the (live) urban backdrop for some of the central scenes in the film, because it was architecturally so close to the New York/Gotham City vision of the original film.[37] The Chicago Board of Trade, designed by Holabird and Root in 1930 was chosen to represent Wayne Corporation. This building was also included in Ferriss' famed collection.[38]

The filming techniques in the *Spiderman* series saw Imageworks generate an array of digital buildings of varying levels of architectural detail to increase its existing database of New York architecture. The images in some cases included a higher than normal level of detail, derived from the actual architecture, thereby allowing greater interaction of the characters with the building exteriors. This was critical for the close up action shots, but far less important as the digitally invented skyline faded into the distance.

> "We didn't want to just photograph the city and put Spider-Man in it, because the realistic images would sort of 'spit out' the CG character," says (Sam) Raimi. "So I tried to find those buildings that were magical and make the whole city nothing but those — like the Chrysler Building, with its majesty, or the Empire State Building, with its dream of tomorrow, and all the great tiles in the subways, all the beautiful brownstones."[39]
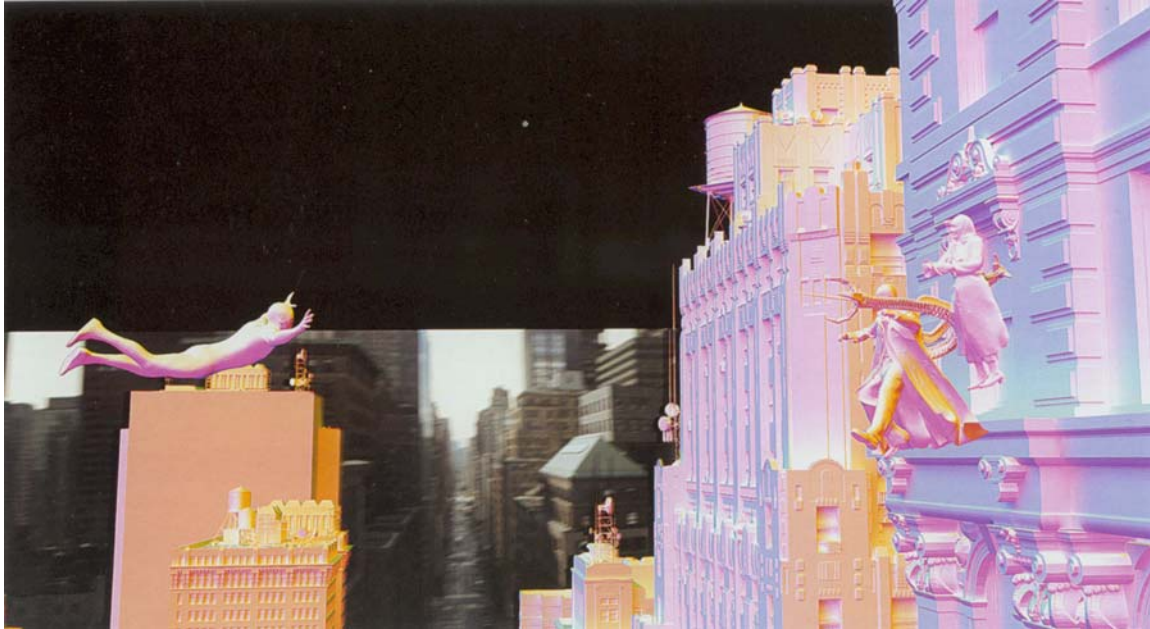
Fig 12: *Spiderman 2* (2004) The wide shot of the bank exterior layered CG environments against a digital tile of live action background plates that had been shot in New York City. A screen shot of the composite showing the relationship between the actors and the building exterior from *Spiderman 2*.[40]

The third installment of the *Spiderman* series (2007) places the city of New York in a starring role, while continuing the escapism offered by the super-hero film genre. There is a subtle "creep" that is evident in *Spiderman 3*, towards a more visible use of easily identifiable New York icons. The views of the skyline in *Spiderman* (2002) are all nighttime views, with only the hazy lights of the Chrysler Building vaguely recognizable beyond Spiderman's web. In *Spiderman 2*, we see the Empire State Building as a reflection in the glass, reminiscent of the way that Jacques Tati incorporated the icons of Paris into the modern setting of *Playtime* (1967).[41] Although Peter Parker still resides in the same apartment in *Spiderman 3*, the Empire State Building has been relocated several blocks closer to Parker's apartment, so that its presence is clearly felt in each day or night view out into the city – re-establishing the iconic "establishing shot" so traditional in earlier films.

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Fig 13: *Spiderman 2* (2004) The Empire State Building is vaguely recognizable in the reflection as M.J. looks out of Peter Parker's balcony window.

Spiderman 3 escalates the amount of violence to buildings as part of the film plot. Where the first two films involved the destruction of abandoned warehouses and balconies, or the forced enlargement of openings in brick and stone Ferriss type façades, the inaugural key piece of plot development in *Spiderman 3* involves a runaway crane that creates a massive slice through a modern glass, steel and concrete office tower. The destruction of the corner support point of the building closely approximates the nature of the cut into the World Trade Tower that resulted in its collapse. This change in the portrayal of New York City may or may not signal a conscious evolution of the series to bring it visually closer to the modern, less nostalgic city, while simultaneously distancing itself from the effects of 9/11.[42]

A blip in time
It is to be noted that the films whose explicit subject matter – be it documentary or docudrama – *is* 9/11 have been purposefully excluded from this discussion. They constitute a genre so specific unto themselves as not to have relevance to the general discussion of fictional films both pre and post 9/11 that make reference to the mythic dream city called New York, and its celluloid skyline.

Initial cinematic reactions to 9/11 differ from the state of films in 2007. The past six years mark an anxious transitioning stage while New York awaits the completion of the Freedom Tower that will fill the void in her skyline. In the fullness of time, the period that must morally and artistically confront the void in the skyline will be very short. This period, however, may be significant in its creation of an artistic position in reference to the skyline.

It will remain to be seen whether the construction and completion of the Freedom Tower will be forcefully embraced, and even flaunted, in films. Or, will the industry and artists approach its assertion in the skyline with more caution given its continued vulnerability owing to the simple fact that world issues have not yet been solved.

Author's note regarding images and film credits:
Unless otherwise noted, all images are screen captures taken from within the films.

Fig 1: Escape from New York (1981) Avco Embassy Pictures
Fig 2: *King Kong* (1933) RKO Pictures
Fig 3: *The Fifth Element* (1997) Société des Etablissements L. Gaumont
Fig 4: *Independence Day* (1996) 20th Century Fox
Fig 5: *Men In Black* (1997) Amblin Entertainment
Fig 6: *Gangs of New York* (2002) Miramax Films
Fig 7: *Spiderman* (2002) Columbia Pictures Corporation
Fig 8: *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) 20th Century Fox
Fig 9: *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (2004) Brooklyn Films II
Fig 10: *King Kong* (2005) Big Primate Pictures
Fig 11: *The Fifth Element* (1997) Société des Etablissements L. Gaumont
Fig 12: *Spiderman 2* (2004) Marvel Enterprises
Fig 13: *Spiderman 2* (2004) Marvel Enterprises

Notes:

[1] Sanders, James. Scenes From the City: Filmmaking in New York. New York: Rizzoli International Publications Inc., 2006.

[2] Internet Movies Database Website, http://www.imdb.com –the site does NOT provide a listing for films that are set in New York but only use digital environments.

[3] Ferris, Hugh. The Metropolis of Tomorrow. Originally Published: New York, Ives Washburn Publishing, 1929. Referencing reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 2005.

[4] Albrecht, Donald. Designing Dreams: Modern Architecture in the Movies. Santa Monica: Hennessey + Ingalls, 2000. p. 157

[5] Cinefex 90. Donald Shay, editor. July 2002. Joe Fordham. "Spin City: Spider-Man." p. 27-28

[6] Koolhaas, Rem. Delirious New York. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. p. 98.

[7] Koolhaas. p. 103.

[8] Neumann, Dietrich, editor. Film Architecture: Set Designs from Metropolis to Blade Runner. New York: Prestel, 1999. p. 95

[9] Just Imagine states that it is set 50 years in the future, i.e. 1980, where Metropolis only infers that it is set in the future by virtue of the urban architecture.

[10] Corn, Joseph J. and Brian Horrigan. Yesterday's Tomorrow: Past Visions of the American Future. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984. p. 41

[11] Sanders, James. Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003. p.

[12] Bluescreen has given way to the more predominant use of Greenscreen in recent years, which seems to work better with digital techniques and facilitates less "ghosting" around the superimposed scenes.

[13] Smith, Terry, editor. Impossible Presence. Surface and Screen in the Photogenic Era. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001. Anthony Vidler, "Warped Space: Architectural Anxiety in the Digital Culture". p. 289

[14] Freud, Sigmund. The Uncanny. Reprint (first published 1899). New York: Penguin Books, 2003. p. 123

[15] Corn. p. 42

[16] John Carpenter Press: Hollywood Reporter, October 24, 1980. http://www.theofficialjohncarpenter.com/pages/press/reporter801024.html

[17] Neumann. p. 150

[18] Cinefex 41. Donald Shay, editor. February 1990. Jody Duncan Shannon. "A Dark and Stormy Night." p. 11

[19] Cinefex 41. Shannon. p. 9

[20] Cinefex 41. Shannon. p. 9

[21] Neumann. p. 172

[22] Neumann. p. 172

[23] Motion control was a computer technique that allowed the cars to appear to fly between the skyscrapers. It was invented by Digital Domain, visual effects group led by Mark Stetson.

[24] City of Sound. Celluloid Skyline. October 16, 2003. http://www.cityofsound.com/blog/2003/10/celluloid_skyli.html

[25] Sanders, James. Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

[26] VFX HQ: Armageddon: New York http://www.vfxhq.com/1998/armageddon_ny.html

[27] DVD Active: The Martians are Coming http://www.dvdactive.com/editorial/articles/the-martians-are-coming.html

[28] 9/11's Impact on the Film Industry Continues. Nicholas Moreau. October 19, 2001. http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/academy_awards/82852

[29] Cinefex 90. Donald Shay, editor. July 2002. Joe Fordham. "Spin City: Spider-Man". p. 130

[30] Cinefex 98. Donald Shay, editor. July 2004. Jody Duncan. "Freeze Frames: The Day After Tomorrow." p. 93

[31] Cinefex 98. Donald Shay, editor. July 2004. Joe Fordham. "Brave New World: Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow." p. 18-24

[32] Cinefex 98. Fordham. p. 23

[33] Cinefex 90. Fordham. p. 27-28

[34] Cinefex 104. Donald January 2006. Shay, editor. Joe Fordham. "King Kong". p. 76

[35] Saunders. p. 102

[36] 9/11 at the Cineplex
http://www.christianitytoday.com/movies/commentaries/911cineplex.html

[37] An interview with Christopher Nolan credited the location change to Chicago for the live action shoot to be partially based upon family ties to the city.

[38] Ferriss. p. 25-26

[39] New York Daily News. Spin City: Spiderman 3 Shoots for the Skyline, April 1, 2007.
http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/movies/2007/04/01/2007-04-01_spin_city.html

[40] Cinefex 99. Donald Shay, editor. October 2004. Joe Fordham. "Armed and Dangerous: Spiderman 2". p. 82

[41] Lamster, Mark, editor. Architecture and Film. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000. Joan Ockman. "Architecture in a Mode of Distraction." p. 179

[42] At the time of the writing of this article, *Spiderman 3* had just been released and the detailed coverage of the generation of its sets and effects will be addressed in the upcoming issue of Cinefex (110), due to be released in later in 2007. As might be noted from the footnotes for this article, Cinefex provides the best coverage for films that use a range of effects to produce both their characters and their environments. Most other sources fail to address any detail in terms of the generation of the (visionary) architecture for current films – the majority of which have become heavily CGI reliant. http://www.cinefex.com