
Max Page’s inflationary pursuit of destruction began with a prize-winning study of the demolition of landmark buildings in The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900-1940 (1999), and now encompasses the fires devastating Lower Manhattan in Chesley Bonestell’s Hiroshima U.S.A. (1950) and the partly submerged hulks of skyscrapers in A.I.: Artificial Intelligence (2001). Although The City’s End is a very different book, embracing comics, computer games, film, painting, and literature, Page continues to insist on New York City’s exceptionalism, sometimes measured by degree, sometimes by kind. There is so much evidence that Page does well not to be overwhelmed by the sheer number of times that New York City has been imaginatively blown up, swamped, crushed, and invaded.

In his account of ‘every generation[’s] … reasons for destroying New York’ (7), Page investigates how New York’s apocalyptic fate reflects and sometimes anticipates broader American preoccupations over massive immigration and internal mobility, urban disorder and alienation, economic crises, and foreign military or para-military threats. Thus, W.E.B. DuBois‘ ‘The Comet’ (1920) puts ‘nigger’ Jim on the spot when he and a rich white woman, Julia, mistakenly believe they are the only survivors of a deadly gas attack on the USA. While Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s Superman shorts in 1941 are informed by urban fears of totalitarianism. As an architectural historian, Page is particularly good on the havoc wrought on the material city. He also brings a historian’s insights and knowledge to a broad sweep of imaginative representations of the city. The choice of illustrations and how they are integrated into the text bring the reader into a bizarre world, in which a giant baby wrenches the Chrysler Building from the surrounding cityscape, and Aerosoft Manhattan reinserts the Twin Towers into the cityscape by modifying the 2004 edition of Microsoft’s Flight
Simulator. As one might expect, Page has perceptive things to say about previsions of 9/11, as well as post-9/11 imaginings of disaster, and about the coincidence of two opposing reactions: it can’t be so, and we’ve seen this before (in the case of New York City, we now know, many times).

Doubtless, there are cases to be made for other cities’ litanies of destruction, but the only shortcoming I should note is the downplaying of internalist explanations of some images and accounts. For instance, his astute commentary on James N. Rosenberg’s Oct 29 Dies Irae (1929), a lithograph prompted by the urban disorder of the Great Crash, mentions George Bellows (presumably, his New York of 1911) and Joseph Pennell. But the logic of visual representation should also take in Max Weber’s Cubist tilting and up-ending of the city, as well as the post-Impressionist movements on the canvas of John Marin. How formal protocols, conventions and developments (from Realism to Modernism, in this case) tie in with Page’s urban and thematic reference points gets rather little attention. Disaster movies, too, are provoked and shaped by their precursors, as well as by economic, technological or societal crises and watersheds.

The humanist underpinning in Page’s other books and articles makes a strong re-appearance in the midst of all the carnage and violence. He deals deftly with explanations for New York’s repeated demise in a fine concluding chapter, examining responses across the political spectrum to violence and its uses and abuses. But his most intriguing, if somewhat hopeful, conclusion is that much of what he has surveyed has a positive purpose, and is even a manifestation of a love of New York and a need for it. ‘All this life [on the real streets of New York] explains why we continue to destroy New York … because it is so unimaginable for us, in reality, not to have this city’ (228). Page is less troubled by the sight of buildings toppling or sinking into the sea, than by scenes in The World, the Flesh, and the Devil and Vanilla Sky, when, respectively, Harry Belafonte and Tom Cruise are pictured in streets empty of people.
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