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Utopian Verticality: the Skyscraper and the Superhero in the American Imagination

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Abstract

This essay examines the privileged status of verticality as a sign of utopian promise and possibility in two iconic, and often symbiotic, urban symbols: the skyscraper and the superhero.

When Fritz Lang arrived into New York City's harbor aboard a ship in 1924 and viewed for the first time Manhattan's spectacular skyline of steep, perpendicular skyscrapers, he claimed that he immediately conceived his film *Metropolis* (1927). To the German director and others, New York City in the 1920s (See Figure 1) was seen as an extraordinary, "new *vertical city* of the future" (Gold 339).

Fig. 1. Chrysler Building, New York, N.Y., c. 1930. Photo credit: Detroit Publishing Co., Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

The magnificent, sheer cliffs of Manhattan's tall buildings that so impressed Lang were emblematic of a period during the late 19th and early 20th centuries when the city was wholeheartedly engaged in creating a new kind of urbanism (See Figure 2), one that was based, according to architect and historian Rem Koolhaas in his book *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* on the "technology of the fantastic" (Koolhaas 29).

Fig. 2. Woolworth Building at night, New York, N.Y., c. 1910-1920. Photo credit: Detroit Publishing Co., Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

The "fantastic" began, he argues, across the bay, on Coney Island, with the creation of sensational "dream-world" amusement parks. There, Steeplechase Park, which opened in 1897, featured thrilling rides, the newly engineered Ferris wheel, simulated mechanical horse races, and more. Soon after, Luna Park and Dreamland opened, in 1903 and 1907, respectively, offering high-speed rollercoasters, sensational animal acts, carnival entertainments, "exotic" performances and cultural oddities–as, for example, the dancers of "Little Egypt" or the miniature village of "Lilliputia" – replicas of global places and landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower, the canals of Venice or the North Pole, and imposing, otherworldy buildings, with painted spires and domes that created bedazzling towers illuminated with thousands of electric lights (See Figure 3).

Fig. 3. Night in Luna Park, Coney Island, N.Y., c. 1905. Photo credit: Detroit Publishing Co., Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

For the crowds of people that headed to the island, these amazing places offered distractions and amusements for the urban work-weary multitudes. But rather than "suspending urban pressure," Koolhaas contends, these amusement parks, instead, furthered a sense of its "intensification" (33). These recreational environments, which could "reproduce experience and fabricate almost any sensation" (61) mirrored the thrills and terrors of urban experience, of modernity itself, which Ben Singer, in his article, "Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism," defines as "a barrage of *stimuli*" and "sensory assaults" produced, in part, by "the unprecedented turbulence of the big city's traffic, noise, billboards, street signs, jostling crowds, window displays, and advertisements," where city dwellers were now inundated with a flood "of impressions, shocks and jolts" (Singer 75, 73). Coney Island was built to simulate this bombardment, replicating the shocks, speed, and sensory stimulation of urban modernity, not as oppressive urbanism, but as thrilling, over-stimulating amusement. Coney Island provided "an antidote to the grimness of the city," Koolhaas argues, only by trading its outer barrier beaches, tidal flats and "virgin nature" into a fantastic, irrational and manufactured environment (Koolhaas 41).

If the "technology of the fantastic" originates on Coney Island, it quickly jumps to the island of Manhattan. It does so, Koolhaas argues, with the invention of

the *skyscraper*. The fantastical playgrounds of Coney Island have served as "a fetal Manhattan"; an "incubator for Manhattan's incipient themes" (Koolhaas 30). Manhattan is more fully receptive to the utilitarian application of these new inventions, (even if fantastical), because the urban island is essentially "utopian" in its ability to absorb innovation, in its energetic openness to progress and technology, and in its restless desire for speed and change.

Born in the late 19th century and finessed in the early 20th century out of heroic feats of engineering and newly available technologies (elevators and steel frames), the skyscraper's fantastical vertical journey upward moved urban populations off the ground (See Figure 4), toward a previously "unknowable urbanism," (Koolhaas 87). En route to new territories for city habitation, the noisy, crowded, and dirty city is left below. The rising thrust of the skyscraper signifies visionary progress; its magnificence of scale and ascendant movement serves as a sign of the utopian energy of modernity (See Figure 5). Defying gravity and signifying the promise and possibilities of technology and progress, Koolhaas calls this remarkable ascent "a man-made Wild West, a frontier in the sky" (Koolhaas 87).

Fig. 4. Singer Building under construction, New York, N.Y., c. 1905-1908. Photo credit: Detroit Publishing Co., Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Fig. 5. Flatiron Building under construction, New York, N.Y., c. 1902. Photo credit: Detroit Publishing. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

American westward expansion in the nineteenth century was promoted in the doctrine of "Manifest Destiny," which simultaneously signaled the promise of freedom and new opportunities to those settlers who heeded its call, but at the same time, incurred devastation to the native peoples already settled on western lands. Manifest Destiny has always been perceived as a horizontal phenomenon, as the westerly movement of "progress" and peoples across great swaths of American land; it is a geography-based belief in the moral destiny of the United States as endlessly restless, energetic, expansively moving toward new frontiers. But in crowded, dense cities; in circumscribed areas like Manhattan, metropolitan pioneerism must resort to movement upward rather than across. In this sense the urban skyscraper represents a kind of vertical Manifest Destiny.

It is within such a "utopian" framework that film scholar and theorist Scott Bukatman positions the figure of the American superhero, whose natural terrain

is not only the city – Metropolis or Gotham – but also the urban sky. "American superheroes encapsulated and embodied the same utopian aspiration of modernity as the cities themselves," he writes in his book *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Superman in the 20th Century* (Bukatman 185). Defying gravity, the superhero often evades the obstacles of dense urban space by moving above the city, in the sky (See Figure 6). When moving through the urban environment and between buildings, the superhero must navigate what Henry Jenkins calls, the “verticality of the urban canyon” (Jenkins 180). He writes, “the superhero tradition depends upon a tension between the grid (that is, the ways that human movements are patterned, constrained and restricted within urban space) and its negation (that is, the ways that a superhero asserts his or her own way of moving through space)” (Jenkins 180).

Fig. 6. Christopher Reeve Superman flying over New York.
Photo credit: https://www.moviestore.com/christopher-reeve-218732/

Prototypes of these urban superhero figures that fly, leap, and swing from tall skyscrapers and across "urban canyons" can be found in the daring and courageous human steelworker and ironworker crews that braved great heights during the construction boom of the 20th century that produced many of Manhattan's soaring skyscrapers. Indeed, a remarkable, but little known history in the construction of these "urban canyons" is that a large number of Manhattan's heroic ironworkers were of Native American origins. Many had come to New York City to work in construction from the Kahnawake Mohawk

Territory near Montreal. They had already learned to "walk the iron" during the large Canadian civil engineering projects of late 19th century that had taken place near their home territories, for which they had been hired and in which they had excelled, earning the notoriety that they were not afraid of heights and willing to train for the most dangerous jobs. There were so many Mohawk ironworkers working on the skyscraper boom in New York throughout the 20th century, that a neighborhood in Brooklyn where they once lived was then known as “little Kahnawake” (See Figure 7).

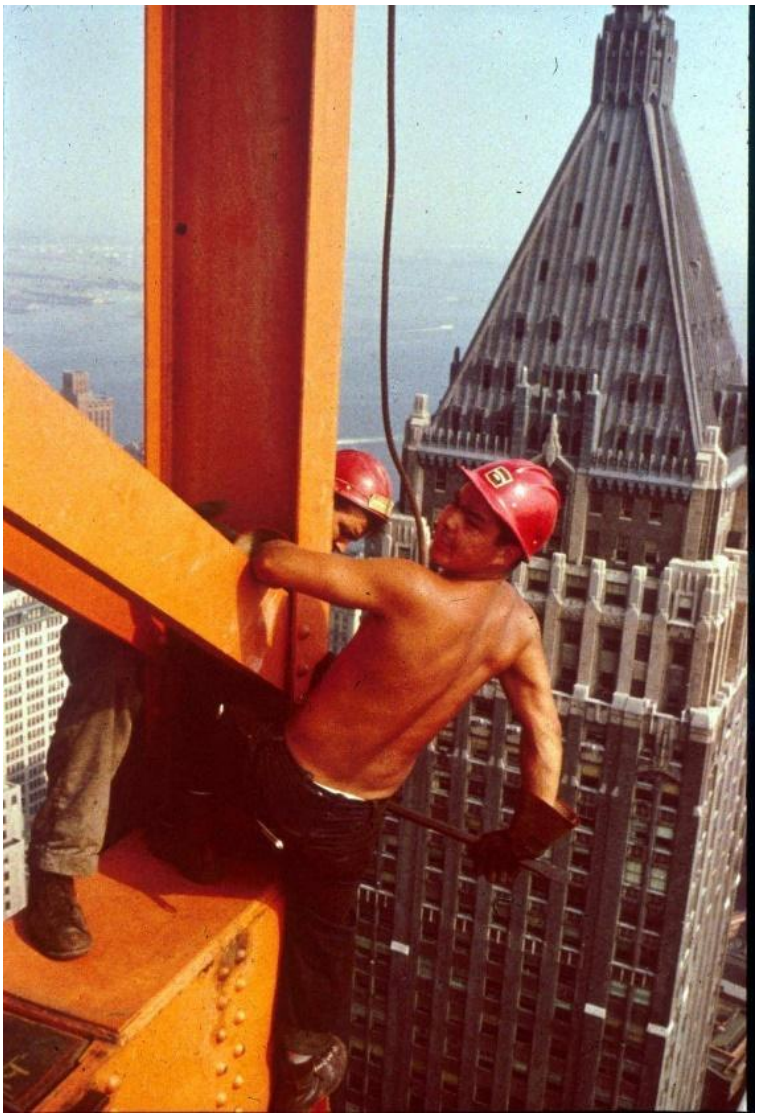

Fig. 7. Kahnawake ironworkers atop construction, Chase Manhattan Bank Building, New York, N.Y., c. 1960. Photo credit: Courtesy Bethlehem Steel.

Remarkable prototypes of urban superheroes can be seen, as well, in Lewis Hine's iconic photographs taken during the construction of the New York City's most famous skyscraper, the Empire State Building. Bukatman singles out one photograph in particular, taken by Hine in 1930 or 1931 as resoundingly prototypical. Sometimes titled *The Sky Boy,* at other times, *Icarus, High up on Empire State,* it depicts a young ironworker high above the ground, as he clasps a large steel cable while working on the construction of the Empire State Building. The city looms far below, the Hudson River and New Jersey in the distance. Squinting from the sunlight, the wind blowing his hair a bit off his face, his expression emanates a complete sense of ease, as if hanging from a cable mid-air was the most effortless and natural thing to do. He wears simple overalls over a sleeveless tee-shirt. He has no protective gear, no helmet, no gloves and no harness. The cable traverses the picture plane as if slicing across it, making the young man and cable look majestically suspended above the ground with no support. The photograph narrates a seeming impossibility, of a young man freely suspended in the sky (See Figure 8).

Fig. 8. "Icarus, High up on Empire State." Photo credit: The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library: http://qa.digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-a92b-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.

The photograph of the suspended ironworker is celebratory and victorious; it depicts human mastery over the very laws of gravity and space. It predicts, in some measure, the appearance of the superhero, whose narratives, Bukatman

asserts, represent "urban modernity as a utopia of sublime grace" (Bukatman 185). The image of the human body, atop such heights, constructing modern structures on such an awe-inspiring and monumental scale, positioned in (almost) free-floating space prefigures, as well, the union that will occur between the skyscraper and the superhero who emerges on the American scene in comic-book form in 1938, in the same decade as the construction of the Empire State Building and just seven years after its completion.

Like the ironworker in the photograph, urban superheroes will take up similarly impossible gestures, moving through and above the vertiginous city. Superheroes enact and extend the fantasy of flying, leaping, moving seamlessly through and above urban space without obstacles, intrusions or limits; they are, Bukatman writes, "sagas of propulsion, thrust and movement through the city" (Bukatman 189). They experience "freedom of movement not constrained by the ground-level order imposed by the urban grid" (Bukatman 188). The skyscraper, the ironworker, and the fictional superhero all underscore the privileged status of verticality in testing and transcending established limits. The extraordinary achievements of bodies and engineering that seem to defy the very limits of nature are, in essence, utopian gestures.

But there are more complex meanings and darker aspects to verticality that should be acknowledged as well. Jenkins writes that it is "the panoramic shot" that is "a key element of the visual iconography" in many science fiction films (Jenkins 177). This is often true, as well, with films whose plot involves the urban metropolis, certainly a central theme in the superhero genre. As defenders of the city against corruption and crime, superheroes will often be displayed thus, perched atop a canopy of tall buildings with the city below, in full panoramic view. But such domineering vertical postures from above can signal more problematic and troubling meanings. In the Batman narrative, Bruce Wayne is scripted as a very wealthy billionaire executive in charge of his own global corporation (with a butler to attend to his every need). In Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008), Wayne is often depicted alone in his penthouse apartment, which sits high above the city. When he transforms into Batman, he is often depicted moving or towering above the city as well. City officials can only contact him by projecting his symbol in the sky. He is otherwise unreachable. He is, therefore, isolate, above, and distinct from the other city dwellers, by virtue of class, wealth, and status. Batman (and indeed all American superheros–*hero* being the operative word here) works for the greater, democratic good. However, he mostly works alone and only teams up with city officials and law enforcement when necessary. His mode of operation is singular, individualistic, often moving closer to expressions of vigilantism at certain strategic moments in the film. He is, therefore, more closely aligned with tendencies associated with libertarianism and ideologies of self-reliant individualism than institutional American democracy. Of course, as a symbolic figure, Batman affirms certain important American ideals: rugged individualism, self-determination, autonomy from authority, and more. But his status as distinct and above the urban populace that is visually affirmed through his

panoramic and vertical dominion over the city signals the way in which such tendencies can move in dire and dystopian directions.

Indeed, in several iconic science fiction films, it is verticality itself that defines and affirms class segregation and division. Both *Metropolis,* (Fritz Lang, 1927) and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) use vertical configurations to spatialize class relations. In the earlier film, oppressed workers live in an underground city while the wealthy live above in fresh air and sunlight; in the later film, the dregs of humanity live in an apocalyptically ruined Los Angeles while the wealthy live above and "off-world." The pyramidal Tyrol corporation towers above the city in *Blade Runner.* Similar divisions occur in *Brazil* (Terry Gilliam, 1985), of which John Erickson writes: "Images of verticality ... appropriately convey the spatial disposition of a totalitarian state defined by pyramidal, hierarchical structure in which power flows from the top" (Erickson 28). In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Michael Radford, 1984), the persistent intrusion of "Big Brother" suggests the malevolence of surveillance, of being watched from above. Verticality figures as well in the *Matrix* franchise films (1999-2003), as the sinister Machines have taken over the surface of the ruined earth, creating their Machine City above ground, while the freed humans have burrowed way below the surface of the earth, to create their own underground city, Zion. In all these films, domination from above represents oppressive authoritarianism and control to those below.

These dystopian films narrate the darker side of modernity, where progress and technology do not yield promise and potential but rather weapons of mass destruction, human subjugation, and environmental degradation. Even as Coney Island turned the sensations of urban modernity into funhouse thrills and celebrated the fantastical potential of modern technology as amusements, it also scripted their potential for catastrophe by staging "a series of simulated disasters" (Koolhaas 51). One of the most popular "disaster" exhibits at Coney Island's Dreamland was "Fighting the Flames," a continuous simulation that was staged throughout the day of a six-story building igniting into a blazing fire and then of it being extinguished (Dreamland itself ended up burning down in 1911). Koolhaas writes of this exhibit: "The entire spectacle defines the dark side of [the] Metropolis as an astronomical increase in the potential for disaster only just exceeded by an equally astronomical increase in the ability to avert it" (Koolhaas 57).

If the invention and innovation of the urban skyscraper in Manhattan in the early twentieth century signified utopian potential to move vertically into a then "unknowable urbanism," it must also be noted that reaching up toward the sky always constituted dangerous risks. In detailing the "sensory assault" and experiential conditions of urban modernity, the onslaught of speed and technology, Singer writes: "The newly technologized urban environment posed new dangers and underscored the sense of a radically altered public sphere, one defined by chance, peril, and shocking impressions rather than any traditional conception of safety" (Singer 79). During the construction of the mythic and majestic skyscrapers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when such

buildings were new and remarkable innovations, many steel and ironworkers fell to their deaths and the newspapers back then, as Singer documents, were replete with sensational, grisly descriptions of their gruesome falls.

If the densely populated modern metropolis—along with its great structural achievement, the urban skyscraper—represents the utopian capacity for invention and innovation, but also, at the same time, represents the "increase in the potential for disaster," one only need remember the celebratory creation and catastrophic destruction of two iconic Manhattan skyscrapers, the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. We might consider the celebratory event at their creation, the illegal but exhilarating tightrope walk between the North and South towers by the French high wire artist, Philippe Petit, on August 7, 1974 (See Figure 9), just as the then tallest buildings in the world were being completed. His astonishing sojourn in the sky for almost one hour that day expressed the same utopian gestures so evident in the Hine's ironworker photos and in the "sublime grace" of the urban superheroes. But if the beginning of the life of those monumental skyscrapers witnessed such a wondrous and thrilling event, their end was met with unimaginably horrific and catastrophic force on September 11, 2001 (See Figure 10).

Fig. 9. Philippe Petit walking between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on a high wire in 1974.
Photo credit: *https://www.huffingtonpost.com/sabine-heller/philippe-petit-man-on-wir_b_570720.html*

Fig. 10. Unattributed 9/11 Photograph. Photo credit: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

The skyscraper and the superhero function symbiotically as iconic urban symbols. The skyscraper is real but born, Koolhaas claims, from fantastical roots; the superhero, while pure fiction, was born from deep strains of American optimism and self-identity; they both constitute the utopian promise (and peril) of modernity itself. Their natural state is vertical and sky-bound. Looking upward in awe, they rise above us.

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