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After The 25th Hour:
Perspectives on David Benioff's Novel

What insight might be gained by a study of a 2000 New York-novel transformed into a screenplay for a very successful 2002 New York-movie *and* the topic of verticality? Is there any point in keeping talking about verticality for a city obsessed by its skyline since — at least — the very beginning of the twentieth century? Furthermore, considering these issues (the novel, the film, New York and verticality) can we fancy how they all frame a dialogue with the recent events taking place in New York between 2000 and 2002, namely the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center?

Offering no easy answers to such questions, the present paper would rather construe a framework for debate skewed by two intersecting directions, horizontal and vertical. Both the novel by David Benioff, *The 25th Hour*, and the film of the same title directed by Spike Lee (with a screenplay written by Benioff himself) deal with the representation of the horizontal dimension infused with hope and dream, and the vertical one drawing a catastrophic picture of New York City. What I suggest in these pages is that both the novel and the film can be viewed in light of interpretative strategies that hark back to the Gilded Age, were moulded by Modernism in the 1920s and 1930s, and seem to come full circle with the beginning of the third millennium.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the making and mapping of America as an ever enlarging organism (with the annexation of the Western territories and the development of the cities as industrial hubs, new markets, and financial centers) called for new paradigms to name the new natural and urban boundaries. As far-fetched as an association with Clarence King's geological survey of the Rocky Mountains in

1872 may sound, it helps show how in the United States geology and technology have always gone hand in hand. Such a metaphorical marriage of geology and technology has outlined a conception of time which has much to do with the spatial intertwining of vertical and horizontal axes, ever soaring heights and never ending landscape, cataclysmic pulls and imaginary projections into a pastoral landscape, urban mechanical jungle and "garden" ideal, nightmare and dream.

These paradigms still work in *The 25th Hour*, a twenty-first-century novel portraying the city as a site of flux, and a palimpsest that witnesses "successive acts of destruction and creation" (Miles et al. 1). The intersection of horizontal (bridges and parks, low buildings, stoops, streets, etc.) and vertical (skyscrapers) cityscapes which had originated in the Gilded Age, was then to become central to the New York-focused works of American modernist writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1926), John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), and Hart Crane's *The Bridge* (1930). Their works tackled the horizontal underpinnings of the vertical sky-climbing symbols of American power and richness. The destructive forces released by World War I, and, later, the economic slump following the Wall Street Crash in 1929 taught Fitzgerald how mystifying those slender bodies had been, and how their very existence — their bold rocketing off the ground and into the sky — had rested on the assumption that the United States territory could not be invaded. The inviolated and inviolable status of the nation (its being safe from warlike threats coming from outside while being perfectly enveloped within its natural borders) was to remain one of the milestones of American exceptionalism. What had looked like a threatening scenario to Fitzgerald and many other artists between the two World Wars would continue to nourish the urban imagery, and would finally become reality with 11 September 2001.

Here come Benioff's novel and Lee's film, at the crucial point where urban dream and reality eventually crash into one another. The story, which follows a few narrative lines, strikes its right path through the New

York setting and a plain style. Monty Brogan, a twenty-three-year old Irish-born drug dealer living in Yorkville, has been "touched" by the Police and condemned to seven years in the Federal prison of Otisville. He has one last night of freedom to spend with the people who have been part of his New York life until he was arrested: his father, a Brooklyn tavern keeper; his girlfriend, Naturelle, a beautiful Puerto Rican girl; his two best friends, Frank Slattery, a neurotic Wall Street broker, and Jakob Elinsky, a well-born high-school teacher; his boss, Uncle Blue; his former partner, the Ukrainian criminal Kostya. This, in short, is the plot compressed into twenty-four hours (the day before prison), plus one, the twenty-fifth hour, when Monty can no longer indulge in nostalgic visions of his "lost city," and must head to the tomb walls of a jail in upstate New York.

Two juxtaposed lines shape the profile of Monty's city: a horizontal one, jutting out into a liquid space of possibility (the West); a vertical one, yielding to a cataclysmic magnet (the New York underground). There's no balance between the former and the latter; a contradiction that speaks to the two souls of the city: the more natural and vernacular parts (the East River and the Hudson; the Brooklyn, Verrazzano, Williamsburgh, and George Washington Bridges; Central Park and Carl Schurz Park; Yorkville and Brooklyn); and their man-made counterparts (Wall Street's skyscrapers, Ground Zero, the criminal underworld).

Two overlapping maps, both geographic and fantastic, can thus be charted in *The 25th Hour*: the native landscape *and* the citadel of power, the city as a mosaic of peoples and cultures struggling to keep up with its mythic status of "gateway to the promised land" *and* the city as an upward spiral which has turned downwards.¹

By employing and reworking these themes, Benioff manages to give his story a plurality of temporal perspectives which, in turn, allow the narrator to act both as witness to a longer history (that of the "rising" of New York), and prophet of events which are yet to come (its "falling"). There is nothing "oracular" in Benioff's 2000 prediction of a catastrophe pending over New York. The signs of an apocalyptic destruction of the

city have always loomed large within the American literary and popular imagination. They are rooted in the unique economic and social conditions of the city's technological take-off which was made possible at the cost of enormous human sacrifices.

Either by inducing paranoic anxieties of destruction, or by imposing urban policies meant to control and neutralize the mob, New York's architecture has always been very ambiguous in the ways it celebrated both corporate powers and the ideal of the city common wealth. First horizontally and then vertically, urban expansion went parallel to social explosion. The former tried to come to terms with the latter, while the latter kept menacing to disrupt those terms. The present essay argues that Benioff's novel and Lee's film can be read in the light of that menace.

I. NEW YORK HORIZONTAL

Cyclical Time: the East River; Yorkville and Central Park

Some of the most suggestive scenes in the novel and the film are the insights into New York waterfront areas, namely the Yorkville esplanade on the East River. The nice streets of Yorkville and the gorgeous vision of the East River allow Monty a momentary escape from reality. Belonging to the pastoral dimension of the city, Yorkville and its esplanade seem to offer a suspension of social conflicts and individual diseases that is nevertheless only temporary.

There is a lot of thoroughly upper-class Yorkville in *The 25th Hour*, a lot of its charm and posh posture: the promenades along the beautiful esplanade, the outdoor joys of Central Park and Carl Schurz Park, the walks up and down crime-ridden streets, the lingering on the stoops of the brownstone buildings, and the quiet two-room apartment where Monty and Naturelle live. Walking along the riverbank, Monty takes a temporary rest and forgets the neurosis of the city. By magnifying the

East River and its many bridges, the author creates an imagery of natural as well as built arches that embroider the city, and help its inhabitants to cover its temporal and spatial distances. In this way, New York City seems to gain a sense of unity within its otherwise dismembered fabric. However, as "unifying" as these visions can be, they are locked into a predicament: on the one hand there is the desire to connect borough to borough (and city to city, state to state...), while on the other, there is the impossibility for such a desire to come true but within the characters' imagination.

The first meeting between Naturelle and Monty — an episode narrated with a three-year flashback — takes place on a sunny late summer day in a playground: a perfect September afternoon in Carl Schurz Park, or Central Park (where the film scene was actually shot), seems to soften all the interethnic and inter-class struggles of the city.

The enormous garden *within* the city, planned by Frederick Law Olmsted in 1857, still retains part of its function as an inclusive ground for the New York motley of peoples and cultures — mainly composed by immigrant working class — to shelter from the "bustle and jar of the streets" (Olmsted, in LeGates 320). Originally conceived as a social palliative to the burden of the street, Central Park came to represent the locus where diverse and often conflicting elements of the metropolis were neutralized. And Central Park was part of a larger design aimed to control the city's mob by means of architecture. In *The Incorporation of America* (1982), Alan Trachtenberg explains how Central Park was conceived to be "an anodyne to the pressures of the street, the exhausting effort to avoid collision," and how it was to function as a mainstreaming force upon the lower strata (110, 112).

To a certain extent, the reformers' idea has proven quite far-sighted. In Lee's and Benioff's 2002-snapshot, Central Park is still a place where the urban threat represented by the masses and the streets is somewhat soothed. Yet "the smoldering volcano," the menace coming from street-life and the urban mob in the 1880s, keeps seeping under Central Park.

The whole city is ready to erupt at any moment. Upper-class Yorkville is apparently free from any social conflict, but Monty and Naturelle are not. Monty is Irish-born and, like his friend Frank Slattery, comes from Brooklyn, specifically from Bersonhurst, where his father still lives and works. Naturelle Rivera is Puerto Rican and comes from the Bronx where her mother still lives. Monty, Naturelle and Frank — unlike Jakob Elin-sky, born to upper-class Jewish-American parents living in Park Avenue — were all raised up in working-class neighborhoods. The three of them share a common will to social and economic reward for their poor teens. Naturelle, then, is "just right, a neighborhood girl who could play the uptown game" (207), and so are Monty and Frank. Their three lives exemplify the American metaphor of upward mobility, yet their moving from rags to riches has unbearable costs: Monty turns into a drug dealer enmeshed with the criminal underworld, Frank is a broker with no private life, Naturelle will go back to where she belongs, the Bronx, for she can't afford to "play the uptown game" without Monty's paying for it. Monty, Frank, and Naturelle used to belong to the mosaic of different vil-lages and different ethnic groups, "the many islands within the islands" (Maffi 77): Bensonhurst, the mainly Italian neighborhood in south-west-ern Brooklyn, adjoining Coney Island; and the Bronx where many Puer-to Ricans from East Harlem migrated in the postwar years.

Now Monty, Frank, and Nat neither belong to their birth-places nor to the residential neighborhoods they have chosen to live in. The union between a second-generation Irish-American guy and a Nuyorican girl also suggests that the die-hard fears linked to interethnic relationship are likely to explode with the first hardships. In the scene in which he enters the toilet of a bar, looks at himself in the mirror, and starts swearing against anyone and anything in New York City, Monty says: "Fuck Naturelle Riveira... she sold me *up* the river" (Lee, "Reflections" 6). Besides being a variation of the English informal expression for betrayal ("selling something or someone down the river"), "she sold me up the river" may sound like a double reversal of the slaves' being "sold *down* the

river": first comes a gender role reversal (here there is a woman who is selling a man), second a racial reversal (a white man is sold by a colored woman). Apart from this insightful reworking of the fear of miscegenation, Monty's anger against his city hits each and every face of the race-gender-class prism of New York:

Fuck . . . The turbaned Sikhs and unwashed Pakistanis racing their yellow cabs down the avenues Fuck them all. The Korean grocers with their pyramids of overpriced fruits, the plastic-wrapped tulips and roses. The white-robed Nigerians selling counterfeit Gucci on Fifth Avenue. The Russians in Brighton Beach, drinking their tea from glasses, sugar cubes clenched between their teeth. Fuck them. The black-hatted Hasidim in their dirty gabardine suits, selling diamonds on 47th Street, counting their money while they wait for Meshiach The Puerto Ricans, flags flying and radios howling from the open windows of their cars. The Bensonhurst Italians pomading their hair, with their nylon warm-up suits and St. Anthony medalions. The Upper East Side wives . . . with their scarves from Hermes and their artichokes from Balducci's. Fuck the uptown brothers, they never pass the ball, they don't play defense . . . (144)

Still, in spite of its seemingly disjointed patchwork of ethnicity, New York is, in Benioff's own words, "packed together. It's not like Los Angeles" (Lee, "Benioff's Commentary"). Spike Lee, whose films have always had a strong "territorial inscription" (Pouzoulet 32), tries to render this somewhat "unified" vision of the city into a long tracking shot of New York faces running horizontally.

New York City *is* "packed together" (Lee, "Benioff's Commentary") on urban and symbolic grounds, its legibility residing in "an exercise in contradictions," a compromise between two different tendencies. On the one hand, the segregating forces advocating plans to dispose of the downtown manufacturing, dump low-rent tenants, and get rid of all infrastructures connected to the poor and the working class; on the other, the

local forces that resist gentrification and are composed by an ethnic diversity greater than in other cities (the difficult coexistence of Latinos, Chasidic Jews, Italians, East Europeans, Caribbeans, etc.).² Regulated and constrained as it is by landscapes of power, New York City thwarts legibility even while its interethnic chessboard is on the verge of collapsing, and the social and economic contrasts it entails are getting less and less fluid.

Mythic Time: from New York Bridges to the Desert

Much of the illegibility of a city like New York is originated by the disparate social worlds it encompasses. Where many different groups and cultures live together in highly populated cities, the transition from one to another is less abrupt and, therefore, less decipherable. The lines separating class, gender and race become a little less clear-cut than anywhere else. One way to read what appears as a puzzling maze at first glance could be to focus on the criss-crossing bridges connecting Manhattan with the other boroughs. *The 25th Hour* emphasizes the beauty and the symbolic quality of all New York bridges. New York City (or, better, just some of its boroughs, Manhattan and Brooklyn) is constantly cut across transversely by Benioff's characters who sort of glide over it, "skating" on its, real or fantastic, asphalt or watery tracks. There is a lot of emphasis on New York bridges, the author himself talks about a story of "New York unappreciated bridges" (Lee, "Benioff's Commentary").

In Hart Crane's visionary poem *The Bridge* (1930), Brooklyn Bridge becomes a metaphor connecting American past and future, history and technology. Across, above and underneath the bridge, imaginary directions overlap: the westward route moving from Brooklyn to California; the backward route looking into American past and myths; the upward Whitman-like, "silver-paced" route ascending to the sky; the downward Poe-like route plunging into the river's depth and underground. The suicide attempts which have marked the history of Brooklyn Bridge from the start represent a literary topic. Bud, the Bowery bum of *Manhattan Trans-*

fer, arrives at the Brooklyn Bridge southern driveway, looks at the "blues-steel" river below, mutters the words "Don't matter where I go, can't go nowhere now" (125), and falls into the East River. His personal tragedy is the very denial of the westward opening embodied by the bridge.

Benioff uses the same motif when he tells of the rumours heard by Monty about a graffiti artist, Sane Smith, ending his days with the archetypically "insane" dive into the river, maybe after having tagged it. The words and tags of Sane Smith — though consisting of spray color, the most impermanent substance — are bound to resist the predicament of time's effacing action (his works will not yield to scrubbing efforts in the next hundred years) because they seem to share the geological perspective of the rocks they rest on. "The jagged boulders scrawled with paint" (12) are probably the remains of the Wisconsin ice sheet, where now visible in Central Park the force of the glacial advance can still be seen in the many boulders, called erratics, scattered here and there, evidence of the ice withdrawal.³ The erratic words of Sane Smith spread across the city, up and down its streets and waterways, are written onto the sloping "erratics" of Carl Schurz Park: the remote past resurfaces in the present. Either drawn on pleistocenic stones or on the steel tubes of Manhattan bridges, Sane Smith's graffiti are woven into the urban fabric which will carry their traces even after the colors are gone.

A book about "New York City unappreciated bridges", *The Twenty-Fifth Hour* does not focus on Brooklyn Bridge, mentioning many other ones. The evocation of bridges on the East River comes with gorgeous views of the river, a contemplative mood of the beholder, and some thoughts of escape:

Monty has sat on this bench a hundred times, but today he studies the view.

This is his favorite spot in the city.

This is what he wants to see when he closes his eyes in the place he's going: the green river, the steel bridges, the red tugboats, the stone lighthouse, the smokestacks and warehouses of Queens. (8-10)

Jakob's own reaction to the same sight, however, is slightly different and his imagination is caught by what lies below the bridges and the river: the image of bloated eyeless bodies waiting below the water. An obsession with what lies underneath Manhattan has always haunted the New York imagination and the "eyeless bodies" hiding below the river that haunt Jakob's imagination are witnesses to a story of tragic drownings and suicides: from the seventeenth-century Dutch sailors to the late-nineteenth-century workers who died in the construction of the New York bridges, to the late-twentieth-century bums, lunatics, and graffiti artists succumbing to "the endless inspired catastrophe of New York" (Delillo 494).

In Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, the founding trope of "The Tunnel" associates Brooklyn bridge with the metaphorical descent into the Netherworld represented by the subway. The poet's descent into a subway (and the interior of his mind) is followed by the resurfacing to see the bridge and the East River leading to the distant sea. Benioff's representation of bridges moves within similar poles, they are both tunnels of death where desperation can finally turn into suicide yielding to a catastrophic attraction and — at least on a fantastic level — gateways to a mythic frontier. The George Washington Bridge symbolizes the last route to salvation and hope for Monty. At the end of the film, Brogan picks up his son to drive him to Otisville. Reading a Road Atlas, Brogan finds out how to get there. Taking the Henry Hudson on the Upper West Side they will pass by the George Washington Bridge that joins Manhattan to New Jersey and therefore opens to a metaphoric "left turn" to anywhere, an open road as opposed to the journey to nowhere represented by Otisville.

Brogan's speech is overflowing with the sense of possibility and open destiny related to the West and to the Frontier myth:

Give the word and I'll take a left turn ... take the George Washington Bridge.
Go West ... Never come back ... (Lee, "Left Turn to Where?" 18)

While Brian Cox (Brogan Sr.) utters these words steering the car, he starts an imaginary trip across the American landscape, heading for a white desert down in Texas. There, as Brogan's tale unravels, Monty would stop at some anonymous small town, erase his real identity, start over like a bartender, never look back to his New York past, be joined by Naturelle and finally settle down. The film differs from the novel in two ways: adding the reunion with Naturelle (in the book Monty would get married with a local girl), and visually white-washing the last part of Brogan's make-believe. Getting closer to the George Washington Bridge (a turning point which would allow half a chance of freedom for Monty as Cairo would have done for Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*), Mr. Brogan tells the perfect American "go-West" tale:

"Give me the word," says Mr. Brogan, "and I'll take a left turn."

"Left turn to where?"

"We can take the George Washington Bridge. Wherever you want."

... I'm saying if you want.... I'll drive and keep driving ... and then I'll leave.

(274, 275)

The last page of the novel strikes a legendary chord. The real world well behind, Monty envisions a future of hope and happiness. Blurring the boundaries between dream and reality, such a close reiterates the myth of the open road, suggesting life might as well continue for Monty if he only heads west. But in the film something has changed. The last words said by Cox-Brogan take Monty back to where he really belongs:

You're a New Yorker ... You've got New York in your bones.... Spend the rest of your life out West but you're still a New Yorker. (Lee, "Don't Look Back" 19)

And the very last shot is on Monty sitting in his father's car, the George Washington Bridge passed by, a close-up shot on his swollen and bleeding face. No open-ended perspective, no legend. Whereas before the attack on the WTC, legend could still win against facts (thus echoing

John Ford's epitaph "This is the West, Sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend" — John Ford, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, 1961),⁴ after that day New Yorkers, and America at large, have come to realise no escape and no frontier is allowed any longer, not even on a fantastic level.

II. NEW YORK VERTICAL

Historical Time: Reaching for the Sky

That Benioff's and Lee's city is first and foremost "temporal" and contains different types of time within its spatial boundaries is made clear by the title chosen both for the novel and the film. If the cyclical time of seasons and commuting patterns can be symbolized by the Upper East Side waterfront, streets and parks, and the mythic time of the open destiny finds its most accomplished metaphor in the New York bridges, there are at least three other types of time we can trace in *The 25th Hour*: a historical time, made of buildings as palimpsests of urban memories; a differential time, composed of the different paces of the city and its citizens; an individual time, made of the characters' perception of the other two types of time. These last three types of time occur in the vertical dimension, running along a top-to-bottom line of urban catastrophism. A sense of tumbling down New York streets is shared by the characters' material and spiritual lives in the world-city.

The previous pages have already shown how the fatal attraction to what lies under the river's bed continues to play a central role in Benioff's novel. But a plunge always implies an erection, and may be the harbinger of a new rising. If, as Art Spiegelman's 2004 comics *In the Shadow of No Towers* shows,⁵ the New York sky fell with the World Trade Center in 2001, sometime in the city past it must have been ambitiously reached through a miracle of engineering and space com-

pression. That miracle happened at the beginning of the twentieth century and took the elegant shapes of the first skyscrapers.

The giant national corporations emerging in the United States in the Gilded Age had to combine vast space needs with limited site, structural preoccupations with symbolical function. (See Ford 29-41 and Sussman.) These mixed requisites immediately implied high-rise development and in the 1920s most of the new skyscrapers built in midtown Manhattan began to compose "a Grand Canyon in treated stone that casts square, rectangular, triangular, and rhomboidal shadows onto spacious sidewalks" (Maffi 16-17). It's worth noticing how the analogy with the Grand Canyon had appeared as early as the 1890s in the prophetic words of a Chicago journalist, George Ade (Teaford 14). Even more intriguing, the first systematic and scientific description of the California canyons by the geologist Clarence King came in 1872, with a book which stood half way between a treatise and a novel, *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada*.

As Alan Trachtenberg argues in *Reading American Photographs*, the aura surrounding the epic undertaking of exploring and naming the natural wonders of the Cordilleras can be traced in King's use of metaphors: "Canyons are 'gateways,' ridges 'mural escarpments,' sand and marl formations are 'innumerable turrets, isolated towers, and citadel-like masses, which when seen at a little distance, present the aspect of a great wall-city, with outlying bastions and buttresses'" (160). King's description of the Rocky Mountains reflected his geological theories of catastrophism. In his expedition he found evidence of geological cataclysms which were read as signs of an older and more terrible history than Europe's. (See Trachtenberg, *Reading* 18, and Leonardi.)

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the industrialization and mechanization of American life was reached under unique circumstances, and for "speed, scale and thoroughness within a brief period, American industry rapidly surpassed its European rivals" (Trachtenberg, *Incorporation* 52). Along with native industrialization then came what a 1884 medical treatise by George M. Beard called *American Nervousness*: a

mainly middle- and upper-class obsession with impending chaos which fused the menace of social insurrection and that of technological short-circuits. Inflammable wires have always haunted the New York imagination, resurfacing time and again in the city history and explaining the existence of firefighters as urban folk heroes.

By the early twentieth century, however, the fear of a social or mechanical apocalypse had to cope with that "transition from horizontal to upward vertical movement" (Brooker 30) marking the beginning of Modernity and embodied by the skyscrapers. By 1910, the wonder of America seemed to lay in the towering silhouettes filling up the lower end of Manhattan. Along with land prices, the skyscrapers rose higher and higher. The upward verticality of "the city of ambition" was often perceived as if it were inseparable from a downward horizontal counterpart.

For F. Scott Fitzgerald the same pull was streaked with a "touch of disaster"; an underlying prophecy of destruction to be found in *Manhattan Transfer* by John Dos Passos as well:

Do you know how long the Lord God took to destroy Babylon and Nineveh? Seven minutes. There's more wickedness in one block in New York City than there was in a square mile in Nineveh ... (381)

And destruction actually came on 29 October 1929. With the country sliding into a deep economic depression, and the stock market crashed, the newly completed skyscrapers (the Chrysler Building, with its 1048 feet, and the Empire, with its 1250 feet) stood in sharp contrast to the poverty-stricken tenements and streets. If the city's "crack-up" was to be overcome after the Depression, New York imagination would continue to be haunted by the long shadow cast by its greatest crisis. 1929 added a tragic taste of reality to old apocalyptic fantasies but the city lived on, and as the buildings went higher, the fear of a menace coming from the sky got stronger. In 1968, the project for the construction of the World

Trade Center (1966-1973) was opposed by the owner of the Empire State Building, Lawrence A. Wien, who, moved by economic and real-estate interests, ran an advertisement in the *New York Times* warning his citizens against the possibility of a commercial airliner striking the World Trade Center. The ad was suggestively titled "The Mountains Come to Manhattan" (Glanz, Lipton).

The perception of the skyscraper as both a strata of rocks from pre-historic time and a spiral of high-tech elements projected into cyberspace has marked the city's skyline from the turn of the eighteenth century to the present. This double perception goes back as far as King's description of the Canyons through urban images of cathedrals and domes and then turns to the urban reefs of the New York skyscrapers. Geological theories of catastrophism, sociological studies of mechanization-induced anxiety, and fear of popular rage have been common traits to this vision. Benioff's novel and Lee's film are no exceptions to these traits. By the end of the millennium, New York "nervousness" is neither better at coping with technological progress than it used to be at the beginning of the twentieth century, nor it is safer from biblical fear of destruction.

In *The 25th Hour*, the second-generation Irish-American Monty Brogan has always dreamt to become a fireman (56); a child's fantasy turning more and more into paranoia as he grows up. Being twenty-three-years old in 2000, Monty was a child by the late seventies and in the eighties. Two decades which saw the city catching fire both literally and literary. John Guillermin's *The Towering Inferno* (1974) staged a massive fire breaking out and threatening to destroy the tallest skyscraper in the world, and gave visual plenitude to the paranoid attitude of many Americans towards poor wiring and short circuits. In the same years thousands of buildings in the Southern Bronx, east New York, Brownsville in Brooklyn, and southern Queens were destroyed by fire and arson. Living in a working-class neighborhood in Brooklyn, born into an Irish-American family, and moving up to upper-class Manhattan as a grown-up, Monty cannot rid

himself of either the romanticism of a child's dream or the painful regrets of a young drug-dealer for not having become an honest firefighter.

The fear of blackouts and other catastrophes so suggestively evoked by American movies in the 1970s, as well as Monty's personal obsession with fire, have turned into nightmarish reality with the terrorist attack of 11 September; a tragic twist of fate which was somehow prophetically inscribed into Benioff's work and was later handled by Spike Lee.

Differential Time: Geology of Fear

To a somewhat symbolical extent, the topography of horror rimmed by the crater of the collapsed Twin Towers may be considered as representative of the geological truth Clarence King had discovered in the Far West: "Beneath America lies buried another distinct continent — an archaean America" (Trachtenberg, *Reading 160*).

Today Ground Zero consists of the six-underground-level pit framed by the seventy-foot walls of the bathtub (the wall that used to prevent the basement from being inundated by the Hudson river): a vast area looking both prehistoric and futuristic. Much work was done to clear the hollow from the debris and the few massive structures still standing "like rotten trees in a storm" (Glanz, Lipton 273). The rescuers (covered in dust and wearing surgical masks) walked through mounds of detritus and pillars of steel. The cranes removed the steel bones of the façade and the core columns and opened up other voids, under the new-dug voids "rubble-filled canyons" were unearthed, just inside the bathtub wall (Glanz, Lipton 295).

Looming chunks, mounds of debris, pillars of steel, rubble-filled canyons: an uncanny urban correlative of an earthquake. And just like after the storms, explosions, eruptions and fires of a natural cataclysm, the surreal calm of the present time which echoes a terrible past. Those six underground levels witness how that vertical striving was turned downward with the attacks, how "the mountains" eventually "came to Manhattan"

and eventually crumbled. Being both the site of wreckage and recovery, Ground Zero attests to the differential time of the city, its moving at different rhythms, at once fast (rising and falling) and slow (lifting again).

Although Benioff wrote the novel before the attacks, the most memorable page of the book offers a sinister prophecy of the day which shook New York. In the already mentioned "Fuck NY Scene," Monty's bursts of rage end in a catalogue climaxing a topographical survey of the city as a whole:

Fuck the city and everyone in it — from the row houses of Astoria to the duplexes of Park Avenue, from the projects of Brownsville to the lofts of Soho, from Bellevue Hospital to the tenements in Alphabet City to the brownstones in Park Slope — *let the Arabs bomb it all to rubble; let the waters' rise submerge the whole rat-crazed place; let it burn, let it burn, let it burn.* (144, my emphasis)

If before 11 September the prophecy followed a three-step pattern (first the attack, second the flood, then the fire), the same pattern underwent significant variations in the 2002 film:

Let an earthquake crumble it; let the fires rage; let it burn to fucking ash; and then let the waters rise and submerge this whole rat-infested place. (Lee, "Reflection" 6)

After the real attacks, the Arab bombing was wiped out, and the sequence of natural cataclysm inverted: first the destroying fire, then the healing and regenerating flood.

In the following scene, "Three Choices" (7), Ground Zero is shown from the thirty-second-floor window of Frank's apartment: all is still, no movement, no sounds but the overwhelming soundtrack. In one of the deleted scenes ("Ground Zero," 4), the image of Ground Zero is even more compelling in its thorough absence of sound and movement. We are shown

a desert crater which is also a breaking-yard, then the skyscrapers of the Financial District surrounding that valley of death, then some flags and some men in white butylene suits looking and moving like astronauts, then the huge cranes. A third-millennium version of King's survey of the Far West back in the 1870s: the vacancy of the desert, the high Canyons, the United States banner bringing civilization to those places.

Individual Time: Brokers and Drug-dealers

Different types of time harking back to remote past and projecting into the future, the surreal silence of the present echoing the furious blast of the past, the shell hole of today assuming the high-rise of yesterday.

In the book as well as in the film, Frank Slattery is one of those who work in lower Manhattan, just a few blocks north of the New York Stock Exchange, in the shadows of the Wall Street canyons. He deals in bond trading and works for 10 or 11 hours a day in a clamorous office. As a broker, he is always under pressure to make profits, therefore under pressure of time. As a broker he is also under the pressure of non-stop supervision: from managers to video cameras, from fellow traders to electronic monitor. Totally removed from labor, Frank's towering office is set at the end of time-space compression: through market manipulation and corporate organization of a global structure, he deals in time while saving it and in space while ignoring the worldwide dislocations his dealing implies (24).

In 'the film, the first glimpse of Frank comes with a close-shot on his bloodshot eyes, his hands clutching an anti-stress ball, his look fixed on the monitors in his claustrophobic office booth. With Spike Lee's camera highlighting the reflecting surfaces of the glass doors within the open-space office, each face and each screen look double, as if they were deceptive repetitions of the originals. Frank's world is what it seems: an infinite reproduction of insubstantial richness.

Over a hundred years, the incorporation of America has turned into the incorporation of the whole world. Software has apparently replaced hardware, and the incorporeal money "gamble" staged in Wall Street everyday is made possible by the existence of new sweatshops in third-world countries: "One thousand contracts at one hundred thousand dollars a pop, a one-hundred-million-dollar position. Two full points. A two-million-dollar profit in nine minutes" (27-28). Bond trading is all a matter of exact timing; a broker is not allowed any error, he has to close deals on perfect time. The material consequences of his "fractional upticks and downticks" move well beyond the Jersey shore and his mansions "by the Englewood Cliffs," but Frank's eyes, like those of Wall Street brokers, cannot reach further than New Jersey (28).

Monty, on the contrary, is all wrapped up in reveries which take him further and further away from his standpoint: from his house to the esplanade, from the esplanade to the river, from the river to Queens and then to the distant horizon of the western desert. Whereas Frank is locked up in his office perspective and lives in a sort of clockwork capsule, Monty will soon be locked in a real prison (a walled city) and aims at cherishing each and every minute of freedom. Monty's extending time to the utmost through memories helps him face the no-time option of his future. Even the twenty-fifth hour is virtually never-ending, opened to the long-lived, if somewhat worn-out, Western myth. The mythic time of the last four pages of the novel is thus conveyed by the use of the conditional, a mood open to wishes and possibilities. But beside — maybe even behind — the mythic time of the Frontier lies the Biblical time of upcoming cataclysm evoked through the imperative of a prophet's anathema.

CONCLUSIONS: "GOOD DIRECTORS ARE GOOD STORYTELLERS"

The main purpose of the present essay was to read Benioff's novel and Lee's film in the light of their representation of New York as a place

divided, both physically and symbolically, into "pastoral" spaces open to horizontal landscapes (the waterfront, the East River, Central Park, the Bridges); and modernist cityscapes given in a vertical dimension (the Wall Street canyons). Since the very beginning of national history, these two axes were given to and perceived by Americans as huge and absolute, and defied any possible comparison with European space. Facing the Canyons of the Rocky Mountains, Clarence King found the geological proofs of his cataclysmic theory and of the fact that the North American continent had a much older history than Europe. If the American landscape (with its Midwestern prairies, and its Western deserts) had dominated the national rhetoric throughout the nineteenth century, the beginning of the new century, the advent of Modernity and the boom of American cities needed a new layout of space. The main feature of those cityscapes was verticality.

Among the extraordinary conditions shaping urban development, the fact that cities were scattered all over the country and that they had limited borders was to play a central role in American imagination and architecture. In the first case, what was needed was a compression of horizontal space into vertical time: ever new technological innovations in order to shorten the natural distances. In the second case, the finiteness of urban edge, the ever-growing immigration rates, and the speculative market called for a vertical expansion of residential, commercial and financial buildings. As a real icon of Modernity, New York was the city where these two demands were met with the most striking results: a triumph of technology and an ever-changing skyline. But these outstanding achievements were paid at the cost of abiding collective obsessions such as the fear of impending catastrophe coming either from fire and short circuits or from social upheavals.

Benioff's novel offered one of the last literary representations of New York City before the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. A good part of the novel's accomplishment resides in its handling of the tensions and contradictions generated by New York's jux-

taposition of horizontal and vertical dimensions.

The 25th Hour would not have become such a best-seller had it not been for Spike Lee's film. By acknowledging the hard law of the literary market, we take nothing away from a good book which came out with perfect — if tragical — timing just a few months before 11 September, while uncannily anticipating it. Given its temporal collocation, the novel was open to a moral challenge. Spike Lee decided to work his way through the representation of Ground Zero (and so to include *the* event of New York history) despite the moral and artistic doubts this choice posed. To the director, a deliberate omission of the attack would have meant a lack of "responsibility," a moral and aesthetic shortcoming. In an interview about his colleague Spike Lee, Martin Scorsese said that "good directors are good storytellers" (Lee, "Evolution of an American Filmmaker"). And good storytellers always know what to include and what to leave out. Spike Lee managed to take the best from Benioff's book and to adjust it to the dramatic change his city had undergone, adding a new layer to the urban palimpsest.

In *The American Scene*, Henry James likened the New York skyline to "a pin-cushion in profile" that would demand an ever changing narrative:

One story is good only till another is told, and skyscrapers are the last word of economic ingenuity only till another word be written. (77)

The unrelenting narrative of uprisings and downfalls, however, calls for a reading of the city's history as a superimposition of past relics and signs of the present which make the future more legible. The prophetic pages of Benioff's novel (like those of Don DeLillo's works) are more than foreseeing, showing how the future of the city is actually inscribed in its past and present history. In 2000, *The 25th Hour* told the story of a city caught between a nostalgic longing for its vernacular landscapes (the river, the park, the streets) and a sense of unfulfilled ambition embodied by the somewhat void profiles of its skyscrapers (Frank's office on Wall

Street). By 2002, another story was told. New York's "last word" was spoken by the collapse of the Twin Towers; with its unfulfilled ambitions coming to a screeching halt. But, after that, other words have been written.

NOTES

1. Besides the many references and quotations which occur throughout the essay, this work owes much to the reading of a corpus of critical studies focused on New York cultural and literary history and, more generally, on the representation of city space in American culture, cited in the bibliography below. Particularly enlightening perspectives came to me from Trachtenberg, *Incorporation of America* and *Reading American Photographs*, Ford, *Cities and Buildings*, and Maffi, *New York City*. The idea of framing the discourse into five different types of "time" (cyclical, mythical, historical, differential, individual) is indebted to Miles et al.
2. Sharon Zukin, "Space and Symbols in an Age of Decline," Miles et al. 85.
3. See "Geology," *Encyclopedia of New York City* 458.
4. For a study on *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and the myth of American Civilization see Stowell 95-110.
5. See Spiegelman. The introduction to *Shadow of No Towers* is titled "The Sky Is Falling."

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