



1 Spider-Man (2002)

Dreams and Nightmares: Filmic Fantasies of New York After 2001

2008

America is part of everyone's imaginative life, through movies, music, television and the Web, whether you grow up in Bilbao, Beijing, or Bombay. Everyone has a New York in their heads, even if they've never been there before, which is why the destruction of the twin towers had such an impact.

Timothy Garton Ash

As it happens, the first days of September 2001 were, for me, an especially satisfying time. More than a decade earlier, I had conceived a book project about the relationship of the city and film, called *Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies*. Year in and year out, while maintaining my design practice and collaborating with Ric Burns on our seven-part public television series about New York, I had carried out my research: viewing and analyzing hundreds of films; interviewing scores of directors, cinematographers, production designers, special-effect supervisors, and other craftspeople; locating rare art-department stills and construction drawings in studio basements; and searching out the extant “New York Street” backlots in Hollywood, as well as long-forgotten film locations within the city itself. Month by month, year by year, the book itself had gradually taken shape, its text and images assembled in accordance with my overall premise: that the city we see in film is not only a

mirror of the real metropolis, but a city unto itself, a “mythic city,” or “dream city,” with a life of its own—one that had entered the imagination of people all around the world.

Now, at last, the book was complete, and heading swiftly toward publication by Alfred A. Knopf for the holiday season. The jacket layout—a masterly design by Chip Kidd featuring a dreamlike film image of the lower Manhattan skyline—was in hand; the files of the book were to be transmitted to the printer in mid-September; and there remained in the meanwhile a few, not-unpleasant authorial tasks to carry out—among them, the taking of an author’s photograph for the back flap. Seeking to link this image to the book’s larger themes, I proposed a portrait posed on what would seem at first glance a typical Manhattan street, but on closer inspection would prove to be the backlot “New York Street” of a Hollywood studio. After extended negotiations with Paramount Studios—at one point reaching the desk of its chairman, Jonathan Dolgen—permission to use the lot had been obtained, and a gifted young photographer, Gina Conte, had been commissioned to do the shoot. The plan called for me to fly to Los Angeles early in the morning, have the picture taken at Paramount that afternoon, and return the following morning. The date that seemed to work best for everyone was Tuesday, September 11th, 2001.

In the end, the photo was indeed taken, and at Paramount—but only at the end of that week, following three grim, sleepless days stranded in Indianapolis, after my plane (like every flight in the United States) was ordered by the FAA to put down in mid-journey on that terrible Tuesday morning. Amidst the universal anguish and confusion of those first days and weeks, my own situation was merely a peculiar one, as the meaning of a work I had patiently assembled for more than a decade was wrenched suddenly into an entirely different, and far more garish, context. It was too late to revise the book’s contents in any substantial way before it went to the printers; there was time only to add a brief author’s note, acknowledging that although the shape and significance of the city’s skyline had been irrevocably altered by the events of September 11th, the book might still help “to further an understanding of why the New York skyline—in both image and reality—has had such a profound and personal meaning for people all around the world.”

Certainly, this aspect my subject—the meaning of the city and its skyline in “image and reality”—had suddenly become a powerfully charged one, of interest not only to a coterie of architects, film scholars and cultural critics, but to mainstream journalists and media outlets across the country.

There was, first of all, the fact that so many onlookers that day in New York and elsewhere—literally stunned by the horrific spectacle of the attacks themselves—could find nothing to liken them to except “a disaster movie.” But though I had devoted an entire subchapter of my book to the cinematic destruction of New York—from the atomic nightmares of *Invasion, U.S.A* (1952) and *Planet of the Apes* (1968), to the watery deluges of *When World Collide* (1951) and *Deep Impact* (1998), to the monstrous incursions of *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953) and *Godzilla* (1998), to the cosmic bombardments of *Armageddon* (1998), *Meteor* (1979), and *Independence Day* (1996)—it seemed clear to me that the events of September 11th, though obviously unlike anything in our real-world experience, did not, on the other hand, especially resemble a movie. Not only were many of the images—especially those unimaginable shots of people jumping or falling from the towers—more literally graphic and specific and hideous than anything a feature film would ever show, but they could

never, of course, offer the essential “suspension of disbelief” that is at the heart any cinematic presentation of catastrophe—the particular *frisson* which comes from our underlying awareness that, however dramatic or riveting, the events onscreen are fictional.

Those searching for the significance of the movies to what had transpired on September 11th stood on firmer ground, I felt, in looking to the way in which films—along with television and music and the myriad other elements of America’s global popular culture—had made New York in general, and the World Trade Center in particular, such an irresistible target. Though one had to be inevitably cautious in making pronouncements about the motivations of the 9/11 terrorists, and avoid facile presumptions about a group whose acts were all but inconceivable, it seemed plain that it was in no small part the cinematic projection of the New York skyline, penetrating every part of the world, that gave it so outsized a place in the minds of those who would seek to destroy—or at least derail—the modern, globalizing, commercial culture of which it was the supreme symbol. By the same token, of course, it was obvious that the attack itself represented the cruelest and most manipulative “media event” in history, in which the first plane’s collision with the north tower, as unimaginably awful as it was in itself, was in a certain sense merely a kind of “shill,” or attention-drawer, to ensure that virtually every camera in the media capital of the globe would be trained on the World Trade Center when the attack on the south tower came. In both cases, the power of the *image* of the skyline—as much as its reality—lay close to the heart of the event.

It was in this strange and terrible context that another question arose—one that I would hear repeatedly from journalists in the coming weeks, as my suddenly “relevant” book moved toward publication. Given all that had happened, did the New York skyline have any future in the movies themselves? The question gained a certain urgency in those first weeks, thanks to reports of the frantic efforts underway to remove images of the Trade Center in nearly completed films or promotional campaigns. A theatrical trailer for *Spider-Man* (2002), whose release was still nearly a year away, had shown the superhero foiling a robbers’ getaway by using his web to catch their helicopter between the twin towers; it was instantly pulled from circulation, as was a “teaser” poster for the film showing the towers reflected in Spider-Man’s eyes. Using digital techniques, images of the towers were hastily removed from the Manhattan skyline for a studio confection called *Serendipity* (2001), as they were in the goofy fashion-world parody, *Zoolander* (2001). Though it only emerged later, the makers of *Men in Black II* (2002) were at that moment struggling with a far larger problem, having set the entire climax of their film atop the World Trade Center, whose roof would open to release a fleet of UFOs into the sky. Production was halted until the script could be rewritten.

The need for these changes became clear when a romantic rondel called *Sidewalks of New York* (2001)—whose premiere had been scheduled for mid-September but postponed after the attacks—finally opened in November. The film’s writer and director, Ed Burns, a fiercely loyal New Yorker, had chosen not to alter or remove the numerous scenes in which the World Trade Center appeared onscreen, arguing simply, “If someone in your family dies, you don’t pretend like they never existed.” Nonetheless, on more than one occasion, disconcerting views of the now-vanished towers behind the actors jolted movie audiences out of the fictive “world” of that Burns, like any good filmmaker, had sought to fashion.



2 *Just Imagine* (1930), set in the imagined New York on 1980.



3 *King Kong* (1933), sketch of Kong atop the Empire State Building

For me, these various short-term deletions, alterations and reactions prompted a deeper, more melancholy concern. In my book, I had tried to evoke the glamorous, larger-than-life urban presence of the “dream city” of movie New York. I had drawn special attention to an extraordinary tradition of skyline fantasies, stretching from *Metropolis* (1926) and the original *King Kong* (1933) through *Superman* (1978), *Ghostbusters* (1984), *Batman* (1989), and *The Fifth Element* (1997). In those and dozens of other films, the skyscraper towers of New York, the product of the worldliest of forces—structural innovation, real-estate pressures, new scales of corporate organization—had transcended their earthly commercial origins to become one of the great imaginative settings of modern times: the embodiment of daring visions of the future, or strange, invented pasts, or, most thrillingly, the magical setting for a series of extraordinary characters, possessed of powers beyond those of ordinary humans, who could directly engage their sky-high architecture. It was precisely these filmic fantasies, I argued, which best activated the inner meanings and highest possibilities of the real city’s unique landscape (2, 3).

Now, in the aftermath of the attacks, this fantasy vision of the city and its skyline—along with its potent dreams of aspiration, even transcendence—appeared to have been shattered, likely forever. It seemed possible that images of the skyline would once again appear as the background for police dramas, and perhaps, eventually, of romantic comedies. But how would the audiences ever again enjoy fantastic images of a “dream city” now that the nightmarish images of that morning—the planes ripping through the towers, the giant fireballs, the unimaginable collapse of the buildings themselves, and perhaps most horrible of all, the images of people falling or jumping to their deaths—had been seared into the consciousness of people everywhere? Would that fantastic filmic city turn out to be a collateral casualty, as it were, of September 11th?

As it turned out, the answer has turned out to be a resounding “no.” Far from disappearing from the screen, fantasy film visions of the city and its skyline have multiplied in the years since September 11th—even if the meaning and texture of those visions has often taken on a different, more complex shading than in the relative innocence of earlier decades.

To a great degree, the profusion of such fantasies has been due to the critical and commercial success of a single film, *Spider-Man*, whose extraordinary reception upon its release in May 2002—scarcely nine months after the attacks—demonstrated that audiences everywhere were not only ready to accept a fantastic vision of the city but were in some sense eager, even anxious, for its return. Indeed, at a crucial, painful point in the real city’s history, *Spider-Man*’s appearance carried with it the welcome notion that the great skyline tradition of the movie New York—the tradition of specially powered characters interacting with the skyscraper city in extraordinary ways, and thus activating that city’s urbanistic possibilities as nothing else—would not only be continued but expanded. In many ways, *Spider-Man* would fashion the ultimate filmic fantasy vision of New York, at once summing up and enlarging on everything before it, and is thus well worth a close look.

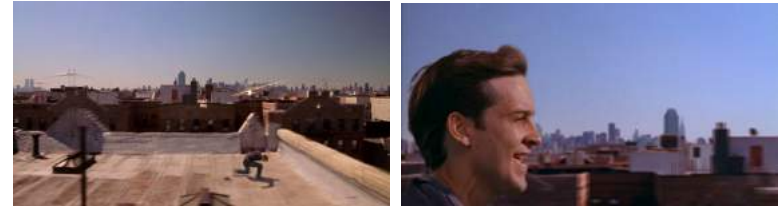
The film’s first advance was its unusual—and unusually effective—mix of studio and location work. By their nature dependent on special effects, most filmic fantasies of the city had been highly fabricated constructs, created almost exclusively in Hollywood studios and special-effect houses. Though the makers of *Spider-Man* did not hesitate to use all the resources of the studio to create their fantastic vision of the city—indeed would go further than anyone before them in creating an extraordinary digitized “model” of New York—they were careful to frame these constructed sequences within extensive location scenes, shot in the city itself. The result was something richer than any similar film before it, combining a breathtakingly fantastic vision of the city with one rooted deeply in the texture and character of the actual, five-borough metropolis.



4 *Spider-Man* (2002). Mary Jane Parker (Kirsten Dunst) walks down a street in Sunnyside, Queens.

This rootedness was evident from the first scene, set not among the towers of Manhattan, but in a modest (and real) Queens neighborhood called Sunnyside, home to the main character, a hapless, ordinary high-school student named Peter Parker (Tobey Maguire). Like the West Farms area of the Bronx that is the location of *Marty* (1955) or the Bay Ridge, Brooklyn setting of *Saturday Night Fever*

(1977), Sunnyside is a classic “outerborough” New York community—an area in many ways like a small, self-contained town, but one inextricably linked to the vast metropolitan region by subway. The film’s opening shot shows the elevated train line that connects the district to Manhattan, its arched trestle crossing the district’s decidedly small-scale “main street”—and the early part of the film would be largely shaped by the tension between this community’s insular, almost village-like way of life and the lure of the towering metropolis just over the horizon (4).



5, 6 *Spider-Man* (2002). Peter Parker (Tobey Maguire) tests his newfound powers on the roofs of Queens apartment houses, with the skyline beyond.

Indeed, when (after experiencing a laboratory accident) Peter first gains his spider-like powers—allowing him to move with superhuman speed and leap great distances—it is atop the mid-rise, relatively unthreatening apartment houses of Queens that he first tests his abilities, exhilarated by his newfound agility, shouting for joy as he jumps from the rooftop of one six-story building to another (5). In the background, however, we plainly see the Manhattan skyline, as if quietly waiting for him, and we know it is *there*—in the formidable skyscraper canyons of New York—that his destiny will unfold (6). In fact, to a large degree, the story of *Spider-Man* will present a contemporary version of the classic *bildungsroman*, the archetypal story of a boy making a journey from a small town (Sunnyside) to a big city (Manhattan), undergoing adventures, taking on responsibilities, experiencing heartbreak, and, along the way, becoming a man.



7, 8 *Spider-Man* (2002). Peter Parker, as Spider-Man, first confronts high-rise landscape of Manhattan in crude homemade costume.

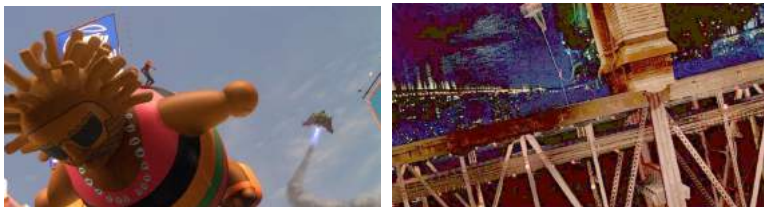
Soon enough—though he is not *quite* ready—Peter must face that great skyline, and in a remarkable night scene we watch him learn to negotiate Manhattan’s landscape for the first time (7, 8). Wearing a crude prototype of his Spider-Man costume, he leaps from a high midtown rooftop and starts to fall—but suddenly shoots out a “web” lifeline that, sticking fast to the façade of nearby building, serves him as a jungle vine did Tarzan, allowing him to swing forward into the steep chasm of the

boulevard. Starting to fall again, he shoots a line to another building and swings forward yet again, until he is making his way through the airspace of Manhattan’s avenues with amazing speed (9, 10).



9, 10 *Spider-Man* (2002). Spider-Man leaps off roof, shoots our web, and begins swinging through Manhattan’s high-rise canyons.

The sequence is remarkable, in a number of ways. First, unlike some of his sleek, confident, super-powered rivals—Superman, most obviously—Peter is plainly terrified at the start, filled with the primal human fear of heights. Unlike Superman, moreover, whose transcendent powers allow him to glide effortlessly above the city, Spider-Man flies by continually *falling*—“saving” himself with the dexterous use of his web. In order to keep airborne he must keep swinging, shooting out his web to make contact with building elements higher than he is, constantly translating his height into forward movement, and thus giving thrilling representation to all three axes of modern New York: the frantic rush of its traffic along the two horizontal dimensions of its street grid, and the vertical upthrust of its towers along its third dimension, its “Z” axis. And because he *is* constantly falling, it is only by remaining constantly alert and completely focused that he can successfully move through the city, exercising a restless momentum that is itself a kind of allegory for New York, and New Yorkers.



11, 12 *Spider-Man* (2002). Spider-Man battles Green Goblin above Times Square (left) and on the Queensboro Bridge

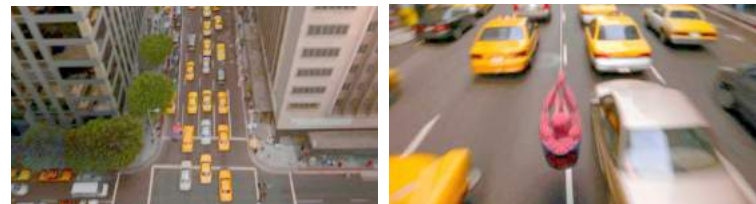
Across the remainder of the film, Spider-Man uses his growing mastery to fend off the attacks of another airborne character, the evil Green Goblin, in two titanic battles over Times Square and the span of the Queensboro Bridge (11, 12). Both scenes take advantage of the extraordinary three-dimensional landscape of modern New York—the giant signs and lights of Times Square, the immense steel framework of the bridge—as the greatest possible setting for the aerial struggles at the heart of the film’s action. Where else, we are reminded, could such archetypal characters such as Spider-Man (or Superman or Batman or King Kong before him) be found? A rural village, or

suburban subdivision, filled with one and two-story structures? The entire way of life of such figures, their entire reason for their being, would be meaningless without the modern high-rise landscape—not one tower, but a *city* of towers, and suspension bridges, and overscaled elevated signs—that New York pioneered in the 20th century and, to a great degree, still represents in the public imagination.

But however impressive these complex battle scenes, it is the film’s final sequence, featuring its hero alone, that truly reignited the ability of movie New York to connect us—viscerally, spatially and symbolically—to the deepest meaning and largest power of the skyline. Though as the amazing Spider-Man he has triumphed over his adversary, as ordinary Peter Parker he has lost everything else. His best friend has become Spider-Man’s sworn enemy, and Peter, now fearing any kind of intimate connection, must turn away from his lifelong love, Mary Jane (Kirsten Dunst) (13). He is left with no one and nothing—nothing, that is, except the city itself, with which he now reconnects in a final burst of motion like nothing else ever seen in the movies (14-19).



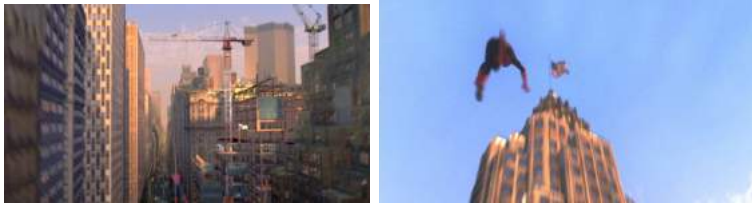
13, 14 *Spider-Man* (2002). After a funeral, Peter Parker walks away from his love, Mary Jane, and reasserts his lonely role as the city’s protector.



15, 16 *Spider-Man* (2002).

High above the streets of midtown Manhattan we first watch Spider-Man jump, turn, fall, and swing, zooming down onto a broad avenue filled with yellow cabs, skimming just above them, then soar up into the canyon of the avenue (14-16). He then seems to hover in the air, before spinning up again, higher this time, near the tips of the surrounding buildings—including one still under construction, whose crane holds a steel beam out in space: the promise of the skyline’s future, rising once again (17). Using the boom of that crane he turns a loop-de-loop, and, as if propelled by the upward promise of the unfinished structure, flies almost straight up to a skyscraper peak surmounted by an American flag—recalling the Manhattan skyline’s longtime role as an emblem of not only civic but

national aspiration (18). We spin around to see Spider-Man surrounded now only by the tallest and most beloved peaks of that skyline—the Chrysler and Empire State Building—and, in the distance for a split second, as if an apparition, the twin towers still rising downtown (19).



17, 18) *Spider-Man* (2002).

Just forty-three seconds long, the sequence took no less than seven months to produce, the response of the film’s visual effects team to the director Sam Raimi’s simple request to conclude *Spider-Man* with “the all-time best animated shot in history.” Much of the sequence’s effectiveness came from the use of a new approach—possible only with state-of-the-art digital animation—that allowed for not only a more spectacular but more *intimate* interaction between superhero and city than had ever been achieved before. In the sequence (as in the rest of the film), we do not watch Spider-Man’s flights from a stationary, distant viewpoint—but in motion ourselves, right behind him, as if the super-hero had somehow employed a personal cameraman to follow him and record his activities. Brilliantly exploited by Raimi and his colleagues, the intimate technique allowed audiences to share the experience of *being* Spider-Man, to feel for themselves the exhilarating thrill of “flying”—in fact, of constantly falling and rising again—far above the streets of Manhattan. It was this, in turn, that allowed this final sequence to offer—at that special, troubled moment in the life of the city—a true sense that the powerful aspirational promise of New York’s skyline, so battered by real-world events of a few months before, had been redeemed, at least a little, by the mythic city of the movies.



19) *Spider-Man* (2002). A still from the final sequence, showing the Chrysler Building and, a moment later, the World Trade Center.

Of course, in the real world, the extraordinary commercial success of the film exerted a powerful impetus in its own way, and soon the major studios began looking for other projects that could take similar advantage of the new digital techniques that *Spider-Man* had pioneered. Spider-Man himself would return in sequels in 2004 and 2007, joined by fellow Marvel superheroes such as *Daredevil* (2003) and *The Fantastic Four* (2005), all of whom, like Spider-Man, found a natural home among the high-rise towers of New York. Not to be outdone, the two mainstays of rival DC Comics, Batman and Superman, would soon reprise their spectacular romps through the mythically named—but clearly New York-inspired—Gotham City (*Batman Begins*, 2005), and Metropolis (*Superman Returns*, 2006). Whether identified explicitly or not as New York, the urban background of most of these films (unlike the original *Spider-Man*) shared a certain generic quality, perhaps in part because—like many big-budget, special-effects-laden studio features—major portions of them were filmed on location in Canada or Australia.

A different problem haunted the return of another legendary mythic character to the upper precincts of the city’s skyline. *King Kong* (2005), Peter Jackson’s obsessive remake of the Depression-era classic, combined highly advanced digital animation techniques with ambitious live-action sequences (filmed entirely in New Zealand) to recreate 1930s New York with remarkable fidelity and detail. Yet for all its impressive wizardry, the film failed to evoke the raw urban power so crucial to the 1933 black-and-white original, with its dense, canyon-like streets, roaring crowds and blazing searchlights; in the new film, the city through which Kong cavorted seemed somehow safe, unthreatening, almost toy-like. The original film, stripping the Empire State Building of most of its architectural detail and thus bringing out its primal, almost organic profile, was at once able to suggest the great structure’s mountain-like character (and thus its powerful lure to Kong, who had made his throne atop the equivalent spot on Skull Island) while revealing its essential identity as not merely a tall office building but the era’s supreme, upsurging expression of human will (20). Jackson’s carefully detailed Empire State Building, with every window and decorative feature called out, appeared by contrast an exquisite, fabricated Art Deco icon, an emblem neither of abiding primal energies nor of a formidable, frightening modernity (21).



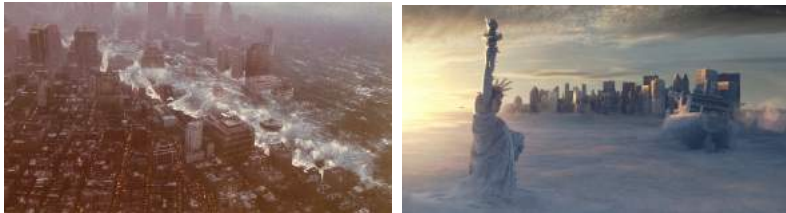
20) *King Kong* (1933).



21) *King Kong* (2005).

By contrast, *Men in Black II*, the 2002 sequel to the original 1997 *Men in Black*, offered a real feel for the texture and character of the city, rooted by the witty, knowing premise that even the most bizarre, otherworldly events and characters would likely meld seamlessly into the everyday texture of

New York, whose own fabric is, in many ways, so unlikely. That urbane sensibility was even more evident in *My Super Ex-Girlfriend*, an unusual 2006 film that sought to combine two classic if disparate New York genres: superhero adventure and romantic comedy. The inhabitants of what seems to be the familiar, ordinary city take for granted the presence of a flying super-heroine called “G-Girl” (Uma Thurman), who occasionally makes her appearance in the upper reaches of the skyline. Along with them, we witness her spectacular exploits in the sky, but unlike them, we also follow her down to earth, to watch her alter-ego—a career woman more out of *Sex and the City* than *Superman*—struggle with typical New York relationship issues involving a young architect, played by Luke Wilson. As in *Men in Black*, the film reiterates the delightful, abiding vision of New York as a place where flying, super-powered characters might well be regarded as merely one more fact of life.



22, 23) *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) New York submerged by tidal waves (left), then locked in the ice age that follows (right).

In one area, to be sure, the impact of September 11th was felt pervasively in fantasy visions of the city—at least for a time. Remaking the classic H.G. Wells alien invasion tale, *War of the Worlds* (2005), the director Steven Spielberg firmly instructed his writers to avoid showing New York being attacked, and no filmic images of the destruction of the city, so common in the years before 2001, made it to the screen in the first years afterward. But the lure of the city as the ultimate cinematic target for natural or man-made disasters would ultimately prove too strong, and the makers of *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), a film which imagined the cataclysmic consequences of global warming, could not resist including images of Manhattan buried under a hundred-foot blizzard, or its streets and avenues flooded with walls of water (22, 23).

In the end, however, it was another filmic portrait of a watery, submerged New York, not a frightening, dystopian vision of the future but its exact opposite—a light-hearted, animated family feature—that offered perhaps the most suggestive fantasy portrait of the early 21st century city, one that in its own way reflects the subtle but seismic shifts affecting the texture of daily urban life, not only in New York itself but cities around the globe. (24)



24) *Shark Tale* (2004). An undersea Times Square.

The opening of *Shark Tale* (2004) presents a fantastic underwater habitat that is, nonetheless, strangely familiar. *Very* familiar, in fact, for what we see is a place closely resembling Times Square, its towers veneered with oversized billboards and big electronic screens. For the first few moments all is quiet, deserted. When the action does begin, it is not a character but, suggestively, the televised *image* of a character—a newscaster fish named “Katie Current” (speaking in the voice of TV anchorwoman Katie Couric)—who appears on one of the large screens facing the square, inquiring anxiously, “*Are they gone?*” With the welcome news that “they”—the sharks—have indeed left, the empty city instantly explodes with activity: its daily life, evidently brought to a sudden halt earlier, suddenly resumes in full flood.



25, 26) *Shark Tale* (2004). A vision of a vibrant, aquatic New York, filled with camera-snapping tourists and bickering cab drivers.

To an up-tempo version of the Bob Marley reggae classic “Don’t Worry ‘Bout a Thing,” we witness a lively aquatic parody of contemporary urban life—witty, fast-moving, rich in detail. On the one hand, we see the ordinary, routine functioning of the big city: whales collecting garbage, traffic lights directing schools of fish along a grid of “streets,” and elevated subway lines, surmounting that same

grid, speeding crab commuters on their way. Everywhere we see signs and billboards, filled with aquatic parodies of real global brands (Coral-Cola, The Gup, Martha Sturgeon), along with hordes of tourists taking it in—all the elements of what modern academics might call a “late-capitalist” urban economy (25). It is evidently a diverse and multicultural place, too, filled with bickering South Asian taxi-drivers and a Japanese sushi shop (with no customers), all driven by the pulse of that West Indian soundtrack (26). It is, finally, a modern, media-saturated environment, whose fabric is literally saturated with electronics and images—from building facades covered with large-scale screens to shop windows filled with a stacked array of TVs—all showing the same report of traffic accident, for which we are instructed to “pull out our shellphones” to call in late.

Although there are occasional malfunctions in this urban environment—the arguments and accidents and daily friction one would find in any big city—this underwater metropolis is, plainly, a vibrant place, healthy and secure in its day-to-day life. It is safe to say that a parodic version of New York made fifteen years earlier would have been unlikely to portray an urban landscape so consistently safe and orderly. But it also might have been unlikely to suggest, amidst all this vitality, a pervasive threat from *outside* the city, capable of bringing that life to a stop. “According to the latest Scallop poll,” Katie’s televised image declares somberly, “fear of sharks is at an all-time high. Who can stop this menace?” A quick cut proposes a candidate: a fish called Oscar (Will Smith), a self-described “superstar mack-daddy” who apparently lives in a fabulous penthouse atop the city skyline. This too turns out to be not a reality but merely an image, when a wide shot shows Oscar—actually an ordinary, working-class dreamer—floating in front of a billboard of a luxury apartment, merely fantasizing about being a star (27, 28).



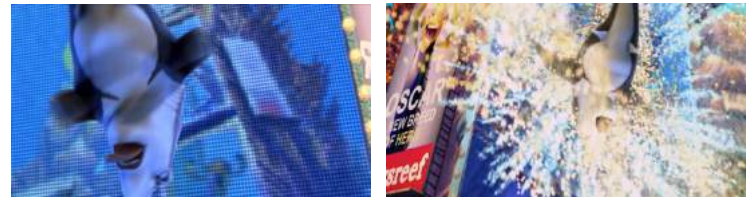
27, 28) *Shark Tale* (2004).

Yet thanks to a run-in later in the film with an uncommonly gentle shark named Lenny (Jack Black), Oscar seems to be on the verge of getting his wish. A crucial turning point in the film—bringing together media, celebrity, and a provocative new vision of urban space—is a grandiose “fight to the finish,” a spectacle that, unbeknownst to those watching, is being staged by the two amiable characters to confirm Oscar’s (undeserved) status as the city’s protector, its heroic “shark-slayer.”



29, 30) *Shark Tale* (2004).

The great battle takes place in the middle of Times Square, witnessed by thousands of people filling the huge open space. The news cameras are there, too, recording the fight in real time, and broadcasting it to TV sets all over town (we see Oscar’s friends and coworkers, somewhere else in the city, watching it all as it happens). But what gives the scene its unique texture and choreography is the fact that the video feeds of the great struggle are also being displayed on the giant screens that surround the space. What we see taking place in the urban arena, therefore, is both the real action and the televised images of that action, interacting in new and unprecedented ways (29, 30).



31, 32) *Shark Tale* (2004).

This is especially vivid in the fight’s big finale—a dramatic blow which sends Lenny flying into one of the surrounding buildings. We see Lenny’s body grow larger and larger until the entire scene explodes, confusingly, and we grasp that we have been seeing not Lenny, but a giant screen showing the live, televised *image* of Lenny—up to the very moment his actual body slams into his electronic image, shattering the digital display in a burst of sparks (31, 32). It is an extraordinary scene, in which real life and virtual life intertwine in ways that represent not just a conflation of image and reality, but, arguably, a new kind of urban environment, a step forward in the centuries-old evolution of public space.



33) *Shark Tale* (2004).

That evolution began, for Western cities, with the *agora*, the public forum, where the populace of ancient Greek and Roman communities came together for special occasions and events as well as everyday life and commerce. In one way or another, this sort of gathering space provided the heart of cities for centuries, from classical times until the early 1900s, when a few modern capitals—New York and London, notably—added a new twist, lining the walls of their great public places (Times Square, Piccadilly Circus) with large-scale electric lights and signs, allowing them to live as vibrantly by night as by day.



34) Times Square, 1940s.



35) Piccadilly Circus, 1950s.

Then, around 1950, two powerful forces threatened to unravel this deep-rooted tradition, almost overnight. Working in tandem, the highway system and television destroyed the age-old human need for the agora—the first by discouraging urban concentration of any kind, the second by providing in people’s private homes the flow of information and entertainment they once found in public centers. In older cities, central gathering spaces began to wither away; in newer, suburban-style communities, they were never created in the first place. Actual public spaces were widely felt to be a thing of the past; the sense of community they once provided would now be found primarily in virtual environments: on television or, later, online.

But in the past decade or so, in New York and a handful of other global cities, the mixture of two new technologies and a pervasive social trend have led to the next stage of this evolution: the unexpected *rebirth* of the agora as a new kind of hybrid space—one that *Shark Tale*, of all places, may be the first to have explored in depth. The first was the advent of “electronic news-gathering,” which allowed for the live televised broadcasting of events as they happened; the second was the introduction of LED display technologies, which allowed vast outdoor electronic screens, capable of showing full-motion video, to be installed in places of high visibility and pedestrian traffic. Urban public places could now become a kind of layered, palimpsest-like environment, in which televised images would not only be sent into the distant ether but be corralled back, at vastly enlarged scale, into physical space itself (33).

These two technological innovations, in turn, were reinforced by the rise of an all-pervasive, media-driven celebrity culture, which has given certain cities a renewed centrality in modern life. Perhaps even more than the traditional worldly goals of wealth and power, it is *fame* that ordinary individuals now aspire to: the deep-seated need (as Oscar declares more than once in the film) to be a “somebody.” Unlike wealth and power, which can today be garnered in a wide range of settings, urban and rural, the place to achieve celebrity—or to be a part of the system that constructs celebrity—firmly remains the city. It is only in mass, media-driven urban environments such as New York that everyday figures can have their name and face enlarged to immense scale, and placed in front of millions.

In *Shark Tale*, all of these forces and trends come together in a suggestive vision of the future New York: one in which the virtual world, rather than competing with the traditional physical city, becomes itself a crucial part of urban experience. A New York in which an event can take place in three levels of “reality”: as something witnessed in a physical space, as a televised image, or as a televised image *within* a physical space. A New York in which physical space and virtual space have in fact become almost inextricable.



14 Tourists in Times Square watching TV coverage of September 11th

The strange and bitter irony, of course, is that the event which heralded this new phenomenon, more than any other, was September 11th itself, which occurred both as a real event witnessed firsthand by millions of people across the metropolitan area—and as a televised image, broadcast as it happened to millions more across the world (34). In retrospect, perhaps the strangest and most prophetic images that morning came, in fact, from Times Square, where crowds of people looked up in astonishment and horror at giant screens filled with televised views of something happening at that very same moment in the very same city, just a few miles away—the powerful interlacing of urban image and reality that, to a large degree, lies at the root of both the dreams, and the nightmares, of New York today.