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# **New York: The Animated City**

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## **Abstract**

The urban landscape of New York City is one that is familiar to many, but through the medium of animation this familiarity has been consistently challenged. Often metamorphic, and always meticulously constructed, animated imagery encourages reflective thinking. Focussing on the themes of construction, destruction, and interactivity, this article seeks to cast critical light upon the animated double life that New York City has lived through the following moving image texts: Disney's *Fantasia 2000* (1999), Patrick Jean's computer-generated short *Pixels* (2009), and Rockstar Games' open-world blockbuster *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008).

## **Keywords**

animation, cinema, Disney, *Fantasia 2000*, *Grand Theft Auto IV*, New York, *Pixels*, video games

## **Introduction**

Of all the major global cities, New York 'is perhaps the most storied, photographed and – of course – filmed on earth. A capital of culture, finance, politics and business, an entry point for immigrants, an empire for crime lords and, subsequently, the setting for a multitude of movies, New York is a uniquely cinematic city' (Harris, 2012: 5). This evocative summary of New York's uniquely cinematic quality is hard to refute – even if Los Angeles might

consider things a little differently. Yet, the implicit live-action (photographed/filmed) bias in this summation leaves unsaid the significant role that animation has frequently played in (re)shaping New York as seen on screen.

Today, the boundary between what constitutes live-action and animated imagery is impossibly blurred. Much mainstream film is now shot digitally and subject to quiet enhancement before it is screened in a manner resembling the cinematic tradition. The term 'film' itself is also typically a misnomer now. However, at the core of moving image production remains a binary that still supports such distinctions between the purportedly live-action and animated modes. Both approaches start with an idea, but the practical method of translating that idea into moving imagery necessitates a choice: to record or to animate. Clearly, animation requires recording equipment, and recorded material relies on what is essentially an act of reanimation at the point of projection to regain motion, but how the individual frames of these moving images are constructed differs: frame by frame (or keyframe by keyframe), as is the case in all animation, or take-by-take, as is the case in 'live action' filmmaking. It matters not that the moving images may be atomised at a later stage, capturing the pro-filmic event, digitally or otherwise, demands a temporal decision: frame or take. The decision to animate, therefore, opens up a greater scope to manipulate the moving image at the point creation, potentially affording new ways of looking at the familiar.

The urban landscape of New York City is one that is familiar to many, but through the medium of animation this familiarity has been consistently challenged. This article, therefore, seeks to cast critical light upon the animated double life that New York City has lived through moving image texts. Of particular interest will be the way that traditional hand drawn techniques have been used to reanimate America's Depression narrative within the film *Fantasia 2000* (1999); how the destructive, yet reassuringly artificial, potential of animation provides an opportunity for filmmakers to indirectly engage with difficult subject matter,

such as the terror attacks of September 11, 2001; and how the interactive animated landscape of *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008) opens up new ways to look at the urban landscape of New York City.

### **Constructing the Animated New York**

E. L. Doctorow once observed that New York is the archetypal city of everyone's future: 'People in every continent reason that if they can just reach [its] shore, they can scramble up to a better life, or a more fighting kind of life where initiative can count for something' (1999: 11). Architecturally, New York's iconic skyline provides the shorthand for such aspiration: 'While important cities had always had symbolic skylines [. . .] it was in the twentieth-century American city that the terms city and skyline became practically synonymous. No longer was the city a low-rise phenomenon with a few symbolic towers, but rather the functioning city was the skyline' (Ford, 1994: 30). Following the Wall Street crash in 1929, New York's skyscrapers became particularly potent symbols, providing a visual reminder to those living and working in newfound poverty of more profitable times; predictably, in the wake of the crash the growth of New York's skyline slowed considerably, with construction reduced amidst the onset of economic depression. Despite this very real downturn in construction, the concept of construction remained a key intellectual touchstone. With specific reference to the Empire State Building development, Benjamin Flowers suggests that skyscraper construction during the Great Depression

became a story about the struggle to define architecture's role in society, about whether architects were visionary thinkers or servants of the marketplace, about whether architecture would offer solutions to the problems facing society, or whether

it would serve the interests of the wealthy and the elite. Politics and architecture were inseparable. Construction remained an important feature of the popular. (2009: 64)

The symbolic potency of skyscraper construction, as experienced during the Great Depression, is perhaps most suggestively captured in Disney's package feature *Fantasia 2000*.

The 'Rhapsody in Blue' sequence in *Fantasia 2000* effectively provides an animated reimagining of New York's most significant period of architectural animation – that moment in history where the city began to take on the shape that we recognise today. Furthermore, the sequence also seeks to illustrate some of the ways that a group of imagined New Yorkers, rendered here in a caricatured, Al Hirschfeld-style, seek to contend with the changing economic conditions through which they live.

Bringing a building to life, let alone a skyline, is no mean feat. Furthermore, working with traditional live-action techniques this is almost impossible. Intellectual montage, as developed, theorised and put into practice by Sergei Eisenstein, provides perhaps the most obvious exception to this, and is illustrated best in his 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin*. Here we see the statue of a sleeping lion dramatically come to life after the titular battleship fires upon the Tsarist military headquarters, which houses those responsible for orchestrating the massacre that takes place on the Odessa Steps. Eisenstein's montage actually cuts three lion statues together in quick succession, one after the other, with each statue in a progressively more alert pose, so when the film plays at normal speed the idea created in the mind of the viewer is that this is one lion sitting-up in surprise. By working with only the recorded image though, Eisenstein is forced to develop an elaborate methodology through which to achieve the animation effect. In comparison, within the animated realm *proper*, the only limitations regarding how a building might be brought to life are the limits of animator's imagination.

The 'Rhapsody in Blue' sequence begins with a single musical expression, that of the familiar rising clarinet glissando, which is echoed visually by the singular line that traces across the screen, precisely sketching out a high-rise skyline – the stepped nature of which draws immediate comparisons with that of New York. The angular nature of the line as it maps across the blue screen, bringing detail to the skyline, promotes a further association with the architectural blueprint. Although not made explicit, this suggestion fits neatly with the manner in which George Gershwin describes conceiving of Rhapsody in Blue during a train journey to Boston for the premiere of his *Sweet Little Devil* (1923):

I had already done some of the work on the rhapsody. It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattley-ty-bang that is often so stimulating to the composer [. . .]. I frequently hear music in the very heart of noise. And there I suddenly heard – and even saw on paper – the complete construction of the rhapsody, from beginning to end. [. . .]. I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America – of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our blues, our metropolitan madness. By the time I reached Boston I had a definite plot of the piece, as distinguished from its actual substance. (Lee, 2002: 156)

Gershwin's account of this moment of schematic foresight, whilst undoubtedly (and most likely intentionally) serving to add to his already soaring reputation as a popular composer, closely aligns with how Disney's animators open the 'Rhapsody in Blue' sequence. Here, the singular line does not reveal the substance of the sequence in full, but rather defines the landscape in which the plot is to take place. Furthermore, the binding of the aural with the visual, via the blueprint motif, prepares the ground for Gershwin's musical kaleidoscope of America to be brought to life.<sup>1</sup>

With a diverse range of characters populating the sequence, including a Gershwin-esque piano player, we are initially presented with a picture of the daily struggles faced by those living through the depression – including the unemployed, the underemployed, and wealthy (who are now also faced with bitter financial realities). Approximately halfway through, this situation is captured in microcosm as the characters take to the Rockefeller ice rink. On a practical level, key-animator Eric Goldberg notes that art director Sue Goldberg gave the characters ‘a flat, clear stage upon which to act out their dreams. The backgrounds become two colours—a pale blue-green for the ice, and a warm lavender for Rockefeller Centre. The absence of shadows serves to focus the audience on what’s happening to the characters’ (Culhane, 1999: 72). Visually, in this moment, the characters effectively set into motion a re-appropriation of city space.

Throughout the history of US urban settlement ‘the private realm has taken precedence over the public and separation over interaction’ (Christopherson, 1994: 410), and this dynamic has certainly been a feature of New York’s urban development. Even the Zoning Resolution of 1916, the first formal recognition of the needs of those individuals who inhabited Manhattan, established regulations that favoured private redevelopment. In the years leading up to 1916 ‘a wide range of citizen groups and politicians had been urging the city to intervene more significantly to address the problems of light and air, traffic, and aesthetic monstrosities’ (Page, 1999: 61). However, the Zoning Resolution, when it came to pass, sought to regulate development through the imposition of building ratios: ‘virtually all of Manhattan below Central Park was divided into zones in which buildings could rise to one and one-half or two times the width of the street’ (Page, 1999: 63). Rather than establishing a regulatory opportunity for independent public development, the Zoning Resolution of 1916 effectively encouraged larger private buyers to acquire as much of a given block as possible for development, so that maximal use could be made of the site in terms of both breadth and

height. Thankfully, this was not always the case as John D. Rockefeller Jr.'s Radio City development demonstrates.

It is fitting that Rockefeller ice rink provides the setting when the 'Rhapsody in Blue' sequence slips into its dreamlike phase, given the potent iconography of that location. At a time of great economic depression, the rich architectural diversity of the Rockefeller complex, with its soaring, setback exterior, its Art Deco flourishes, and golden sculpture of Prometheus, would no doubt have provided a visual distraction to passers-by.<sup>2</sup> As it stands, Paul Manship's statue of Prometheus provides a symbolic foundation to the complex as a whole – cut into the sunken plaza, the statue stands simultaneously above the ice rink yet at the foot of the towering central skyscraper, 'the speeding figure is charged with energy, a beatific smile upon his face. The figure is a human spaceship, and humanity triumphant' (Rutledge, 2008: 119). While the statue is destined to remain only ever a static symbol of human optimism, the animated nature of the 'Rhapsody in Blue' sequence brings this sense of optimism to life, presenting a metamorphic vision of contrasting hopes and dreams. When New Yorkers first took to the Rockefeller ice rink in the 1930s it would have been hard to imagine that they were starting what would become a much-loved annual ritual that persists to the present. No matter how fleeting, the freedom afforded by this frozen oasis reveals the importance of social interaction to the health of an otherwise inanimate metropolis. In *Fantasia 2000* it is in the ice rink, this space where societal boundaries might be transgressed, that the melting pot, alluded to by Gershwin, takes shape. We see, at this point, that the characters are able to start afresh, become re-animated, much like New York eventually did towards the end of the Great Depression.

Given the range of animation styles on show in *Fantasia 2000*, including the caricatural 'Rhapsody in Blue', the European infused 'Steadfast Tin Soldier', and the Studio Ghibli-esque 'Firebird', it is tempting to see the package feature as little more than a large



scale public relations exercise. However, in this context, the 'Rhapsody in Blue' sequence gains added significance, for if this is indeed a film designed to cultivate universal appeal, the decision to revisit the Great Depression infuses the passage with an identifiably American flavour. However, with this ultimately positive reanimation of a painful past, the film resists a more critical account of this period of economic downturn in favour of a Disneyfied vision of American Exceptionalism.

### **The Animated Destruction of New York**

Construction and destruction have been part of New York City's history in equal measure. The destruction of the New York cityscape has taken various forms, being a consequence of planned demolition (as was required to prepare the ground for Central Park in the 1850s), gentrification projects (as has transformed Harlem), and most recently terrorism (which has resulted in over decade of redevelopment in downtown Manhattan). This destruction-reconstruction cycle, which is a constant feature of any large metropolis, has been explored on many occasions through cinema, and New York City has often provided the universally recognisable backdrop for such narratives.<sup>3</sup> Consider, for example, the Statue of Liberty, which connotes freedom and opportunity; it was the first structure that many late-nineteenth century and early twentieth century immigrants saw as they approached Manhattan via ship. This symbolic potency has resulted in the Statue of Liberty being utilised in numerous science fiction disaster films where natural or man-made threats to the status quo provide the dramatic tension, in the context of which the statue serves as a measure of normality. In the film *Planet of the Apes* (1968), the discovery of the statue on an uncanny coastline prompts the realisation that the film has actually taken place on a post-apocalyptic Earth. Whereas in the films *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *Cloverfield* (2008), the statue remains in its

familiar location, however, it is structurally defamiliarised, becoming submerged by a tsunami and being beheaded, respectively. In practical terms, it has been animation that has frequently provided the means by which to realise the simulated destruction of New York. Perhaps the most famous example of this being the eponymous King Kong, exacting stop motion carnage on the Empire State Building and surrounding city in Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack's 1933 classic (and which was remade by Peter Jackson in 2005, but with computer generated imagery in the place of stop motion). However, following the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001, there has been a considerable reduction, if not reluctance, on the part of mainstream American film studios to produce disaster films set in New York.

Given the photorealistic capabilities of modern computer animation, the desire to create images of New York-based destruction, following the shocking images that filled the rolling news coverage of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, has understandably proven unpalatable. However, in addition to animation's ability to render the unreal appear real is its ability to present an image that oscillates between these two states, simultaneously highlighting both content and construction. It is this potential that Patrick Jean exploited when he made the animated short *Pixels* (2010). Ostensibly paying homage to the aesthetics of 8-bit video games, which became popular during the 1980s, *Pixels* offers a glimpse into an alternate reality where New York comes under attack from a variety of 8-bit video game characters.

*Pixels'* opening shot sees a young man discard an old cathode ray television on a New York sidewalk. After resting dormant for a few moments, the screen flickers to life revealing a *Bomberman*-style bomb, which then detonates, causing the screen to shatter and a cloud of multi-coloured pixels to swarm out of the set. This cloud of pixels quickly grows in size and begins to descend on the New York skyline. As it passes over the city it begins to disintegrate, with smaller groupings of pixels forming into Space Invader ships, which then

act out a large-scale version of the game against a backdrop that includes the Empire State Building. The projectiles fired downward by the Space Invader ships cause anything that they hit, such as lorries and taxicabs, to collapse into pixels. Following this we see a swarm of pixels fly down into the New York subway. After a quick cut shows the 23rd Street platform, an overhead monitor shows that Pac Man is travelling down the line, gobbling stations. Above ground, a further series of cuts reveals the impact of this, as the 14th Street and 23rd Street entrances collapse into pixel rubble. The action now pans to the sky, revealing large columns falling earthward. As the camera whips downward it becomes apparent that these are giant *Tetris* shapes, which begin to land on the Empire State Building, finding purchase on its stepped sides. For anyone familiar with *Tetris*, the threat that these falling blocks pose to the Empire State Building is most likely apparent, and sure enough, as an L-shaped piece comes to rest on a mid-level corner, four of the building's connected floors begin to flash, before vanishing in classic *Tetris* fashion. Panning from this, across the city skyline, the camera comes to rest on the Brooklyn Bridge. Beneath one of the supporting towers hover several white cylinders, which begin to rebound white blocks against the tower in the style of Atari's *Breakout* causing the brickwork to fail. After Brooklyn Bridge falls into the East River the camera pans across the devastation and up the Empire State Building again; however, this time we discover that Donkey Kong is standing at the top of the structure, holding a barrel above his head. The camera follows the barrel as it is hurled to the ground, where a large frog can also be seen leaping across the road – an obvious allusion to Konami's *Frogger* franchise. As the camera tilts upward we see that a giant *Bomberman* bomb sits in the road. Upon detonation the entire urban landscape of New York City starts to become pixelated. The cubes that now make up the environment also shift in appearance, transforming from many small cubes to just a few large cubes. A crash zoom outwards reveals that the whole earth is becoming pixelated, with New York serving as the epicentre for this reaction. As the

short reaches its conclusion the earth can now be seen floating in space as a singular black block.

This short, in addition to providing a playful snapshot of how digital technologies have reconfigured both the complexion and parameters of moving imagery, reveals the strength of animation, as a discrete art form, to engage with challenging subject matter. With *Space Invaders* raining destruction from the skies, *Tetris* cubes taking out several floors of the Empire State Building, and a giant *Bombberman* bomb detonating at the short's conclusion, *Pixels* provides a retro reimagining of the recent terror attacks that targeted New York. What is under attack here, however, is not some towering man-made structure, but diversity itself. Social and cultural diversity, historical diversity as recorded through the structures that make up New York's urban landscape. In the 1964 edition of her influential study *The Death and Life of Great American Cities: The Failure of Town Planning*, Jane Jacob's observes:

Fifth Avenue in New York between Fortieth Street and Fifty-ninth Street is tremendously diverse in its large and small shops, bank buildings, office buildings, churches, institutions. Its architecture expresses these differences in use, and differences accrue from the varying ages of the buildings, differences in technology and historical taste. But Fifth Avenue does not look disorganized, fragmented, or exploded. Fifth Avenue's architectural contrasts and differences arise mainly out of differences in content. They are sensible and natural contrasts and differences. The whole hangs together remarkably well, without being monotonous either. (239)

Of course, there are a few more glass-fronted buildings lining Fifth Avenue today, but to a certain extent Jacob's description remains accurate; however, the homogenizing pixels

presented in Jean's short do capture a very real concern – the threat of heavy-handed commercial urban redevelopment. While such a practice might be financially lucrative, 'it cannot thereby create, in some magical fashion, an equivalent to city diversity' (Jacobs, 1964: 205).

Ultimately, in the case of *Pixels*, which may well have been conceived as a homage to the 8-bit games of Jean's youth, the fact that Jean chose to situate the short in New York attaches significant symbolic value to the destruction featured in the film. In this instance, the combination of independent French animation and American principle photography highlights the potential of such transnational projects to open up artistic agency; had Jean worked within a mainstream American media context, commercial pressure might well have prevented him from developing such a playfully potent short.<sup>4</sup>

### **Animating Interactivity: Virtual New York**

Up to this point it has been noted how animation presents opportunities to view, study, and reconsider the landscape of New York City through animated film. Clearly, though, such engagement with the animated landscape affords a relatively limited level of interactivity on the part of the spectator. Of course, the spectator might choose to fast-forward through a section of the film, if watching in a situation that allows such an act, or, even if in the cinema, to choose where to look on screen, resisting the sites of interest on screen that are emphasised by the filmmakers through creative choices such as editing, lighting, focal point, and performance. Within the video game though, a text that only gains meaning through the animation of its digital code, the player has far greater scope for interactivity.

Video games are still a comparatively young art form, especially when considered alongside the likes of cinema, literature, and theatre. Consequently, the study of gaming has

only just started to escape ghettoization. In recent years, work has been done – both within the game’s industry and also outside of it – to encourage a broader appreciation of the art form. Externally, this gentrification project has included high-profile exhibitions, such as ‘The Art of Video Games’ (Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2012-2013), ‘Game Story’ (Grand Palais, Paris, 2012), and most recently the acquisition of fourteen games for inclusion in MoMa’s ‘Applied Design’ exhibition (March 2013 - Jan 2014). Video game archival projects have also gained some publicity recently, with the Library of Congress making it known that it is working hard to preserve games in such a way so that they might remain playable for generations to come. From within the industry, developers have, in recent years, sought to engineer increasingly sophisticated, culturally and politically engaged, and artistically ambitious story worlds. Consider for example the offerings from developers such as Bethesda Studios (*Skyrim*, 2011), 2K Games (*Bioshock Infinite*, 2013), but, perhaps, most prominently, Rockstar Games (*Grand Theft Auto IV*, 2008, *Red Dead Redemption*, 2010, *L.A. Noire*, 2011, and *Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013). Given the present article’s focus on New York, it is *Grand Theft Auto IV* that proves most interesting.

Writing in the New York Times during the month of *Grand Theft Auto IV*’s release, Seth Schiesel offered the following summary of the game’s appeal:

The point of the main plot is to guide Niko [Bellic] through the city’s criminal underworld. Gang leaders and thugs set missions for him to complete, and his success moves the story along toward a conclusion that seems as dark as its beginning. But the real star of the game is the city itself. It looks like New York. It sounds like New York. It feels like New York. Liberty City has been so meticulously created it almost even smells like New York. From Brooklyn (called Broker), through Queens (Dukes), the Bronx (Bohan), Manhattan (Algonquin) and an urban slice of New Jersey

(Alderney), the game's streets and alleys ooze a stylized yet unmistakable authenticity. (2008)

It is clear from this summary that it is the animation of the 'New York' landscape as an interactive game space that represents a crucial feature of the text. This animated game space though represents a site of negotiation, in the classic rhetorical mould, between game, gamer, and game maker. After all, the hypermediacy of the video game gives rise to a type of engagement that both draws attention to the animated surface of the game space and also opens a space for a more experientially embedded interaction, whereby the possible reflective perception of the animated game surface is repeatedly elided as a consequence of the gamer adopting a more reactive position *within* the game world in response to the need to learn and master the control mechanics. In simple terms, the animated fabric of the game can be(come) both visible and invisible to the gamer in equal measure.

The opening credit sequence that serves to introduce the city to the player offers an excellent early example of this shifting hypermediacy. During this opening sequence interactivity is reduced to a cinematic level, with the player being limited to a passive spectatorial position in relation to the developing narrative. The credits, however, while functioning much like those found in mainstream film (in that they essentially provide information about who is creatively responsible for the game itself) extend beyond a purely informational function by also drawing attention to the dimensionality of the animated landscape of 'New York' as it is gradually revealed. At its most playful, this aesthetic serves to establish a direct connection between the creative contributions of an individual and the manifest results of their work in the completed game. This is neatly illustrated when the caption 'Lead Interior Artist' credits Michael Pirso and Andrew Hay by simultaneously having this text visually reinforce both the depth and perspective of the interior space in

which this moment is staged, but by also having the Bellic cousins obscure the text by having them move in front of it – a fitting act that reflects the hierarchical position of character over landscape that informs much animation production and reception, and which also serves to establish the text *as* interior within the same moment.

Rockstar's commitment to increasing the believability of the animated landscape of 'New York' in *Grand Theft Auto IV* also led them to reconsider the level of control over character afforded to the player. Prior to the game's release Dan Houser, co-founder and vice president of creativity at Rockstar, noted: 'we're literally doing fashion shoots and taking the photographs and turning them into the models. We have street stylists to help us dress them. It's got to look right' (Hill, 2008). Given the evident care taken by Rockstar to populate the game world with appropriately dressed non-playable characters, limiting the level of control that the player has over how Bellic appears represents a logical decision. Imagine, for example, if a level of character customisation similar to that available in the *Saints Row* franchise had been open to the player in *Grand Theft Auto IV*, would the seriousness of the narrative have been viewed differently if the player had been able to complete the in-game missions while dressed in a giant hotdog costume?<sup>5</sup>

In terms of game design, *Grand Theft Auto IV* marked the beginning of a phase of increased narratological and aesthetic ambition at Rockstar, which has seen the level of control available over character appearance decrease sharply. Such intentions are perfectly understandable given the development of the studio over the past fifteen years; however, authorial intentions are nothing if not problematic, and in the acutely interactive medium of video games authors must accept that any interpretation reached by the game player will only ever come as a consequence of their play as constructed *in the moment* within the algorithmic space of the game. As such, it is usually problematic to speak of a universal game experience



shared among all gamers – especially when the game takes place in one of Rockstar’s open worlds.

However, the complex algorithmic nature of the video game does not preclude the potential appropriation. In a reworking of Andy Warhol’s 1964 art film *Empire*, Phil Solomon appropriated the *Grand Theft Auto IV* game world to recreate the intense long-take of Warhol’s earlier film by setting up a similar shot, resulting in the film *Empire* (2010). To achieve this, Solomon ‘hijacked a copter, leaped onto the rooftop of an adjacent building, spawned a scooter out of the thin air and then gingerly drove it to the very edge of the precipice in order to roughly approximate that familiar view from July 25-26, 1964’ (2012). The resulting film, which Solomon let run for 24 hours of in-game time (48 minutes in real terms), offers a far more varied visual texture than Warhol’s original black and white 16mm exposure. When trying to describe *Empire* it is hard to best Solomon’s own poetic summary:

A thunderstorm threatens, then clears. High winds blow errant pieces of limned debris. Golden waters sparkle and dance as the west-turned sun sets in the rosy-fingered dusk. Night comes in. Mechanical fireflies and custodial lights dot the void. The moon (twice) comes out to play. The night canopy is gradually withdrawn, as the morning light of weekday commuting burnishes in from the east. As we approach full circle, the blue afternoon gradually reveals the Building in its final iconic silhouette state, as a single plane appears and flies across the horizon line, doomed to repeat its fated flight path in eternal recurrence. (2012)

At the heart of both Solomon’s and Warhol’s *Empire* projects resides a desire to pull attention away from authorial intent, in order to open up a space in which the symbolic status of the New York skyline – for which the Empire State Building provides a universal

shorthand – might be reflected upon at length. Alongside this, both *Empire* projects (but perhaps more so the case in Solomon’s offering) pose questions about the constructedness of the symbolically potent screen-space. In Warhol’s *Empire* it is the materiality of the film that provides a continual reminder of its construction. Ultimately, the factor that decided the duration of *Empire* was not a conceptual one, but rather, ‘once one reel change is effected, the project assumes a potentially endless length that is only curtailed as [Jonas] Mekas and Warhol become tired of returning to the camera’ (Sutton, 2009: 198). With reference to Solomon’s *Empire*, the constructedness of the experience is doubly visible by virtue of the animated fabric of the text and the algorithmic looping of events, such as the plane’s flight path and the recurrence of the moon. Ultimately, both films provide the viewer with an opportunity to study the urban New York landscape in ways not possible if one were simply look upon the skyline in person.

## **Conclusion**

As has been illustrated, the metamorphic quality that the New York landscape gains by virtue of being rendered anew through the medium of animation is worth recognising. In fact, it has never been more important to recognise the shape-shifting potential of animation when brought to bear on the symbolic iconography of landscape. Recent developments and convergences in site-specific animation have opened up possibilities to animate the real world landscape in real-time.

Bill Brand’s *Masstransiscope*, which first debuted in Brooklyn’s Myrtle Avenue subway station in 1980, and which was restored in 2008, has paved the way for numerous copycat animated installations on subways around the world. Building on the optical exploits revealed by the nineteenth-century zoetrope, Brand positioned 228 hand-painted panels

mounted in a single, illuminated unit, along the length of the subway station: ‘As viewers rode through the abandoned station without stopping, they would see the panels through the windows of the car. The subway functioned like the zoetrope, seaming the panels together into what would appear to be a twenty-second animated sequence’ (Fitzpatrick, 2009: 228-229). While New York was the point of origin for this form of site-specific animation, the popularity of this form of animated landscape has seen it become an increasingly commonplace advertising device in other major cities such as Beijing, London, and Tokyo.

While the *Masstransiscope* installation supports a familiar conception of animation, through its arrangement of discrete images that become animated through perceived motion, architectural projection mapping, which has recently enjoyed a period of sustained popularity, relies heavily on animation yet resists straightforward definition in such terms. In fact, the very act of architectural projection mapping problematises the notion of the *image*, in a singular sense, considering that any given *image* may in fact be a composite of multiple images simultaneously projected – a practical necessity given the likelihood that the building will not have a uniformly flat surface. New York is by no means the only city to have proven a popular location for projection mapping projects (whereby images are projected onto the side of buildings to create an illusion of physical animation), but the iconicity of much of the city’s architecture has led projectionists to make liberal use of New York’s urban environment. The proliferation of increasingly high-definition projectors, coupled with the continual refinement of the software used to map architectural projections will likely lead to the real-time animation of New York’s built architecture becoming an increasingly familiar part of the urban landscape.

Ultimately, the landscape of New York City is one defined by animation in its most universal sense: endowing the inanimate with the illusion of life. Whether this is in the form of a reanimated depression era New York on a traditional screen, the perceived animation of

still images when viewed from a moving subway carriage, or even the larger than life moving images that clad the animated canyon that is Times Square, New York's animated double life is everywhere to be seen. If nothing more, it is the author's hope that this article might add to the growing status of animation as a interpretational consideration within an American Studies context, and perhaps encourage those unfamiliar with animation research to investigate further.

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<sup>1</sup> The suitability of Gershwin's 'Rhapsody in Blue' to capture the kaleidoscopic nature of American, and more specifically New York, life has also resulted in the score featuring prominently in the films *Manhattan* (1979) and *The Great Gatsby* (2013).

<sup>2</sup> The development of Rockefeller Centre was not viewed as a wholly positive exercise. In addition to the ill feeling towards the Rockefeller name that persisted due to the family's association with the dealings of Standard Oil, the architectural ambition of the project was not to everyone's tastes, and as early as March 1931, when the project was officially unveiled, the proposed development drew 'considerable public consternation and criticism' (Rowe, 1997: 96).

<sup>3</sup> Max Page's excellent study, *The City's End: Two Centuries of Fantasies, Fears, and Premonitions of New York's Destruction* (2008), offers a comprehensive history of representations of New York's destruction and how such images resonate with some of the most long-standing themes in American History: 'the ambivalence toward cities, the troubled reaction to immigrants and racial diversity, the fear of technology's impact, and the apocalyptic strain in American religious life' (4).

<sup>4</sup> It should also be noted that Jean has continued to offer transnational commentary on the United States, having recently released another animated short called *Motorville* (2013), which draws on the visual design of Google Maps to bring a giant, gasoline-hungry character to life that is ultimately forced to look overseas to the Middle East to feed its thirst.

<sup>5</sup> For a more extensive discussion of the politics of control in the recent works of Rockstar Games see my chapter: 'Now I Know I'm a Lowlife': Controlling Play in *GTA: IV*, *Red Dead Redemption*, and *LA Noire*. In *Ctrl-Alt-Play: Essays on Control in Video Gaming*, ed. Matthew Wysocki (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013).

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### **Notes on Contributor**

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