



Uncertain Waters: Beyond a Metropolitan Sublime

Michael Stanton

The demise of the World Trade Towers grotesquely inflated the sublime! Edmund Burke's inclusion of fear and awe as elements of aesthetics has come to dominate representational canons, but the extreme effect of the 9/11 attacks rendered the concept intolerable while subsequent architectural work seems to have reacted with the proliferation of extreme and often unsettling contortions, vertiginous cantilevers and unbalanced profiles! Standing for the machinations of the previous millennium, upon their extirpation these minimal monoliths became the most potent auspices for the next. Before falling they were extraordinarily blank formally while provoking sectarian rage toward the institutions they stood for - New York, the U.S. and multinational commerce. An improbable history of the violent demise of his buildings plagued their designer as well! Collapse made them true monuments in the funereal sense of the word and profoundly significant as the globe drifts toward dystopia, advantaging plutocracy and distilling resentment in many cultures.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Sublime, Torre, Mar, Tardocapitalismo, Monumento

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The fascination people have always felt at the destruction of a city may be partly an expression of satisfaction at the destruction of an emblem of irresolvable conflict.

Burton Pike, "The City as Image"¹

Perhaps the greatest contribution made by the industrial town was the reaction it produced against its own greatest misdemeanors; ...

Lewis Mumford, "The Counter-Attack"²

Michael Stanton

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Fig. 01
 Sept. 11, 2001. Photo from screen.

He walked north through the city of shiny windows, through the city of scrambled alphabets, though the city of gilt letter signs.

John Dos Passos, "Skyscraper"³

NATURA MORTE!

Life promises only one certainty. Like soldiers and artists whose brief passage gains significance posthumously, buildings can live significantly as palpable absence after their use or, at times, their materiality is gone.

In 1925, Dos Passos sees a city of obscure alphabets; of garbled significance and staccato utterances; aphasia, coprolalia, tourette syndrome, dysphemia. "Gilt letter signs" refract unrepentantly disavowed guilt. Half a century later, The World Trade Towers, most emphatic within the urban cacophony, formed a fraternal quotation mark, an 11 rising toward the impossible. Lacking overt symbolism, thus open to malleable interpretation, they stood in resounding silence. This commercial tag team inevitably confounded totality, displacing the simple phallic certitude of the conventional skyscraper, resisting closure. Formally minimal they presented a convoluted text, like the work of Donald Judd, a master of reticence and repetition. The oblique orientation of the shafts of this skewed tuning fork struck a discordant note of force, resonating with thunderous authority, perfect cipher for the anonymous might of transnational commerce American-style. As metropolitan mechanisms, the towers delineated late-capitalism! They formed a billboard advertising neoliberal promises of "free markets," promoting artifice intent on increasing economic inequality. A vivid and imperious target for diverse antagonists, they reified the faceless omnipotence of increasingly impervious multinationals invested in manic expansion while pleading innocence regarding internecine and independent webs, autonomous holdings and the military underwriting of policies.

Enormous even in the world's tallest city, before 9/11 the towers' looming profile projected the image of the metropolis incarnate. Extraordinarily blank formally, before their destruction the towers provoked sectarian rage toward the institutions they stood for – New York, the U.S. and multinational commerce. Always political, they grotesquely inflated ideologically at the paroxysmal moment they fell. Boisterously taciturn presence was replaced as the twins finally melded as insistent dust and debris. Suddenly they were exponentially more representational, supercharged by their negation. The specter-haunted crater they had occupied, appropriately name *Zero*, surpassed them. Standing for the machinations of the previous millennium, upon falling these neutral monoliths became potent auspices for the next.

Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center. Beneath the haze stirred up by the winds, the urban island, a sea in the middle of the sea,... On this stage of concrete, steel and glass, cut out between two oceans (the Atlantic and the American) by a frigidbody of water, the tallest letters in the world compose a gigantic rhetoric of excess in both expenditure and production.

Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the city"⁴

De Certeau reads the gilded metropolis from the top of the towers. Sampling Dos Passos, his two “tallest letters” inscribe an economic/political “alphabet” despised by most of the planet! Agitated by the shifting flotsam of nomadic populations, the Americas constitute a precarious expanse of turbulent and uncertain fluidity ravaged by tornadoes and hurricanes, equally by ideology and ambition. Like a lighthouse, at the towers’ feet roiled the currents of American enterprise, consuming countless failed initiatives —broken dreams decreed by the stultifying effect of plutocracy.

Their arrogance was perceived by a global community who predictably felt disadvantaged by world trade. In 1993 the tragic minuet of arrogance, impotence and terror was played out in the semantic field that is the American city. If one tower had come down when attacked then, the other would have remained like a foreign holding company ready resume commerce, even migrate from one nation of diminishing importance or increasing supervision to another. The many-headed multinational hydra is indeed resilient. Its bicephalic emblem was not, nor were the thousands of lives it took with it! Finally, it was not primarily their form but their brand that attracted attackers more than once. The failed attempt to topple one of the two towers and to bring it down on Wall Street aimed at the nation’s commercial heart, thus moving from analogy to act as the world order veers toward dystopia, further advantaging wealth and distilling malignant sentiments in many cultures. Apparently done by fundamentalists, this assault, symbolic and physical, was a vivid blow against what they saw as godless excesses of armed mercantile imperialism and faceless globalism, ultimately as futile as striking the American “ocean” itself. Extirpation in 2001 made them true monuments in the word’s original mortal sense.

Negation in abundance can be read as the cancelling-out effect which is possible when confronted with more than is comprehensible, that which is mind numbing, more than one can bear.

Renée Green, “Survival: Ruminations on Archival Lacunae”⁶

Diana Agrest sees the lacuna framed by the two towers as a Godzilla-scale door to Manhattan⁶. The classical significance of paired columns announcing entry at domestic and urban scales is archetypical; as in Venice where the Piazzetta’s monolithic Roman columns mark entry to the Piazza, or at another scale, the campanili of San Giorgio and San Marco directed arriving ships to the Dogana warehouse where requisite customs procedures were enacted. In St. Louis towers rise parabolically to join as the Gateway Arch, a component of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, leading to the infinite territory purchased from Napoleon in 1803 doubling the size of a rapaciously ambitious nation.

New York is a city of monuments such as I did not believe could exist.
Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*⁷

...enormous objects that mimic an abstract and sublimated dance of contradictions”.

Manfredo Tafuri, “The Crisis of Utopia: Le Corbusier at Algiers”⁸

**EULOGIES TO THE Z-AXIS
AND ITS PIONEERS**

The term *monument* is commemorative, overtly funereal! While its Latin root refers to memory, its subtext recalls absence, *tomb* or *sepulcher*. Accumulated through millennia in the Old World, such hermeneutics were initially disregarded by the WTC. In the New World, the arena of imagined immortality, like other skyscrapers these particular monoliths reveled in permanence. Emblematic of the megalopolis, they were mute goal posts inviting ambition while manifesting extreme and diverse emotions among domestic and foreign communities for whom dogmatic explanations suffice and in whom resentment percolates. As shibboleths they masked opportunism while engaging an endgame of Modernist architecture. The designers' attempt at abstract formality fell with these structures, defying all available readings, neutralizing any sense, like sounds, explosions for instance, that are so amplified that hearing fails. Like martyrs, but unlike most buildings, they are more "real" in death given their faux ambivalence when alive. Declaring objectivity, they suddenly became emphatically figural. On 9/11 they materialized all the contradictions that they had regally represented since '73. They licensed economic adventurism as a self-righteous crusade against *the other*, encouraging tribal and sectarian conflicts in order to consolidate new markets, in absence remaining painfully tangible. The wound they left joined the hideously redolent ruins of Guernica, Hamburg, Tokyo and Nagasaki, vast fields of rubble, of charred wood, broken stone and lives imperiously taken, provoking the incalculable grief of survivors.

George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden, two sons of mid-century oil privilege, engaged in a dumb and deadly symmetrical fight in which they cast buildings as major players...This competition was staged as a tragic riddle of conflicts and fatal flaws. The characters seemed to carry out involuntarily programmed retaliations and self-protective consolidations. Yet from within this perfect circle of self-reflexivity emerged the most convicted cries of innocence.

Keller Easterling, "Subtraction"⁹

After 9/11 initial European sympathy quickly soured given the bellicose and Islamophobic reaction in the U.S. and the swaggering rhetoric dispensed by a President who, within days, the French began to call *Roi Georges!* "Dead or alive" and "smoke'em outta their holes" —such macho cowboy posturing from this preppy Connecticut/Texan recalled the romanticized genocide of indigenous American populations. The Levant was awash with intense reactions! Elation and some sympathy were immediately overwhelmed by fear of the asymmetrical retaliation that was the predictable response of the U.S. and macabre fascination concerning its unself-critical outrage, vengeful sanctimony and xenophobia, making it inevitable that western exceptionalism would have devastating effect on a terminally scarred and scared region whose population had repeatedly weathered horrendous massacres of innocents and knew they would be again subjected to exponential repetition of the carnage in the U. S.¹⁰

... if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person, as these emotions clear the parts, whether fine or gross, of a dangerous and troublesome

encumbrance, they are capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror; which, as it belongs to self-preservation, is one of the strongest of all the passions. Its object is the sublime. Its highest degree I call astonishment; the subordinate degrees are awe, reverence, and respect, which, by the very etymology of these words show from what source they are derived, and how they stand distinguished from positive pleasure.

Edmund Burke, "Of the Sublime" & "Exercise Necessary for the Finer Organs," 1757¹¹

ARCHITECTURE RESPONDS

The retroactive identification of the sublime during the Enlightenment, the integration of *astonishment* into artistic vocabularies, institutionalized the active rôle that fear plays in representational canons. In the arts, it has completely surpassed "the positive pleasure" of beauty and the picturesque. As envisioned by Burke and a host of

artists, the sublime was embodied in breathtaking "nature" (mountain storms, eruptions, ships consumed by ice or waves, impassably violent rivers, general rustic havoc) instilling titillating dread. Remarkable work continued to up the ante of uncanny delight and the sublime is now the dominant medium for art enshrined in Romanticism, Expressionism and the Modernism reified as various shades of installation, performance and film.

Just as Frederick Law Olmsted's model for park design was the art of landscape painters like Claude Lorrain when transforming the still-pristine hinterlands of the Americas, architects of a half-century after him, Raymond Hood, Cass Gilbert and Harvey Wiley Corbett among a host of others, beat "nature" at its own game, structuring on Manhattan an awesome mountainscape surpassing that of the Adirondacks upstate. In the escalating construction of towers in Manhattan, emulation of those craggy profiles was transposed to the agitated context of the industrial city. As the river leaves the sea, this metropolitan sublime clustered together peaks even more spectacular than those that had been recorded by the mid-19th-century Hudson River School whose work embodied the physiocratic pastoral harmony promised by Jefferson augmented by the dynamic force implicit in Hamiltonian economy. Industrial scenes - steam ships, railways and factories - were often juxtaposed to bucolic landscapes of the benightedly self-declared "virgin" nation. Frenetic mechanism captivated the American imagination. Capturing the anxious and dark excitement of the industrial renaissance at the turn of the 20th century, the artists of the Ashcan School depicted a fuming vision of the muscular city as it reached fruition and began to signify an expanding American empire. The appeal of such images was aggravated by the collision of dense technological necessity with the sublimated near-sacred delirium of the Victorian Industrial Revolution. Desire for pictorial grandeur eclipsed the need for light and air that was the ostensible reason for the setback laws of 1916 as they codified the wish for tall buildings to be pinnacles. Often what may appear to be pragmatic statutes, also express figurative yearnings¹². For instance, post-war legislative change from setbacks to smooth prismatic towers sitting on setback plazas, like the WTC, reified the shift in architectural appetite between Deco naturalism and Miesian purity.

Exploding buildings are this community's landmark's—it's inverted arches of triumph, it's sinister Taj Mahal's.(sic.)Traditionally, we look to building to provide symbols of social cohesion. Exploding buildings now perform an equivalent symbolic role. People may build in different styles, but explosions are universal. Though each may have a different cause, they become linked in our perceptions to some fearful grand design.

Herbert Muschamp, "Things Generally Wrong in the Universe"¹³

Muschamp's reaction to the '93 attack proved prescient on 9/11 as the sublime inflated to lethal proportions! With the events of that day the multitude was reminded of the fatal weight of buildings and their awesome potential to disrupt and kill. The potential for catastrophe affected architectural design, encouraging extreme and often unsettling contortions, vertiginous cantilevers and unbalanced profiles in the decade after! Threat became a cliché. Sagging, leaning, gouged, cracked and split structure, engineering *tours de force* abounded. The massive yet floating CaixaForum in Madrid with its impossible weightlessness; Boston's ICA stacking concurrent clichés, vertiginous overhang and contorted floorplate; Barcelona's Edifici Gas Natural Mare Nostrum Tower; the CCTV tower in Beijing, another gargantuan door: such super-sublime architectural extravaganzas proliferated.

Modern Architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972 at 3:32 p.m. (or thereabouts) when the infamous Pruitt-Iggoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks, were given the final coup de grâce by dynamite. Previously it had been vandalized, mutilated and defaced by its black inhabitants, and although millions of dollars were pumped back, trying to keep it alive it was finally put out of its misery. Boom, boom, boom....Another factor: it was designed in a purist language at variance with the architectural codes of the inhabitants.

Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post Modern Architecture*¹⁴

The chaos brought on by political turmoil, mobility, the population explosion, and by the tremendous impact of the machine, demands...a serene environment.

Minoru Yamasaki, *Architects on Architecture*¹⁵

A CAREER PLAGUED BY CATASTROPHE

Minoru Yamasaki was the designer of two of the modern epic's most notorious building complexes, both known for their recorded violent ends rather than their short lives. Ironically, the first was detonated in the same year that the other was constructed. Volumetric replacement was thus steeped in macabre inevitability. Following training he joined the designers of the Empire State Building¹⁶. Shortly after it was hit by a B-25 bomber. A year later another military plane struck the 40 Wall Tower designed by the same office! Moving to Detroit in 1949, Yamasaki founded the firm that proceeded to dot the international urban landscape with enormous smooth objects, many of them towers. Their first important commission, much lauded at its inception, was the infamous Pruitt-Iggoe public housing complex in St. Louis, completed in 1955. Less than 20 years later the project was destroyed by explosives, proclaimed to be a symbol of the failure of Modernism itself. Its stark functionalism was blamed along with the character and, extraordinarily, the taste of its African American

residents! In 1956 his firm completed the U.S. Military Personnel Records Center near St. Louis. The concrete and aluminum behemoth was one of the twenty largest buildings in the world! During the troubled '60s it came to symbolize the military draft and Vietnam War. In the early '70s more than a dozen small fires were set in the building in attempts to negate the painful history and current role it signified. On the weekend that the draft officially ended in 1973 fire tore through the building and burned for two days. Nearly 80% of the records from 1912 to 1960 were destroyed. That year Yamasaki and Associates completed what became, in 2001, the most emphatic structure in recent times. The story of 9/11 is told eloquently and often although people lost their jobs for even contemplating its causes. "They hate us 'cuz we're free," was the only acceptable explanation. In 1999 the Basque separatist group ETA was thwarted in its attempt to blow up the Picasso Tower in Madrid, also by Yamasaki! The tallest building in Spain, the tower was completed in 1988, two years after its designer's death. It shared the Twin Towers' sleek neutrality. ETA amassed 2000 kilos of high explosive, a massive bomb bigger than the one that gutted the Murrah building in Oklahoma City a few years before but the Guardia Civil intercepted the two vans carrying the bomb.

All these monuments! Uncanny coincidence? Supernaturally unlucky? Their scale and minimal language does seem to imbue a semantics that led extremists — Postmodern reactionary, anti-Vietnam radical, fundamentalist or separatist — to identify the buildings as synecdochical targets. As cenotaphs they remain uniquely infamous, not for their presence but for the extreme animosity manifested in their actual or intended destruction, racist in the case of Pruitt-Igoe, cavalierly identified as a failure by Charles Jencks' debunked eulogy for Modernism. Antipathy toward the perceived destructive arrogance and economic imperialism of the U.S. doomed the gargantuan military warehouse and equally grandiloquent twin towers.

These buildings were the product of euphoria about society, about the infinite capacity of construction techniques, about the business cycle, about the capacity of the art of architectural design, about man and his dominion over the world he inhabits... we were drawn into a race for height and dramatic statement of which the World Trade Towers in New York are a stellar example...rich, eccentric in shape, and empathically, even violently declarative of centralized government.

Phoebe Stanton, "Architectural Dinosaurs: The end of a new age of 'dinosaurs'" 1976¹⁷

The word 'strong' in this context seems to connote 'powerful' — that is, each building should be a monument to the virility of our society... There is another much less desirable aspect of this effort toward monumentality... The result of this thinking inevitably ends in crudity, to the point of brutality... These can never be appropriate to a democratic society; they are much more fitting as an image of the totalitarian principles which we abhor... The World Trade Center should, because of its importance, become a living representation of man's belief in humanity... and through this co-operation his ability to find greatness.

Minoru Yamasaki, *Architects on Architecture*¹⁸

...in this struggle for the power of knowledge, for power through knowledge, for the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence...

Pierre Bourdieu, "Symbolic Power and the Political Field"¹⁹

Manfredo Tafuri refers to the sublime as “the idea of power, of domination”²⁰. Unequivocally political, monuments and urban ensembles manifest potent, anonymous and careless will. Hegemony may be their most steadfast material. Particularly reviewing the WTC upon their completion in the mid ‘70s, Phoebe Stanton identified symbolic and material elements that could indeed project a hauteur that can consequently enrage. Sleek simplicity and massive scale link Yamasaki’s projects, from the notorious destructions in the U.S. to the attempt in Spain. These sleek signifiers that he imagined represented egalitarianism and humane democratic norms, deployed signifiers inconceivable for this *Nisei* who was nearly interned during World War II but who then advanced professionally in the years after in as a lauded representative of the American Dream. Like a mirror image, the architect’s self-assessment is antithetical to his work. The disparity between ideal and realization in his projects merely charts the polarized trajectory of the nation itself, away from “co-operation” and towards the exacerbation of violence, both “symbolic” and horrifyingly real. The buildings were “strong,” but to the point of coercion. In the mind of their attackers and much of the world, the economic “principles” they represented appear to be far from “democratic,” to be merely the latest nuance of “totalitarian” control! In death, the twins ironically became “a living representation” yet seething resentment toward exploitive dominion, toward the exact opposite of “greatness,” concomitantly condemned both the assailants and the institutions they believed they were metonymically assaulting. Their destruction produced terror far beyond the sublime...but little introspection. Vengeance wrought more chaos and pain on a tragically vulnerable “humanity” with security as an excuse. Imprecise and willfully undeserved retribution globally also leveraged financial adventurism, particularly the control of resources —oil, minerals and markets.

Nevertheless, these architectural signs and their politically charged liquidation point the way to a frightening future. The excuse of old atrocities to justify new ones seems more than usual and not exclusive to the region from which the perpetrators came. The final frame of Steven Spielberg’s *Munich*²¹ released five years after 2001, focuses on the towers, seen from Long Island City. The cycle of violence that began in the Levant a century ago and that was the excuse for the Olympic massacre in Germany and the subsequent assassination of uninvolved Palestinians culminating in 2001 is thus depicted as tragically perpetual.

To the degree that there are traces of violence and death, negativity and aggressiveness in social practice, the monumental work erases them and replaces them with a tranquil power and certitude which can encompass violence and terror.

Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*²²

It is a rule in American life that commerce dwarfs commemoration... Mammon and memory went to war on the Ground Zero site, and, small surprise, Mammon won...

Adam Gopnik, “Stones and Bones: Visiting the 9/11 memorial and museum,”²³

Installed in March 2002, the poignant temporary memorial to the fallen towers deployed searchlights that projected upward

from Ground Zero. This extraordinary evocation of both absence and ascension, while also recalling the menace of and defense from air attack, is now regrettably replaced by the ghost towers' perpetually flushing footprints, the new unremarkable tower that only attains its declared 1776 ft. by adding an antenna like early TV sets, the trite \$4bn. transit center, sterile despite its attempted pyrotechnics and outlandish price tag and the equally predictable museum. All these are meant to evoke remembrance while, like a trendy penthouse in a luxury real-estate brochure, they actually reflect the brazen economics and luxury attitudes of nearby Wall Street and an increasingly plutocratic Manhattan.

Truly horrendous images of destruction and death haunt the present and cannot be expunged. A generation is scarred, impoverished emotionally and often fiscally by that day and what was to follow. To exploit for any purposes the eradication of the towers and their occupants is reprehensible, yet real estate, finance, the very phenomena the Trade Towers were christened to serve, have exploited Ground Zero in a predictable cycle of platitude and speculation. Beyond the destruction and deaths that occurred on 9/11, tragedy metastasized awarding subsequent advantage to the neocon policies upon which the new regime rapaciously profited in the name of that day's events, intimidating the U.S. population, silencing any critical discussion of its complex causes through repressive protocols leveraging the political/economic climate locally and globally. A consequent coup of the few over the many now appears to be increasingly pervasive.

Almost all films set in New York used the towers as a locator. The search for a lucid replacement has been relatively fruitless as such contextual markers rely on generic views of Manhattan that could almost be São Paulo, Shanghai, Chicago. Duplicated and thus always equivocal, the twin monoliths' anonymity stood in direct contradiction to the cornucopia of pre-war towers that Dos Passos anticipates. These archaic edifices, Woolworth, Equitable, Rockefeller, Chrysler, Empire State, are flamboyant stages for the *danse macabre* of tycoons and hegemony, no longer suffice. Deemed unsuitable as an instant talisman for the modern conurbation and its shadowy internecine machinations, they brand themselves, eliciting unique recognition, not the universal yet nameless force of the 21st-century metropolis. Self-aggrandizing and stentorian they say "metropolis" only after "me," like specific dial tones culled from pop songs as opposed to a generic telephone ring. Images of the city now must assert the anonymity of contemporary plutocracy manifested in an ascendent golden horde of international nouveau riche.

This junction between the ego and the object (we are not far from the baby's 'oceanic feeling,' but henceforth reshaped and rediscovered...) Julia Kristeva, "The Adolescent Is a Believer," citing Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*²⁴

The sea is the stuff of epic tales, the mother and the femme fatal, the stage for the heroic historians of world systems or the solvent capable of dissolving landed logics... Like shores, these areas of intolerance between worlds sustain and are sustained by error piracy, or the contentions of democracy. As interface between worlds, they form a perpetual wilderness with limitless surface area —always newly minted, and often



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underexplored. However rough they may be, these seas are also spacious, mixing different waters and different political constitutions.
Keller Easterling, "Contemplation: Seas"²⁵

Viewed from their base in bright late summer, their size, the way the resplendent pylons tilted twisting in perspective toward each other on the diagonal, the numerous slender aluminum-clad pillars incongruously widening at the bottom into Gothic arches where structure argued for the opposite, the pure colossal clarity — minimalist, geometric, intractable— the serenity promised by Yamasaki mixing with a sublime unease verging on vertigo. Passing from Judd to Eva Hesse, two weeks later they were a postminimalist mess, having strewn paper like diabolical confetti, clouding the pure September sky and rendering lower Manhattan toxic in grey sepulchral dust. Deadening organic/mineral powder compelled ensuing brutal reprisal and market piracy The dark sea closes over all enterprise, venal and humane, while its waters remain murky and continually more turbulent.

The skyscraper that finally, through an act of extreme violence, succeeds in purifying, while restoring its own power of speech, the place of the collective murder – the metropolis...

Manfredo Tafuri, "The New Babylon: The 'Yellow Giants' and the Myth of Americanism (Expressionism, Jazz Style, Skyscrapers, 1913 - 1930)"²⁶

When one examines this fleeting and permanent reality carefully, one has the impression of exploring the night-side of societies, a night longer than their day, a dark sea from which successive institutions emerge, a maritime immensity on which socioeconomic and political structures appear as ephemeral islands.

Michel de Certeau, *The rhetorics of practice, ancient ruses*²⁷

Journeys, those magic caskets full of dreamlike promises, will never again yield up their treasures untarnished. A proliferating and overexcited civilization has broken the silence of the seas once and for all.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Quest for Power"²⁸

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