

Window on a Changed World

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About 20 years ago, on a day as cloudless as the early morning of September 11, I was taken to lunch at the Windows on the World. The greeter, before letting me pass, equipped me with a yellow necktie the size of a winter scarf; and I remember my furtiveness and exhilaration as I perched on what seemed to me to be the pompous apex of modernity. The view was terrifying. Still, these windows weren't showing me the world. They were only showing me New York. September 11 was and is a wound, and a window. Like many Londoners, I regard New York as my second city - or my sister city, reachable by a seven-hour tube ride. (Not Paris, not Rome: New York.) My wife, who was born and raised in the West Village, made that tube ride on September 23. She saw the wound in all its rawness: still fuming and throbbing and weeping. I didn't go until the spring. And as I approached the barricaded site, I experienced the direct and vital connection that no words and images had prepared me for. This was a crime scene, and the crime was a crime against humanity. But my sense of it was also personal and territorial. The First World, the world I belonged to, had been horribly mauled.

Unlike the victims, the city will of course recover, will of course survive. That day last spring, its unstoppable forces were all converging: the massive can-do of the clearance crews, the preachers and counsellors and proselytisers, the hawkers and hucksters with their 9/11 memorabilia ("Let's Roll" backpacks, Barbie-Ken ground-zero dioramas, and so on). Yet the activity also emphasised the consternating scale of the disaster. "See that building?" said a passing tour-group guide, as he pointed up at a square-shouldered 50-floor colossus. "Double that, and double it again. That's what came down."

The towers collapsed, and so did much else, including all notions of America as an island or a fortress or a "gated community". The collateral catastrophe of September 11 is our sudden introduction to a barely recognisable planet, a planet which is not going to leave us alone. And the two extra oblongs of empty space in that mythic skyline only apparently consist of thin air. Information pours through them. They are windows on the world; and the view, once again, is terrifying.