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Catastrophe & Spectacle

Variations of a Conceptual Relation from the 17th to the 21st Century



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Fig. 1: Bird's Eye View of Coney Island by Night (postcard by P. Sanders, 1906).

The Rise and Fall of Coney Island

Amusement, Catastrophe and the Dead Fire of Consumption

Giulia Palladini

A fire broke out backstage in a theatre.
The clown came out to warn the public;
they thought it was a joke and applauded.
He repeated it; the acclaim was even greater.
I think that's just how the world will come to an end:
to general applause from wits who believe it's a joke.¹

A moon and a starry sky indicate the particular time of the day at which the image is set. In this landscape, however, numerous lights shine throughout the nocturnal darkness, as do their nuanced reflections on the water. Glimmering among the boats at the small pier, a symphony of red and yellow punctuates the image, constituting for the viewer an ephemeral architecture of light, which counterbalances the majestic shapes that otherwise dominate the picture. The

cornerstone of the majestic buildings is the high beacon tower in the background, overlooking the bridge. On the left-hand side, the pier houses a great ballroom, its windows facing the ocean. On the right-hand side, passers-by stroll along the boardwalk between the lagoon and a sumptuous façade with a large archway at its center, from which the courtyard behind can be accessed.

The climax of the image, however, is not the high-rise tower, but rather the cornerstone of the ephemeral architecture of light: It is the intense cloud of flames and smoke emerging from within the building blocks. Everything in the image seems to have been carefully orchestrated to stage this element as the main attraction for the viewer: In this bird's eye view of Coney Island overlooking the water, the fire has pride of place.

This detail is significant for the story this article is going to tell, which this image more or less accidentally condenses. Fire also has pride of place in this narrative, both as an attraction and as an omen of sorts for the fate of Coney Island, the legendary empire of pleasure conceived to “amuse the millions”² at the beginning of New York’s urban modernity: a place imagined and produced as a delimited territory of unlimited consumption. Located at the far end of Brooklyn on a narrow peninsula extending into the ocean, Coney Island was established as a leisure area at the turn of the century, and continued to perform this function, with varying success, until the 1960s, surviving to this day more as a locus of nostalgia than as a productive enterprise. Comprising a beach resort and a wide variety of entertainment offers, Coney Island’s golden age was between 1900 and 1912, when its three iconic amusement parks – Steeplechase, Luna Park and Dreamland – were in full operation, attracting more than 100,000 visitors a day during the summer season.³ From very early on, Coney Island came to be referred to as “The City of Fire”, an expression used, for example, by Maxim Gorky, who visited the place in 1907 and famously described it, both disappointed and strangely fascinated, in an article entitled “Boredom” published in the newspaper *The Independent*.⁴ This nickname conjured up an image of Coney Island as it appeared from

Manhattan: that of a town of sparkling lights emerging as a flame from the ocean itself.

Fire, therefore, was always already a staple in the terminology and imagination associated with Coney Island. This reference is also alluded to in this illustration from 1906. But the picture potentially conjures up more than just this. I will regard it as an image that unwittingly conveys a set of historical references that exceed the time and purpose of this particular representation: as the imaginary archival remains of a stratified history which, at the time the picture was produced, had not yet fully taken place.

As a matter of fact, the image of the fire in the square lends itself to different interpretations, depending on the particular standpoint of the observer. Someone encountering this picture without any knowledge of either the subject being represented or of the purpose for which it was produced might assume that the blaze is an accident occurring in an otherwise harmonious landscape: a fire captured at the moment it is just about to conflagrate over the peaceful pier, and whose danger the surrounding environment is still unaware of. A careful observation of the image, however, also reveals that attempts to tame the fire are already at work: against the mist of fire and smoke rising toward the sky, the image also portrays jets of water streaming toward the blaze, graphically countering the flames with steady gushes coming from below. Among

the flames, it is also possible to recognize the point where the fire originated: a building. However, for an observer looking at this picture in 1906, at the time it was produced, this image had a radically different meaning. For that observer, the fire was a clear reference to the attraction that, in the 1904 and 1905 summer seasons, had been the most popular at Coney Island: *Fighting the Flames*, which regularly took place at Dreamland. Employing a cast of 4,000 people playing firemen and actors and performed for a crowd of around 1,500 spectators, *Fighting the Flames* was the re-enactment of a fire disaster taking place in a building block, staged in a meticulously reconstructed, plausible urban scene. For 20 minutes, a five-story hotel was set ablaze and rescued during an immersive performance, where spectators played (although from a safe distance) the part of witnesses. Further evidence of the popularity of this attraction is the short film *Fighting the Flames – Dreamland*, produced in August 1904 by the American Mutoscope & Biograph Company, which reproduced a fragment of the show. The promotional materials for the film described the salient features of the attraction in great detail, presented as the ultimate example of ‘sensational realism’:

The entertainment has all the excitement of a genuine fire. The conflagration is preceded by familiar scenes of every-day life in a busy city. Across the city square pass trolley cars, delivery wagons, coupes and pushcart vendors, while busy people complete the scene of life and activity in a metropolitan city. A well-equipped fire department is ready for emergency, and when the alarm is sounded that a five-story hotel is on fire, the engines, hose wagons, water tower, hook and ladder truck and battalion chief’s wagon crowd one another as they rush to the scene of the conflagration. What the audience sees is a raging fire, with excitable people clinging to the windows, others forced to the fire-escapes, where escape is cut off by the flames below. The firemen play the part of heroes. By the use of scaling ladders, while the extension ladder is being raised, the firemen mount the building floor by floor, calm the inmates, bringing some to the ground by means of the scaling ladders and fire escape ropes. While this part of the scene is enacted the life-net has been placed in position. Frenzied people jump from the fire-escapes into the net from every floor. As one man jumps for the net from the roof, an explosion is heard and the roof falls in. All this time the engines have been pumping water into the building and upon the flames. The conflagration is gotten under control and all lives have been saved.⁵

Numerous illustrated postcards were produced to advertise *Fighting the Flames*: Some present a frontal image of the building on fire, with the crowd witnessing the rescue and the firemen heroically at work. Others, in turn, present the attraction in the broader environment of Dreamland, doubling in representation the tension between reality and fiction, which was intrinsic to the attraction. The 1906 *Bird's Eye View of Coney Island by Night* that opened this essay is an illustrated postcard of this kind: one of the postcards that park visitors could purchase as a souvenir of their leisure experience or send to their friends and relatives at home. Significantly, the golden age of Coney Island coincided with the establishment of a large tourist industry. Within this context, images of Coney Island were produced and put to work in the marketing and consumption of cultural memory in the forms of touristic postcards and memorabilia. As Richard Snow reports, "200,000 [post]cards were mailed from Coney in a single day of September 1906".⁶

However, for someone looking at this picture today, more than a century later, and with the long history of Coney Island in mind, besides being a souvenir of this legendary fire attraction, this picture is also a powerful detonator of historical recollections of the many fires that, for its part, Coney Island attracted to itself throughout its history. The most

famous in 1911, which has gone down as the biggest fire in New York history to date, fatally destroyed Dreamland, the park portrayed in this postcard, at the peak of its splendor, performing the hubris of taming the blaze that was regularly ignited for public amusement. In a sense, then, interpreting the picture as the scenario of an imminent conflagration, which would later turn the empire of pleasure into a wasteland, was not too far from reality – especially since 'reality' in the history and legend of Coney Island has intrinsically blurred and overlapped with fiction.

The story of the complex relationship between the fire disasters staged at Coney Island and the catastrophic fires that repeatedly burned down its precarious architectures of amusement comprises many episodes, all of which could be considered distinctive examples of such blurring. Displaying and experimenting with what Rem Koolhaas has called the "Technology of the Fantastic",⁷ Coney Island embodied an alternative world, where imagination was given form and marketed as experience. At Steeplechase Park (founded in 1897), visitors could give themselves over to the pleasure of sliding down gigantic chutes, experiencing the vertigo of height and speed, and bumping into each other on rides like the Human Roulette Wheel. At Luna Park (founded in 1903), dubbed Electric Eden because it was illuminated by

250,000 electric lights, visitors wandered into a surreal, exotic architectural space while undertaking simulated adventures such as The Trip to the Moon or Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea. At Dreamland (founded in 1904), a majestic cosmogony featuring explicit biblical references (significantly framing the leisure experience between the poles of *creation* and *destruction*) welcomed the visitors, offering them the chance to travel through time, space, and human knowledge, encompassing attractions as diverse as a gigantic model of Venice, a Japanese tea room, the ‘Midget City’ of Lilliputia (housing a community of 100 midgets) and the Incubator Building (where premature children were on display in newly invented incubators).

At Luna Park and Dreamland, a great number of historical disasters from different historical periods were recreated and offered up for public amusement. Besides the fire attraction Fire and Flames (which functioned similarly to Fighting the Flames, but on a smaller scale), Luna Park featured, for example, a show about the floods and hurricane that had devastated Galveston, Texas, in 1900, a town reconstructed in miniature and routinely destroyed in performances using real and fake water, large sheets of painted fabric, and lighting and mechanical effects, while a lecturer explained the sequence of events. At Dreamland, visitors could witness The

Fall of Pompeii, comfortably sitting in a reconstructed Greek temple, while the legendary eruption of Vesuvius was recreated using mechanical equipment with a spectacular fireworks finale. In the space of one day at Coney Island a visitor could potentially undertake time travel from one catastrophe to another, from the San Francisco earthquake to the burnings of Rome and Moscow, from the devastating 1902 eruption of Mount Pelée in Martinique to US naval battles and episodes from the Boer War.

Considering the greater spectacular effects displayed in these other attractions, it might seem surprising that audiences considered Fighting the Flames and Fire and Flames to be the most appealing – all the more so since the majority of visitors to Coney Island were working-class citizens who faced hard housing conditions in everyday life, “living in constant fear of fire in ramshackle, deathtrap tenements”,⁸ quite similar to the ones routinely set ablaze in the attractions. As Kevin Baker suggests, to a certain extent, these citizens “were there to see the pageant of their lives and their times played out before them”.⁹ More than a catastrophic phantasmagoria, the attraction was a ritual, where visitors came to terms with the hardship and congestion of the metropolitan experience, which at the time was new to many, constructing its own mythology, in which firemen played the part of heroes from the

beginning. Before a paid fire department was established in New York in 1865, volunteer firefighters had performed a crucial role in society as well as in the growing American ideology of community and human mastery over adverse conditions.

Spectacular fires also characterized the history of Coney Island. A brief tour through such history should touch upon at least a few of the events that routinely destroyed its ambitious fantasies of amusement. Even before the foundation of Steeplechase, a series of fires destroyed various newly founded hotels in the beach area at Coney Island and, in 1903, a devastating blaze erased 14 square blocks on the Bowery, the site of a number of entertainment venues. In July 1907, Steeplechase burned down in 18 hours due to a lit cigarette accidentally thrown into a waste basket. In 1911, the legendary fire that devastated Dreamland was sparked by the explosion of a light bulb, fatally located on a ride named Hell's Gate. The firemen were also unable to tame the fire due to a flaw in the recently installed hydrant system. Half of Luna Park burned down in 1944, and it was finally torn down in 1949. Even more relevant than this partial chronology is the fact that some of these catastrophic events themselves became instances of spectacle, either perceived, marketed or consumed as such.

For example, the day after Steeplechase burned down, its founder George C. Tilyou posted the following sign at the site where his park had once been:

To enquiring friends: I have troubles today that I had not yesterday. I had troubles yesterday which I have not today. On this site will be built a bigger, better, Steeplechase Park. Admission to the burning ruins – Ten cents.¹⁰

Indeed, before Tilyou later rebuilt the park on a much greater scale, he made the most of the disaster, starting by charging admission to the debris of Steeplechase, turning 'catastrophic reality' into 'spectacle', just as Coney Island's many other staged catastrophes did during the same period. The 1911 Dreamland fire, in turn, was perceived as a spectacle from the very moment it happened: Suspecting that it was just one more catastrophic attraction, news reporters from Manhattan printed the news with a 24-hour delay. "Dreamland", Koolhaas remarks,

had succeeded so well in cutting itself loose from the world that Manhattan's newspapers refused to believe in the authenticity of the final disaster even as their editors see its flames and smoke from their office windows.¹¹

However, once the news was announced, this charred site was also immediately turned into an attraction. As the article “Ruins Help Draw 350,000 to Coney” reported, published two days after the fire, the impresario Samuel W. Gumpertz organized “all that [was] left of Dreamland” to be exhibited for a paying audience:

[T]he great waste, five blocks square, was considered an attraction, and it was reckoned that the desire to see the piles of blackened timbers and bent steel helped bringing 350,000 people to the island.¹²

Visitors paid their dimes to see the living remains of the entertainment that once was, namely the few animals from Joseph’s Ferrari Trained Wild Animal Arena that had survived the catastrophe, along with numbers performed on the ruins by some of the ‘freaks’ from The Dreamland Circus Sideshow. Furthermore, half-burned pictures of Little Hip, the famous performing elephant that had died in the flames were sold

as bona fide relics of the fire. They appear to have been genuine enough pictures of the elephant, but someone wandering through the wreckage came across a small boy crouched behind a pile of

timber with a candle in one hand and a photograph in the another. He was singing [*sic*] the edges of the photograph and preparing it for the market.¹³

So, not only were real catastrophes exhibited as attractions, but to complicate matters even further, blurring the lines between fiction and reality, memorabilia of the catastrophe was manufactured from scratch as evidence of one more lesson from the history of Coney Island: that illusion, in spectacle, pays far more than authenticity, in good and bad fate alike.

Keeping in mind this manufactured memorabilia, I want to go back to the bird’s eye view from 1906 where this essay started. That postcard, in fact, had also been manufactured with the intent of making entertainment endure after the moment of its *consumption*: It was meant to double and re-stage a leisure experience that, once the weekend was over and the masses of visitors had left Coney, was eaten up, disappeared as experience, alongside the dimes paid for it. After the blaze in Fighting the Flames had been heroically tamed in performance and all lives saved, working-class citizens could go back to the ‘reality’ of the “ramshackle, deathtrap tenements” to which the new, iconic metropolis of American industrial capitalism relegated their work time, while organizing the market where

their leisure time could be spent, in the phantasmagoria of the consumption of 'the City of Fire'. Although the connection is not made explicit, the powerful etymological relation between *consumption* and the play of fire exhibited at Coney Island appears nowhere clearer than in the beautiful critique written by Gorky after his first visit to the place. After describing the wonderful deception of the City of Fire seen from the distance, at a first glance, once at the parks, Gorky encounters the dreadful allegory of human life's subjection to the power of capital: "[T]he fiery scintillation of Coney Island", he writes, "burns but does not consume".¹⁴ That is, the spectacle of consumption in which the masses of workers participated was meant to be endless, as a "dead fire", which by its own nature had little to do with "the desire of a beautiful, a sublime fire, which should free the people from the slavery of a varied boredom".¹⁵ Within this logic, endless consumption was to be replicated by manufactured goods that, like the 1906 postcard, would artificially reproduce an experience, prolonging the limitedness of its costly pleasure. The counter-image of fire imagined by Gorky was one that would not have to be paid for: It was "a merry dancing and shouting and singing" where the soul "would see a passionate play of motley tongues of fire; it would have joyousness and life",¹⁶ in place of a compulsive urge to consume. The fire would be a force

of conflagration coming from within, not sold to the masses and exceeding the limited time of a weekend: a fire igniting ideas about different life possibilities outside the phantasmagoria of American capitalism that first created the conditions for, and then displayed, its own disasters.

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- 1 Søren Kierkegaard: *Either/Or. A Fragment of Life*, transl. from the Danish by Alastair Hannay. London: Penguin 2004, p. 49.
- 2 "Amusing the millions" was the title of an article written by Frederic Thompson, co-founder of Luna Park, describing the philosophy of his amusement business. Frederic Thompson: Amusing the Millions. In: *Everybody's Magazine* 19 (September 1907), pp. 378–386.
- 3 Louis J. Parascandola / John Parascandola: Introduction. In L. J. P. / J. P. (eds): *A Coney Island Reader: Through the Dizzy Gates of Illusion*. New York: Columbia UP 2015, pp. 1–50, here p. 1.
- 4 Maxim Gorky: Boredom. In: *The Independent*, August 8, 1907, pp. 309–317.
- 5 Synopsis of *Fighting the Flames – Dreamland* (1904), from Biograph promotional materials, qtd. in Lynn Kathleen Sally: *Fighting the Flames: The Spectacular Performance of Fire at Coney Island*. New York / London: Routledge, pp. 85–86.
- 6 Richard Snow: *Coney Island: A Postcard Journey to the City of Fire*. New York: Brightwaters 1984, p. 20.
- 7 Rem Koolhaas: *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*. Oxford: Oxford UP 1978, p. 29.
- 8 Kevin Baker: Foreword. In: Parascandola / Parascandola (eds): *Coney Island Reader*, pp. XIII–XVIII, here p. XVI.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Quoted in Edo McCullough: *Good Old Coney Island: A Sentimental Journey into the Past*. New York: Fordham UP 2000, p. 202
- 11 Koolhaas: *Delirious New York*, p. 76.
- 12 Ruins Help Draw 350,000 to Coney. In: *New York Times*, May 29, 1911. Reprinted in: *A Coney Island Reader*, p. 164.
- 13 Ibid., p. 166.
- 14 Gorky: Boredom, p. 309.
- 15 Ibid., p. 311.
- 16 Ibid.