

Excerpt from Pierre Loti, "Impressions of New York 'from the Point of View of a Barbarian from the Orient,'" *The Century Magazine*, February and March 1913, pp. 611-12, 760-61

[T]he electricity . . . flows in rivers. . . . Everything seems to vibrate, to crackle, under the influence of these innumerable currents which dispense power and light. One is himself electrified almost to the point of quivering under the stimulus. . . . Everywhere multicolored lights change and sparkle, forming letters and then dissolving them again. They fall in cascades from top to bottom of the houses, or in the distance seem to stretch in banners across the streets. But it is up in the air that one chiefly gazes despite all the noise that goes on below; for up there, on the tops of the buildings, are signs that *move*, operated by ingenious mechanisms, visions that dance. Among these is a Roman chariot-race, in which gigantic horses are furiously swinging their hoofs of fire; an umbrella-maker displays a little woman gesticulating with her open umbrella; a thread-manufacturer shows an enormous yellow cat unwinding a reel of red fire, and winding itself up in the cotton; farther up Broadway a tooth-brush maker, the most grotesque of all, has a little devil with rolling eyes of fire, who capers about in the heavens with a tooth-brush forty feet long in each hand. The apparitions flash out, move, fade away, quickly, very quickly—so quickly, indeed, that the eye barely follows them. From time to time some enormous advertisement perched on the top of a dark sky-scraper, almost invisible in the murky atmosphere, breaks out into red flame, like a constellation, hammers some name into your memory, and then as quickly vanishes. To my Oriental turn of mind it is all very strange and even a little diabolical; but it is so droll, so ingenious withal, that I am immediately amused and even on the verge of admiration. . . .

Monday, September 30, 1912. To-night, in order to obtain a general view of the phantasmagoria of New York, I ascend to the top of the "Times" building, which is one of the boldest of the skyscrapers. Located where three streets cross one another, it rises, leans, paradoxical, impassive, with the air of a thing that will never have the force to hold itself up. The very kind editors have invited me; an express elevator carries us at great speed up to the twenty-fifth story, and the next moment we are on the topmost roof. Here we encounter a stiff, cold breeze,—the keen air of high altitudes,—and on all sides, in the immense circle that extends to the horizon, electricity disports itself in a great spectacle. Far, near, and everywhere, words and sentences are written over the city in great letters of fire, last for an instant, disappear, and then reappear. Figures gambol and

gesticulate, among whom I already have some old acquaintances, as, for example, the goblin who brandishes his colossal tooth-brushes. The most diabolical of all is the face of a woman, which occupies as much space in the sky as the Great Bear. During the few seconds that she shines her left eye winks as though in enticing appeal; she seems a rather questionable young lady. What on earth can they be selling down there in the shop beneath her, whither she invites you with so equivocal a sign? Perhaps nothing but modest victuals or chaste umbrellas. It is quite enjoyable up here on this artificial summit, despite the cold which makes the face tingle; the six millions of beings who are striving, struggling, and suffering round about me oppress me no longer, and I almost resent the thought of having shortly to redescend from the high perch where I have been breathing deeply of the pure air, and plunge down again into the human sea that foams down there. What a strange idea these people have, of piling themselves up in this way, layer upon layer, when there are still, in other parts of the earth, stretches of virgin land! Seen from here, the city looks infinitely large; as far as the eye can reach, electricity traces zigzags, palpitates, winks, dazzles, and finally, toward the horizon, merges in a diffused glow as of the aurora borealis. Never before has New York seemed to me so unmistakably the capital of modernism; viewed at night from a height like this she fascinates and frightens. . . .