Deep Gutters and Monolithic Blocks: The Representation of Urban Complexity in Eric Drooker's Graphic Art

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> You can't say "I love New York." Tourists can love New York. Me? Who grew up here? Who's lived here my whole life, who's crawled over every stone and swung off every cornice … I *am* New York. It's in me, in my blood, like a disease … you know.
>
> I'm a native, born and raised on Manhattan Island—I lived there for four decades. When you live in a place that long, it becomes internalized. New York is literally inside me, in my veins.

The men responsible for these two utterances have next to nothing in common: They are Spider-Man (Whedon & Cassaday n.p.), the ultimate superhero of the Marvel Universe, and Eric Drooker ("Interview" 84), poster artist and graphic novelist. Yet the references to New York by the fictional mutant and the real-life artist are astonishingly similar; they even employ almost identical metaphors of the metropolis being inside them, in their blood, or in their veins. The fact that both a comic character and a creator of comics construct their identity through New York City indicates the strong bond that has always existed between the metropolis and graphic fiction, and it is this connection the current essay sets out to analyze by concentrating on the second of the above proponents, Eric Drooker.

This essay will investigate Drooker's association with New York City, where he grew up on the Lower East Side and ultimately became a celebrated graphic novelist and regular contributor to the *New Yorker*.[1] It will trace how the metropolis has shaped Drooker as an artist, and how he, in turn, has constructed the city in his art, particularly in his wordless graphic novel *Flood*. In order to analyze his unique way of depicting the vastness of the urban desert, I will trace his major influences. I will make assumptions about his indebtedness to poster art, a particularly urban genre, which he cultivated himself as a young artist. I will then delve into the woodcut novels of the great pioneers of the wordless book, Frans Masereel and Lynd Ward, whose renderings of the gigantic proportions of metropolitan settings have exercised an immense influence on Drooker the poster artist as well as on Drooker the graphic novelist. The essay will conclude with observations on how Drooker has managed to go beyond Masereel and Ward by introducing Far-Eastern perspectives in depicting the gigantism of the ultimate megalopolis, with its labyrinthine maze of streets and intimidating,

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1 Cf. <http//www.drooker.com> for a fair selection of Drooker's art, particularly his covers for the *New Yorker*.

alienating monoliths. But let us start with a few remarks on the traditional association of the comic book with New York in general.

Not only has the city served as the setting of countless superhero comics, of crime noir comics, and of a whole variety of high-class graphic novels—most prominently those of one of the masters of the genre, Will Eisner—, but New York has also been the place where most of the American comic books have been produced, and where most cartoonists, among them Eric Drooker, have lived and worked. The two major comic corporations Marvel and DC still have their seats in the megalopolis.[2] Regarding the physical properties of the comic book, one may even claim a correspondence between its material appearance and the architectural properties of the city. No real-life space resembles more closely the grid of a comic book page than Manhattan with its geometrical blocks and deep, nameless canyons. The very expression 'gutter' for the white space between comic book panels directly links graphic fiction to the grid of a modern city, most centrally New York, whence, of course, most of the comic terms originate.

Moreover, the city is also the place where the comic's sister arts are predominantly produced and displayed. As Ahrens and Meteling have it: "The competence of comics in capturing urban space and city life can be found within the cityscape itself, for example, as combinations of words and images in the form of signage and graffiti, which are deeply influenced by the aesthetics of comics" (6). To signage and graffiti I would like to add yet two further art forms in which words and images combine, and which belong to the city as much as noise and pollution: the poster and the flyer, both of which Drooker produced in droves as a young man and the influence of which, this essay will suggest, is still being felt in his mature wordless graphic novels. It is my contention that the panels of these novels, which we will concentrate on below, owe a lot of their immediacy, their capability of communicating moods and sentiments without any words in the blink of an eye, to the poster and the flyer, which must needs be capable of attracting people's attention in no time at all. After all, the success of posters and flyers is measured in terms of the number of people they succeed in attracting in spite of the sensory overload prevalent in modern urban settings. In the city, where huge billboards compete for the pedestrians' attention, where shops and restaurants employ every graphic means conceivable to lure customers into their premises, where shop windows display an overabundance of merchandise, a poster or flyer is not given an attention span of more than a fraction of a second, and this is where the special properties of images come in.

That images are much more suitable than written texts to attract people's attention was implicitly suggested by Lessing some 250 years ago. Written texts, as Lessing observed, "articulate sounds in time," one word after another, and are therefore hardly

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[2] No writer has more vividly reconstructed the New York comic industry during the 1940s and 1950s than Michael Chabon in his best-selling novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, the title of which itself reverberates with those of hundreds of superhero comics of the same era.

appropriate for reaching people not willing to invest any time into decoding them. Images on the other hand, according to Lessing, employ "figures and colors in space," are taken in at one glance, and therefore in no time at all (*Laocoon* 339). A corollary of this seems to be that pictures are particularly suited for the depiction of events happening simultaneously, simultaneity arguably being one of the crucial characteristics of urban complexity. As Lessing observed, things which in reality—or in an image—can be surveyed at once, verbally have to be narrated one after the other in order to create a picture of the whole.[3] Images do not have this problem. An example from Drooker's work which illustrates this is the following panel from *Flood* depicting a street fight in downtown New York (cf. fig. 1).[4]

Fig. 1: Drooker, *Flood* n.p.

3 Cf. Lessing, "Laokoon" 889: "If several parts or things which in reality have to be surveyed at once if they are to create a whole were to be narrated to the reader one after the other in order to create a picture of the whole for him, this is an intrusion of the poet into the domain of the painter" (my translation). The original reads as follows: "Mehrere Teile oder Dinge, die ich notwendig in der Natur auf einmal übersehen muß, wenn sie ein Ganzes hervorbringen sollen, dem Leser nach und nach zu erzählen, um ihm dadurch ein Bild von dem Ganzen machen zu wollen: heißt ein Eingriff des Dichters in das Gebiete des Malers."

4 This depiction of violence draws on Drooker's personal experience: "I lived right down the block from Tompkins Square Park when the police attempted a midnight curfew back in 1988. Mind you, this was in the heart of the East Village, a neighborhood with a long history of resistance. A volatile neighborhood. When a police megaphone ordered everyone out of the park, people just stood there chanting: 'Whose fucking park? OUR fucking park!' After people refused to leave, police charged the crowd on horseback. Many people responded by throwing bottles and firecrackers, refusing to disperse. … I saw the police just cracking people's skulls open and charging on horseback, helicopters hovering low above tenement buildings. An unforgettable, apocalyptic scene" ("Interview" 101).

Posters exploit the property of pictures to depict many things simultaneously in space in order to create a much more immediate response than written language is usually capable of, an effect which may just as well be explained by the encoding and decoding process which, for written language, is always "one step removed," as Drooker himself points out:

> With verbal language, an intermediate encryption process takes place: We're translating what we're trying to express, into sounds or strange symbols—alphabetic letters—to be deciphered. Though it's amazingly effective, it's always one step removed. If you see a bird and draw a picture of a bird, that's less of a leap than drawing the letters B-I-R-D. ("Interview" 92f.)

Given Drooker's preference for the picture over the word, it makes perfect sense that he has become one of the most renowned modern proponents of the wordless graphic novel. And it is hardly surprising that he started out as a poster artist in New York, where his "politically impassioned posters long graced East Village lampposts" (Spiegelman n.p.). Drooker's posters and flyers, just like his graphic novels, had a highly political subject. They directly originated in the social complexity of urban life, as he recounts with regard to his organization of tenant meetings opposing the despotism of "slumlords" on the Lower East Side:

> I discovered that by creating an artistic flyer to slip under everyone's door, and post in the hallway—one that wasn't just text, but that had an image on it—was an effective way to bring people to the meeting [sic]. So, this early experience taught me how artwork had a vital role to play in the process of political organizing. ("Interview" 96)

It is the image that draws attention to the piece of paper and, we may gather, gives it a more personal note than mere letters on a white sheet. Drooker's graphics have long gained importance on a national, even international scale, being "used by organizers on posters and flyers, which announce upcoming mass demonstrations, protest actions and meetings" (Drooker, "Interview" 96). One of the most fervent admirers and a collector of his posters was none lesser than Allen Ginsberg, who wrote in 1995:

> Drooker illustrated the city's infrastructural stress, housing decay, homelessness, garbage, hunger and bitter suffering of marginalized families, Blacks and youth, with such vivid detail that the authoritarian reality horror of our contemporary dog-eat-dog Malthusian technoeconomic class-war became immediately visible. (xii)

Ginsberg's enthusiasm for Drooker and his street art went so far that he commissioned him with the illustration of an anthology of his poetry celebrating the 50th anniversary of 'Howl,' a task that Drooker accomplished to perfection. *Illuminated Poems*, including the best writing of Ginsberg and some of the best artwork by Eric Drooker, is still selling well.

Drooker's indebtedness to poster art is most obvious in his graphic novel *Flood*, especially when it comes to the depiction of the harsh realities of modern city life. It is easy to see that in the absence of words, images have to take over the function of written language and thus have to be even more compelling than traditional comic panels,

which may still rely to a large extent on the words of captions and speech balloons.[5] Just like posters, wordless graphic novels have to get their message across through iconographic abstraction and exaggeration, virtually drawing the beholder's attention by the image alone and thus capturing simultaneity. Thus, "Home," the first of the three books *Flood* consists of, visually narrates the story of the lonely city dweller who first loses his job, then his girlfriend, is evicted from his apartment, lands in jail, and ultimately finds himself on the street. As with most of Drooker's episodes, this is based on personal experience in his immediate environment:

> The tragic theme was informed by my experiences on the lower East Side, where I regularly climbed over people to enter my apartment. After Reagan was elected, there was a wave of homelessness the likes of which I had never seen.[6] ("Interview" 92)

Flood concludes with a one-page panel depicting the protagonist as a giant, sitting on a tenement building, leaning against a skyscraper, warming his hands in the light of a street lamp (cf. fig. 2 below). The buildings surrounding him are reduced to mere geometrical forms devoid of life, even further emphasizing his loneliness. He is crouching in an almost embryonic position in order to come to terms with the chill of the winter night and his colossal frame throws a huge shadow on the buildings behind him. Every aspect of the panel emphasizes the fact that his fate is not exceptional, but is also that of many others who undeservedly find themselves in a downward spiral.

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5 As a matter of fact, artists of wordless novels may insist that they use a language much more universal than any semiotic system encoded in letters. As Peter Kuper, himself a celebrated author of numerous novels working entirely without words, puts it most prosaically: "In the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel, humanity has developed one unifying language and comes together to build a stairway to heaven. God, as was His wont, destroys the structure and as an added bonus undoes people's ability to communicate through a single language for all time. … [The authors of wordless novels] discovered a way to sidestep our language barriers and create complex, political, emotional, and humorous stories that can be universally understood" (Kuper 7).

6 If we trust Joe Sacco, himself one of the most accomplished graphic novelists, Drooker is the ideal exponent of those for whom the city is in the first place an archive: "I met Eric Drooker only once for a few short hours six or seven years ago in New York City. Over drinks, Drooker, this far-out, far-left, streetwise artist, held me spellbound with stories of the outburst and upheavals that have punctuated the Lower East Side's dense political history, which, clearly, was his own. Walking me back to the subway station, Drooker motioned to doorways and street corners, describing what had happened there five or fifteen or one hundred years ago as if those things were happening before his eyes again and now. No person I have met since has seemed as organically from a place, not simply by virtue of his being born, raised, and schooled there, but because his streets also teemed with long-dead and mostly forgotten characters who lived and ached and struggled, too, and from whose lives he was still able to draw much meaning" (n.p.).

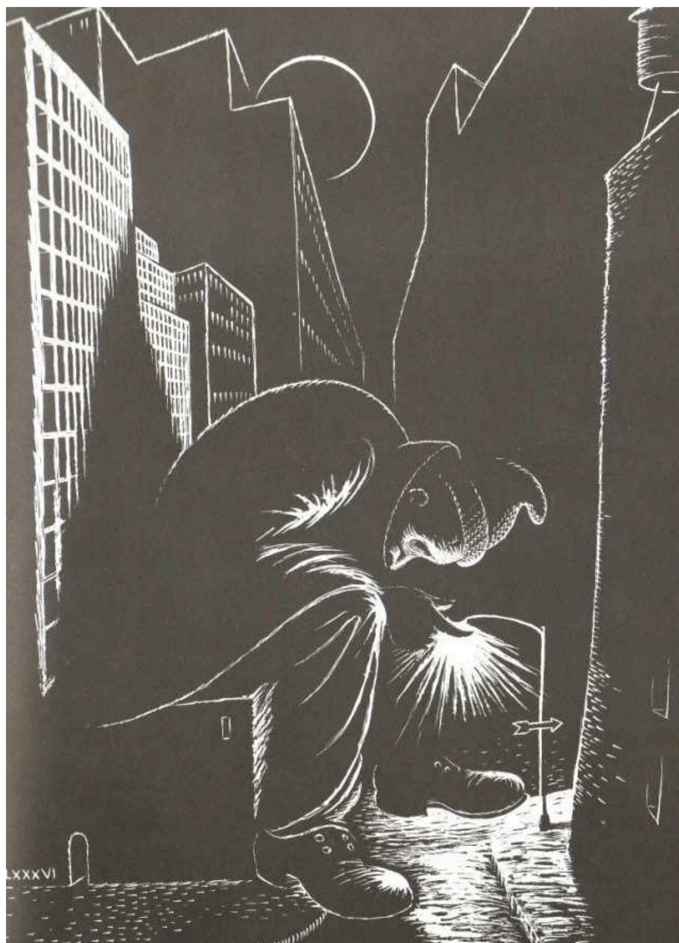

Fig. 2: Drooker, *Flood* n.p

This panel has all the properties of a magnificent poster. One glance is enough and every beholder will sense the loneliness and social isolation of the homeless man. By depicting him as a giant, Drooker draws attention to his plight, while simultaneously showing us the overpowering rows of buildings in their entirety. Had he depicted a life-sized man, he could have settled for a close-up with the man covering half the page with only two or three windows of a building being discernible, or he could have shown the vast dimensions of the edifices with an insignificant, barely perceptible man on the bottom of the page. Only by blowing the protagonist up to larger-than-life size does Drooker have the opportunity to show both the anonymous city and the man in detail, with worn-out shoes and shabby clothes, vacantly staring at the ground. One glance and the two constituent elements of the panel become visible: the anonymous city and the isolation of the homeless. The panel, virtually drawing the viewer towards its essential message, would have worked perfectly as a poster, as many panels of Drooker's graphic novels would.

Drooker's scratchboard technique, a subtractive process whereby ink is scratched away from cardboard, is congenial to his subject matter. In contrast to the usual process of producing black lines on a white piece of paper, blackness is the point of origin and the artist brings out the whiteness. As Spiegelman puts it more prosaically: "Drooker has discovered the magic of pulling light and life out of an inky sea of darkness" (n.p.). This light is there quite literally in the form of the street lamp blanching the cold pavement. It is the only source of warmth that is still to be had for free.

This technique of "pulling light and life out of an inky sea of darkness," of adding whiteness to blackness, connects Drooker to the great pre-World-War-II woodcut artists Frans Masereel and Lynd Ward. It is highly significant in my context that both specifically pioneered the wordless urban novel. Drooker himself doubts that he would have come to the "wordless approach" if he had not been exposed to the works of these two artists ("Interview" 92).

What the Belgian Masereel and the American Ward have in common besides being the foremost creators of wordless books is that they learned their craft in Germany and that the city played a very important role in their work. Both depicted immense cityscapes where anonymity and callousness reigned.[7] Masereel is particularly known for his 1919 work *Mein Stundenbuch* (*Passionate Journey*), the story of a young man who comes to the city, inevitably passing from the state of innocence to that of experience. His 1925 novel *Die Stadt* (*The City*) presents snapshots, in no necessarily chronological order, showing poverty-stricken workers and their families, the exuberantly decadent rich, and prostitutes and criminals against the background of anonymous architectural monstrosities. Interestingly, in his 1928 *Das Werk* (*The Work*), Masereel tells the story of a giant who, having been accidentally created by an artist, roams the city, looking into people's homes. Then, in an act of frenzy, the colossus smashes tenements as if they were mere toys (cf. fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Masereel, *Das Werk* (source: Beronä, *Wordless Books* 39).

It may be assumed that the fascination of early woodcut novelists with the city is to some extent technical. Lynd Ward ("Wood Engraving" 770) emphasizes the coarse effect of dark and white, particularly when the wood grain runs parallel to the surface of the block. This coarseness in the effect of dark and light is particularly felt in Masereel and is to a great extent responsible for the appeal of his work, as the above cut well exemplifies. Urban landscapes, to be sure, present the artist with enormous homogenous flat surfaces; moreover, the gouge may be an instrument more capable of producing straight lines rather than curved ones. Cityscapes thus particularly lend themselves to being rendered in woodcut, which leaves little room for shades of gray but has to settle for either black or white.

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7 Ginsberg felt particularly drawn to Drooker because he reminded him of Ward and Masereel: "I began collecting Drooker's posters soon after overcoming shock, seeing in contemporary images the same dangerous class conflict I'd remembered from childhood, pre-Hitler block print wordless novels by Frans Masereel and Lynd Ward. Ward's images of the solitary artist dwarfed by the canyons of a Wall Street Megalopolis lay shadowed behind my own vision of Moloch. What 'shocked' me in Drooker's scratchboard prints was his graphic illustration of economic crisis similar to Weimar-American 1930s Depression" (xii).

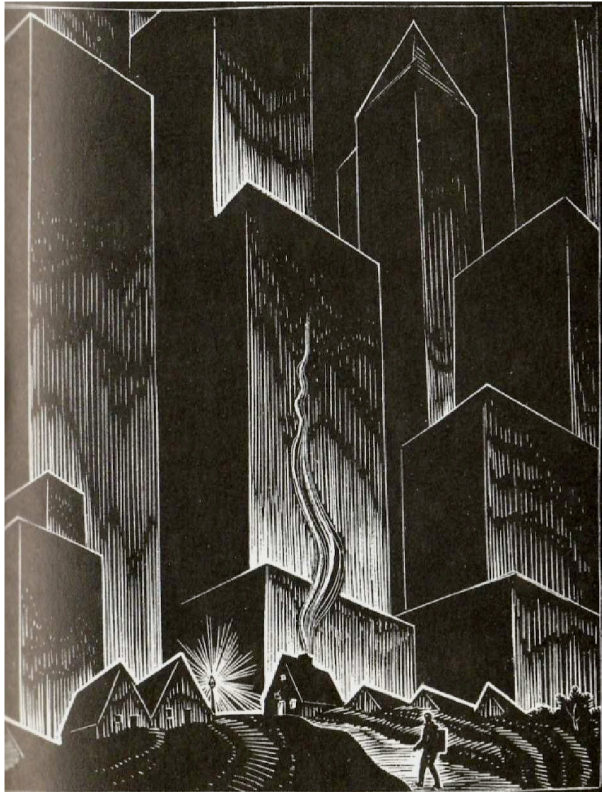

Fig. 4: Ward, *Gods' Man* n.p.

The lines of Ward's cityscapes are generally more filigree than those of Masereel's, which might have to do with the fact that he uses wood blocks cut across the grain. The image below, taken from Ward's wordless novel *Gods' Man* from 1929, depicts the artist protagonist arriving in the city after a hazardous sea voyage (cf. fig. 4). The small cabins in the foreground belong to the old part of town which is almost suffocated by the immensity of modern urban architecture. The skyscrapers appear oppressive, inhuman with their sharp-edged geometrical forms. No sign of life is visible except for the smoke sent up in silence from the chimney of one of the small huts. This smoke, the only item in the picture which is represented by irregular lines, provides the only indication of life. Like in Drooker's panel of the giant homeless man (cf. fig. 2), there is one source of light, a solitary street lamp with its cold white gleam. This lamp sets light to a sea of darkness, as does the artist's gouge to a blackened block of wood.

Buildings such as these "monolithic skyscrapers" (cf. fig. 5), as Drooker calls them ("Interview" 84), are ubiquitous in his city art, and are, in their general monstrosity, very much indebted to Ward and Masereel. In the dream vision of "Flood," the last book of his eponymous wordless novel, the protagonist crosses a bridge to the city, represented in an image strongly reminiscent of the one from Ward's novel *Gods' Man* shown here (cf. fig. 4). The edifices again appear oppressive and lifeless, collectively constituting one monumental unit more like a fortress or prison island. The viewer's premonition of impending doom is justified, as the protagonist will encounter a general climate of hostility and aggression exploding in violent riots and street fights, in the course of which pedestrians clash with the police (cf. fig. 1 and my discussion above). The play with light and darkness adds to the general gloom. Again there is only one source of light, this time the moon, looming ominously behind the monoliths, plunging the unadorned facades into a cold whiteness, against which the black silhouette of the pedestrian's bent figure stands out. Like Ward and Masereel, Drooker is at his most compelling when he depicts one solitary human being against the background of an apparently lifeless cityscape. Though this is not technically a point-of-view perspective, this person psychologically functions as a focalizer through whose eyes we behold the urban scene. Thus, the pictures we perceive are hardly mimetic images. They are construed from the subjective, emotional vantage point of the persona.

Fig. 5: Drooker, *Flood* n.p.

It is in this respect that Drooker has gone even beyond Ward and Masereel. Whereas these two artists mainly adhered to traditional Western perspectives, which are predominantly indebted to mathematical principles deemed to be objective and rational, Drooker managed to bring in a more subjective, more emotional note by applying Asian techniques of showing the vast extension of urban spaces. Drooker explains:

> Western perspective is linear perspective, and was actually a Renaissance invention. It's just one method of creating the illusion of depth on a flat surface. A sense of deep space is created when all lines converge at the 'vanishing point,' which sits on the horizon. As objects recede to this point, they appear smaller. … Linear perspective isn't used in traditional Eastern Art. … Instead of things getting smaller in the distance, things that are closer are placed at the bottom of the picture, and things that are farther away are placed higher up in the composition. Another technique used to portray depth is the gradual loss of detail and softening of distant objects. Far away mountains are obscured by hazy clouds … entire landscapes are permeated with mist. … The mastery of atmospheric perspective really grabbed me because I'd grown a little tired of linear perspective. ("Interview" 109)

Drooker employs both Eastern techniques for his cityscapes: He places buildings which are meant to be close at the bottom of the page and those which are far away higher up. He also blurs edifices with growing distance. Sometimes he even combines both techniques, as in "Flood," where a violent gust lifts the protagonist off his feet, virtually blowing him across the city (cf. fig. 6).

Fig. 6: Drooker, *Flood* n.p.

Fig. 7: Drooker, *Flood* n.p.

Drooker's panel spans two pages, which gives him the opportunity to show a large section of the skyline, suggesting the immensity of the urban maze. Only the buildings in the foreground are depicted in a three-dimensional fashion. Those further away are reduced to their mere contours, becoming more and more blurry with distance. The rain, pouring down incessantly, permeates the cityscape, taking on the function of the "hazy clouds" and "mist" of Eastern art. As a matter of fact, 'deluge' is the more appropriate term with the skeleton of Noah's Ark already being constructed on the top of a house on the left (cf. fig. 6).

The novel concludes with the Ark alone on an endless sea, out of which only the tops of the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building emerge (cf. fig. 7).

However, reaching the blurring effect of Eastern art with the scratchboard technique, which is incapable of depicting different shades of grey, seems to be rather difficult, even if thin layers of watercolor are added, as in the case of *Flood*. Drooker comes to terms with this problem by placing the white lines representing the rain denser and denser with distance (cf. fig. 6), so that the edifices become more and more blurred the further away they are meant to appear. Of course this blurring effect is much easier to achieve when, instead of knife or gouge, the artist uses brush or pencil, as Drooker did in his second masterpiece *Blood Song*.

This wordless novel tells the story of a young girl from a poor Asian village which is wiped out by soldiers arriving in helicopters. She flees to a city very much like New York, meets a street musician she falls in love with, and lives with him, her dog, and his doves in a tent on a rooftop, until he is arrested and put in prison. The replacement of the scratchboard with simple sheets of paper gives Drooker more opportunities to produce the hazy clouds and mist that Eastern perspectives employ. Consider the panel depicting the sunrise against the building on the roof of which the two protagonists live, clearly defined by the dove cages (cf. fig. 8). Classical three-dimensional perspective in the style of Lynd Ward is almost completely given up and we see only the facades of the buildings growing more and more blurred with distance in the morning mist. The tenements in the foreground are almost black, throwing dark shadows with the sun standing behind them. The further away the edifices are, the more the whiteness of the haze takes over.

Fig. 8: Drooker, *Blood Song* n.p.

Fig. 9: Drooker, cover of *9/11: Artists Respond*.

Let us finish with one of Drooker's most compelling pictures (cf. fig. 9), his cover art for the first volume of *9-11: Artists Respond*, an anthology which collects short comic strips and excerpts from larger works by major cartoonists responding to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In this painting, Drooker combines Western and Eastern perspectives to perfection. The buildings in the foreground still have a clear three-dimensional shape, supported by the play with the light of the evening sun outside the picture, all creating a sense of depth. The further away the various edifices are, the more the techniques of Eastern art take over. Again we have the mist which reduces the most distant buildings to mere patches of another shade of blue. In addition, the further the eye wanders, the higher up in the composition the skyscrapers are placed. The suspension bridge, almost as high up as the buildings in the foreground, gives the painting a surreal note when regarded with a traditional Western eye. However, its position makes perfect sense if the 'Eastern' rule applies, namely that elements higher up in the composition are meant to be further away. The height of the skyscrapers is further emphasized by their emerging out of the fog that covers the ground. The skeletons of the two towers allude, of course, to the World Trade Center. Again we have the lonely larger-than-life figure, this time the artist alone, with no other human soul visible, drawing on the roof-top of the closest building. Only the plant next to him conveys a sense of hope and rebirth in the concrete urban jungle.

This essay set out to make assumptions on how the artist Eric Drooker has drawn his identity from being a native New Yorker who has "internalized" the city which is "literally inside [him], in [his] veins" ("Interview" 84). We have seen how he, in turn, has constructed the complexity of urban landscapes—particularly the New York city-

scape—in his art: by drawing on his experiences as a poster artist and by drawing on the lessons he learned from the woodcut masters and from Asian artists, thus producing images of unrivalled intellectual and aesthetic appeal. There is no doubt that anyone who has come into contact with his art and has savored his unique way of representing—architectural as well as social—urban complexities will, fostered alike by beauty and by fear, see the city with slightly different eyes.

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