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English

Behind Apocalypse
The Cultural Legacy of 9/11

by

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ABSTRACT

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'Part One: 9/11 and the Death of the Capitalist Utopia' focuses on how 9/11 has been memorialised, mythologised, and mobilised by contemporary culture. It examines a range of cultural materials from literature, film, and architecture, to 9/11 in the media. The section discusses, through a fusion of cultural and political thought, how the War on Terror became the inevitable continuation of the binary rhetoric of good and evil perpetuated since 9/11. Chapter One, entitled 'Falling Man', examines the complex relationship between art and 9/11, and the impact of images of those seen falling from the towers, primarily using Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* to discuss the role of censorship after 9/11. The chapter progresses to look at Hollywood's overt response to 9/11 with *World Trade Center* and *United 93*. Chapter Two: 'Reflecting Absence' contains a reading of the 9/11 memorial used as a case study of the preferred narrative of 9/11. The chapter establishes a regressive rhetoric produced after 9/11 and used to fuel support for a more aggressive stance towards foreign policy.

In 'Part Two: The Earth Burns Again: the Culture of Apocalypse in Contemporary Cinema', I examine the specific case of apocalyptic narratives post 9/11. This is achieved through comparison pieces between late 90s apocalyptic films and those released after 9/11. It develops much of the theory put forward in the first chapter, showing how this can be applied not just to texts linked directly to 9/11, but also to texts about the future. Chapter Three: 'The Abuse of Apocalypse' begins with an examination of genre and the place of the apocalyptic narrative. I establish two distinct 'waves' and then move on to discuss a fascination with the 'post'-apocalyptic after 9/11. This is framed by a comparison between 90s apocalyptic film and film post 9/11. Here I address the lone survivor narrative and further discuss the aesthetic differences between the two waves. Chapter Four: 'You've Gotta Have Faith: Issues of Religion and Faith in Post 9/11 Apocalyptic Cinema', continues by examining the developing theme of religion within these post 9/11 apocalypse movies. This second part of the thesis is more focused on textual analysis, using the theory already discussed to inform a deeper and more specific discussion of the ways in which this movie genre/sub-genre is indicative of the wider issues at stake.

The thesis concludes with a discussion of the economic apocalypse which is evident in both the text and filmic versions of *Cosmopolis.* It places these ideas of an apocalyptic cultural mentality within the contemporary framework of the global financial meltdown, as well as summarises and returns to the main themes of the work, namely ideas about our ability to imagine the future, and the end of ideas of progress in traditional cultural forms.

Over the last decade 9/11 has been a popular source for writers of both fiction and non-fiction. The unique contribution this thesis makes to the body of work on 9/11 lies in its examination of primary texts alongside political and cultural theory. Most importantly, the way in which I combine narrative and aesthetic theory with textual analysis to build a narrative of post 9/11 apocalyptic thinking gives an overall framework to an otherwise fractious discourse on the popular imagination post 9/11.

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Declaration Of Authorship

I, MATTHEW STUART LEGGATT

declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

Behind Apocalypse: *The Cultural Legacy of 9/11*

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;

2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;

3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;

4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;

5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;

6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;

7. Either none of this work has been published before submission, or parts of this work have been published as: [please list references below]:

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Date: 01/12/2012

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Introduction

"We are the middle children of history, raised by television to believe that someday we'll be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars, but we won't. And we're just learning this fact," Tyler said. "So don't fuck with us."[1]

~ Tyler Durden

I

In David Fincher's 1999 film *Fight Club*, based on Chuck Palahniuk's novel of the same name, Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), the alter ego of a chronic insomniac imprisoned by his small condo life and mundane desk job, amasses an army from the repressed service sector workers driving the US economy, in search of an event which will define the history of his generation. From Tyler's tortured eloquence comes a cry for arms against the oppression of capitalism, a cry which demands the restart of historical progression in order to recover a lost identity and restore the wasted potential of his over-educated class. The aim of Tyler and his army, ironically named Project Mayhem, is to erase the world debt record by destroying the headquarter buildings of all the major credit card companies simultaneously. The film's imagery during the dénouement atop the Parker Morris building,[2] which is set to explode, has been

[1] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 166.
[2] Image 1 *Fight Club* finale.

retrospectively empowered by the events of what is, unalterably referred to as, the defining moment of twenty-first century US history: 9/11.[3]

On September 11 2001 Tyler Durden's dream of an epoch-making event was realised. This was no peaceful transition to a space beyond capitalism, however, as envisaged by Durden, whose financial monuments are empty, but a much more violent and brutal incident involving the mass-slaughter of innocent people, not just from the US but from all around the world. Within hours of the World Trade Center's collapse the day was already being packaged as the moment that "everything changed". But, ironically, Tyler's revolution has come and passed with barely a whimper:

> "We don't have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives. We have a spiritual depression."[4]

In just over a decade since Palahniuk wrote these words, Tyler's generation found their war, and more recently it would appear, they have found their great depression. Something more substantial perhaps, but, despite all this talk of change, the same political and monetary systems that were in place and thriving prior to 9/11 are still very much the powerful tools that govern world affairs today, a decade later.

For those scholars who have begun what will inevitably be a long process of analysis, evaluation, and re-evaluation, of the cultural response to 9/11, claims that the date "changed everything" are to be found in almost every reference.[5] As David Sterritt suggests,

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[3] In his book, *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism*, Stephen Prince examines this moment, describing how, 'It warps the ending of the film.' (p. 68). He suggests that the attempt by Project Mayhem to destroy financial history is an attempt to 'turn back the clock' (p. 66) on capitalism, a motive no doubt shared by Al-Qaeda on September 11. Prince announces that, 'In this respect, what *Fight Club* expresses are the psychological rage and alienation that help to spawn terrorism.' (p. 66).

[4] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 149.

[5] It is rare to find a book or essay that does not begin by suggesting that 9/11 'changed everything', or at least that does not begin by dealing with this concept, perhaps in order to dismiss it as

> Conventional wisdom about the events of September 11 is clear: Everything has changed since the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, and nothing will be quite the same again.[6]

These claims, however, have been absorbed into popular discourse, having entered insidiously via news and media outlets, without much analysis. They beg the serious question: just how did 9/11 *change everything*? Whilst I do not wish to dispute that 9/11's historical, political, and cultural impact has been sweeping, this statement is intentionally confrontational. Whether those two planes striking the Twin Towers that day did *change everything*, or if they merely fostered the perception that everything had changed, will be one of the concerns of this thesis. Isabelle Freda suggests that, 'While everywhere people felt that "everything had changed," this sense of a break was far in excess of the attacks, as horrible and deadly as they were.'[7]

The key to understanding where this perception comes from is in the analysis of culture after September 11. Was it in fact culture that changed in response to 9/11 rather than politics, and if so, what were these changes, and what were they the manifestation of? A city steeped in cultural symbolism, New York as a site was one of the most important factors in bringing a cultural aspect to what would have otherwise been a very political act. As a city of spectacular architecture and the symbolic capital of liberty and democracy, New York itself played a unique role in a cultural adjustment after 9/11. Steven Schneider expresses the interconnectivity between the change in the city's skyline and the subsequent cultural change seen in film: 'Whether I see the twin towers in movies or not, one thing is a given: I will

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oversimplification as Susan Faludi does in *The Terror Dream: What 9/11 Revealed about America*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2008), p.2.

[6] David Sterritt, 'Representing Atrocity: From the Holocaust to September 11', in *Film and Television after 9/11*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon, (Southern Illinois University Press, 2004) p. 64.

[7] Isabelle Freda, 'Survivors in *The West Wing*: 9/11 and the United States of Emergency', in *Film and Television after 9/11*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon, (Southern Illinois University Press, 2004) p. 238.

never be able to view my city's skyline, on-screen or in person, the same way again.'[8] More than just having a physical impact on the famous New York skyline, however, the attacks of 9/11 brought about a cultural tabula rasa and an exceptionalism which Marita Sturken suggests defined the attitude towards the events of 9/11 and was evident in the very term used to describe New York, and more specifically Lower Manhattan, after the attacks: Ground Zero. For Sturken it is this term which ascribes to New York the position of a point of origin which all but erases the attack on the Pentagon and the crash of Flight 93 in Shanksville from the cultural memory of 9/11.[9] New York's cinematic quality, even in its moment of spectacular defeat, was important after the attacks in bringing a cultural coherency to an event which otherwise raised difficult questions about the vulnerability of the USA and its perception abroad.

There is no doubt that 9/11 has been packaged as the definitive historical event of the twenty-first century to date. Could it have become the generation defining moment that Tyler Durden dreams of in *Fight Club*? In the immediate aftermath of 9/11 the first responses came not from culture as such, but from philosophers and political thinkers trying to make sense of what had happened.[10] Don DeLillo, Slavoj Žižek, and Jean Baudrillard were among a host of contemporary thinkers who tried to explain what had happened.[11] Many of the observations made at that time, with the embers of the towers still smouldering, remain both influential and also remarkably perceptive. Much of the future work that would be produced

[8]Steven Jay Schneider, 'Architectural Nostalgia and the New York City Skyline on Film', in *Film and Television after 9/11*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon, (Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), p. 41.
[9] Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History*, (London: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 167.
[10] Of course in some ways these writers were producing culture, but certainly not the popular culture dealt with in the most part throughout this thesis.
[11] See DeLillo's article, *In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September* (2001), Žižek's book, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002), and Baudrillard's *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2002).

concerning the impact of 9/11, including this thesis, draws heavily upon these initial reactions as sites which help to indicate the full power of the event.

It is true, 9/11 *did* demand a new way of thinking and talking, not least of all because it seemed to trivialise the voices of those scholars who had declared experience and culture bankrupt at the end of the 21st century. This time experience had come back to bite, and it was a collision between the image and reality which became the focus of much of the early debate. Here Baudrillard renders clear the significance of the shift:

> In all these vicissitudes, what stays with us, above all else, is the sight of the images. This impact of the images, and their fascination, are necessarily what we retain, since images are, whether we like it or not, our primal scene. And at the same time as they have radicalized the world situation, the events in New York can also be said to have radicalized the relation of the image to reality. Whereas we were dealing before with an uninterrupted profusion of banal images and a seamless flow of sham events, the terrorist act in New York has resuscitated both images and events.[12]

And yet, with this statement in mind, it seems odd that so little about the actual make-up of the 'image' has been discussed in the theoretical literature surrounding the event.[13] Whilst much of the published criticism seems to be primarily concerned with *what* films are being made, and although this is admittedly in itself a very valid area of study and a necessary part of this thesis itself, the important question of, '*how* are films being made?' remains relatively untouched. This is where, rather than be merely descriptive about the landscape of post 9/11 film, this thesis attempts to

[12] Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, (New York: Verso, 2002), pp. 26-27.
[13] Even those film articles which seem to profess an interest in aesthetics post 9/11, such as Mathias Nilges's 'The Aesthetics of Destruction: Contemporary US Cinema and TV Culture', seem to fall short of really addressing this change in the nature of the image on display talked about here by Baudrillard.

emphasise the aesthetic and narrative consistencies evident in post 9/11 film and culture.[14]

The other pronouncement often associated with 9/11 is that it "looked like a movie". From the very beginning there was a connection between the images people saw on their screens that day, and the visions of disaster and apocalypse in Hollywood films. Director Robert Altman went as far as to accuse Hollywood of having taught the terrorists how America could be attacked, saying:

> "The movies set the pattern, and these people have copied the movies. Nobody would have thought to commit an atrocity like that unless they'd seen it in a movie. How dare we continue to show this kind of mass destruction in movies? I just believe we created this atmosphere and taught them how to do it."[15]

Perhaps this is one reason why Hollywood initially shied away from explicitly dealing with the issues of 9/11. Altman's reaction summed up an accusatory mood levelled at culture and in particular the Hollywood film industry immediately after 9/11, which suggested that perhaps the American people were not yet ready to deal with images that so resembled the footage of the attacks themselves. Altman's is a statement born out of sheer disbelief, rather than any real rationale: even though there is evidence to suggest that Al-Qaeda operatives had watched disaster movies prior to the 9/11 attacks, incidents of mass-slaughter on even larger scales have been committed throughout history and certainly precede the advent and popularisation of disaster in cinema. Nevertheless, the impact of 9/11 *on* the film industry was widespread. In this thesis I deal not just with those films explicitly connected with 9/11, but also the more recent rash of apocalyptic films which seem to tell us something about the nature of post 9/11 culture as a whole.

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[14] Stephen Prince's book *Firestorm* provides a very adequate groundwork for dealing with the question 'what films were produced post 9/11?' but is shy when it comes to placing these cultural products within any kind of theoretical framework.
[15] Robert Altman quoted in Stephen Prince's *Firestorm* (p.7).

Whilst the focus in the second half of this thesis will be solely on apocalyptic film and the developing trend of apocalyptic aesthetics post 9/11, the first half deals with culture in a much broader sense. The aim here is to lay the foundations for a discussion of apocalyptic cinema by examining the American reaction to 9/11, and, in particular, the building of a myth around the event itself. How can post 9/11 apocalyptic cinema be read in light of this myth? Not only is there a need to examine the way in which film has been changed by the landmark of 9/11, the way in which the memory of 9/11 itself has been changed and shaped by both film and the wider cultural forces employed in its aftermath should be studied. How has this apocalyptic culture itself been used to manipulate the way in which people respond to, and deal with, the 9/11 event, and what are the costs of this mentality moving forward?

Baudrillard suggests that 9/11 precipitated a repositioning between the 'image' and 'reality', but what exactly is meant here by the word 'image'? In the context of this thesis, image has two implications, the first being myth, and the second being cinema. This term myth seems to have an increasing usage in academic fields today, being used to talk about commonly held beliefs which are in fact untrue or at least unproven. French theorist Roland Barthes is probably at least partly responsible for this popularisation of the term in contemporary theory through his landmark work *Mythologies*, first published in 1957, in which he unpacks various signs, and reads them in mythological terms. In *Mythologies* Barthes proposes myth as 'a system of communication, […] a message.'[16] It is a '*second-order semiological*

[16] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 109.

system.'[17] As such, myth masquerades as reality but in doing so sheds its political nature. As Barthes explains elaborately:

> *myth is depoliticized speech*. […] Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. […] [I]t organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.[18]

Myth is depoliticised speech not because it does not have a political implication, or even sometimes motivation, but because it also extends outside the realm of simple politics. It represents a culmination of ideas and beliefs which act to simplify the idea it portrays and strip it of its very political power/nature.

At its most basic level, myth is story: 'After all, when asked to name myths, most of us think of *stories* about Greek or Roman gods and heroes. Yet myth can also be taken more broadly as a belief or credo'.[19] This is, generally speaking, the way in which structuralists have analysed myth. As the founder of structural anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'asserted that all mythology is dialectic in its attempt to make cognitive sense out of the chaotic data provided by nature, and that this attempt inevitably traps the human imagination in a web of dualism.'[20] Put simply, then, myth is a way of organising through narrative. This way of organising, however, does not simply categorise, but it also reduces (complex concepts to simple binary resolutions) and fictionalises (distorts factual information in order to fit with this more simplified world-view). Of course, this structuralist approach itself is prone to a reduction of the functions of myth. '[Stuart Hall] points out that just

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[17] Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 114.
[18] Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 143.
[19] Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 5.
[20] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture*, foreword by Wendy Doniger, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), foreword, p. viii.

because a message has been sent, this is no guarantee that it will arrive', and this might suggest, that we do not all read in a manner conducive to such myth building.[21] Nevertheless, the binary rhetoric of good versus evil, of terror versus freedom (in itself an extremely tricky formulation), or cowardice versus heroism, are all clearly evident in the cultural responses surrounding 9/11 and are no more explicitly articulated than in the media's response to the event.

Robert Segal makes the useful observation that,

> True, Claude Lévi-Strauss ventures beyond the story to the 'structure' of myth, but again the structure is conveyed by the story. Theories that read myth symbolically rather than literally still take the subject matter, or the meaning, to be the unfolding of a story.[22]

What is important here is that, in order to understand the structure of myth, one must still be a reader of stories. Lévi-Strauss' theoretical explications of myth suggest that we think in mythological terms at times in ways which we are unaware of. Yet, it does seem that, throughout this thesis, many of the myths relating to 9/11 have an air of complicity. They are, to an extent, a type of Freudian wish fulfilment. Take, for example, some of the ideas Susan Faludi advances in her piercing book *The Terror Dream*, which takes a polemical feminist approach to a highly detailed analysis of the myth making media circus that followed 9/11. With numerous anecdotal examples from newspaper articles, interviews, documentaries, talk-shows, and other largely media related sources, Faludi talks of how:

> What mattered was restoring the illusion of a mythic America where women needed men's protection and men succeeded in providing it. What mattered was vanquishing the myth's dark twin, the humiliating "terror-dream" that 9/11 had forced to the surface of the national consciousness.[23]

These types of myth are certainly those which one may unwittingly become complicit in, as they are myths which enable one to 'deal' with the tragedy of 9/11.

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[21] Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies, an Introduction*, (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 89.
[22] Robert A. Segal, p. 5.
[23] Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, p. 118.

And in many ways her analysis is a telling part of the myth which was being built subsequent to the attacks. But there is also a balance that this myth needed to strike. In some ways the plan *was* to promote "business as usual", a message that the public should not be terrified; that people should go back to work, and, as Faludi suggests, get married; revert to the kind of conservative ideals seen in the 1950s; be 'real' men or women, go to church and unite behind superhero leaders. After-all, Barthes says that, 'myth is [politically] on the right.'[24] But at the other end of the scale, the opposite message needed to be promoted; America is at war and could be attacked again at any moment; the alert level remains high and America must fight back against a terror that cannot fully be seen, in a war it can never truly win. These are just some of the confusing messages prevalent in political speeches, the media, and culture as a whole after 9/11. It is the aim of this thesis to examine the way in which cultural forms reacted to, and negotiated with, these contradictions, responding to a cultivated atmosphere of social fear.

In part two of this thesis the link between myth and image becomes more explicit when we examine the manifestation of the cultural mythology of 9/11 in the dark pessimism of post 9/11 apocalyptic cinema. An image is not merely a picture: it is an imagination, or a representation of something. There is a long history of distrust for the image which can be traced in writing at least as far back as Plato's musings on the nature of the image and reality in *The Republic*. But as modern technology and culture have progressed, the line between the image and reality has become increasingly blurred and difficult to define. With the advent of the moving image, and what would later become the thriving Hollywood cinematic machine at the turn of the twentieth century, the 'realistic' image, or imagination, became the

[24] Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 148.

goal of many would-be filmmakers. Even more recently, advancements in digital and computer aided technologies have lent the filmmaker the power not only to simulate reality but to go way beyond it, achieving spectacular effects far beyond the real.[25] But what happened on September 11 2001 was different, having the appearance of in fact being the reverse: reality impersonating film (the image).

When images as *realistic* and verisimilar as those that can be seen at the cinema precede the 'real' event, as was the case on 9/11, do people then begin to start believing that in fact life is some sort of disaster movie? Baudrillard certainly seems to suggest as much when he describes the event *as* a Manhattan disaster movie:

> And in this singular event, in this Manhattan disaster movie, the twentieth century's two elements of mass fascination are combined: the white magic of the cinema and the black magic of terrorism; the white light of the image and the black light of terrorism.[26]

The distinction between reality and image here has collapsed completely. For Baudrillard the attacks were not *like* a disaster movie, they *were* a disaster movie. And people responded accordingly, like those 343 firemen who died in their attempts to help evacuate the buildings, or those that flocked to the scene and queued to give blood when there were so few actually injured.[27]

There is a further question to be asked from Baudrillard's distinction of cinema as 'white magic'. Even if this was the case, surely 9/11 exposed cinema's 'black' imagination? Cinema is, in this simplistic duality, 'white magic' (wholly

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[25] I am thinking here particularly of the spectacular scenes of destruction witnessed in the big budget disaster movies of the last two decades.

[26] Jean Baudrillard, pp. 29-30.

[27] This figure is quoted in Susan Faludi's *The Terror Dream* (p. 74). Nearly all of the victims of 9/11 either died in the towers or were buried when the structures collapsed. Of the large number that were evacuated very few suffered from injuries that were not smoke related and would have needed blood. Although the fire service undoubtedly aided with the evacuation of those who were already injured inside the towers, they could in reality do little to prevent the inevitable tragedy which was to occur when the towers collapsed. Similarly, those who wanted to give blood were responding in the only way they knew how, in order to process the events they needed to feel that they could contribute physically in some way.

innocent) only in so far as terrorism is 'black magic' (wholly evil). And yet, just as the innocence of cinema can be questioned, as indeed it is by Altman, surely too there is a problem with the distinction of the terror act as 'evil'. Zygmunt Bauman provides us with a very useful explanation of the term 'evil' in his book *Liquid Fear*:

> The question 'what is evil?' is *un*answerable because what we tend to call 'evil' is precisely the kind of wrong which we can neither understand nor even clearly articulate, let alone explain its presence to our full satisfaction. We call that kind of wrong 'evil' for the very reason that it is unintelligible, ineffable, and inexplicable. 'Evil' is what defies and explodes intelligibility which makes the world liveable… We can tell what 'crime' is because we have a code of laws which criminal acts breach. We know what 'sin' is because we have a list of commandments whose breach makes the perpetrators sinners. We resort to the idea of 'evil' when we cannot point to what rule has been broken or bypassed for the occurrence of the act for which we seek a proper name.[28]

So is 'evil' borne merely out of our inability to understand, or comprehend, the motives for an act of 'wrong'? This certainly complicates the White House's distinction of the 9/11 acts as 'evil' and is in this respect an important part of the interrogation of the mythology built by the Bush administration around 9/11. In his address to the nation on the day of the attacks, which lasted less than four and a half minutes, then President, George W. Bush, used the word 'evil' no less than four times.[29] It is no wonder people decided that the event looked like a movie when even the president's address seemed to invoke the simplistic duality of good versus evil which is a staple of the Hollywood film industry. These were the beginnings of the myth of 9/11, and the building of a clear and comprehensive narrative for the US public.

The binary nature of the narrative of good versus evil that was appealed to, obscures the truth behind the myth of 9/11, and allows for other more crude

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[28] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), p. 54.

[29] A fuller discussion of the use of the term 'evil' after 9/11 will be presented in Part One of this thesis, and see also in particular Richard Bernstein's book *The Abuse of Evil: the Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11*, and Phil Fitzsimmons' article 'Little White Lies: 9/11 and the Recasting of Evil through Metaphor'. This idea is also alluded to in the opening chapter of *The Spirit of Terrorism*.

manipulations of public sentiment which will be explored in this thesis. Bauman talks of how, on both sides, religion has not been the source of the conflict but has instead been almost retrospectively fitted to the war on terror. So the US, and particularly Bush's, appeal to a crusade against terrorism, of good versus evil, is the Christian narrative being imposed on the War on Terror, just as fundamental Islam is made the scapegoat for the socio-economic and political problems from which terrorism arises: 'On our fast globalizing planet, the "religionization" of politics, of social grievances and battles of identity and recognition, seems to be a global tendency.'[30]

By packaging the acts of 'evil' perpetrated on 9/11 as the acts of religious fanatics, the American government and media were simplifying the motives of the terrorists. That religious fanaticism is a result of socio-economic and political turmoil in the Middle East is overlooked in favour of a more convenient narrative of inexplicable 'evil' which serves to close off discourse. The targets chosen by the terrorists were *not* Christian icons; they were symbols of American wealth, military power, and globalisation. The 'religionization' of politics, as described by Bauman, is both emotive and distracting from the real issues which not only precipitated 9/11, but are even now fuelling the conflicts in what has become an increasingly unstable region of the world. Not only this, the duality afforded to the conflicts which have taken place since 9/11 mean that they are only rendered comprehensible in these very filmic terms of good versus evil. As will be explored later in this thesis, the USA's reaction to the Abu Ghraib photographs was damning in that it showed the narrative for what it truly is, nothing more than a culturally perpetuated myth.

[30] Zygmunt Bauman, p. 114.

In the first half of this thesis the cultural myth of 9/11 is examined, and this feeds into an analysis of the image of 9/11 projected, the filmic image of destruction and apocalypse which becomes the essential manifestation of the 9/11 myth in the second and concluding parts of the thesis. In essence, this examines how both narrative and aesthetics have changed after 9/11 and what is the agency behind these changes. What is the purpose of the myth of 9/11 and how has it been controlled? What are its functions on both the political and psychological stage and how has that affected US cultural production? Finally, and certainly the most difficult question of all, what are the long term implications of this: how has 9/11 changed the cultural imagination of the future? As the observations of *Fight Club*'s ending testify, 9/11 *has* altered the perception of past movies. It has also certainly had a very real impact on present day cultural production, the critical acclaim of films like *The Hurt Locker* (2009) proving that the post 9/11 conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan can provide good subject material for filmmakers. But what I am most interested in is how 9/11 has changed the cultural view of the future.

The real difficulty in writing about 9/11 is in its assimilation, the difficulty of 'coming to terms with'. By this I do not mean simply coming to terms with the event as a moment of trauma, a 'traumatic event', or coming to terms with loss in general, in fact if anything I mean the opposite.[31] When trying to understand the enormity of an event like 9/11 it is coming to terms with a presence rather than an absence that is the challenge; the proliferation of material surroundings, and the fact that, after a time, everything begins to look shaped by it. When confronted with such a sea of

[31] Certainly 9/11 sparked a substantial reinvestment in trauma studies, but 'trauma' itself seems an inadequate concept through which to describe the wider significance of the 9/11 moment. Whilst the damage inflicted on those living, or with relatives, in New York would have constituted trauma, this does not seem to explain the designation of the event as "world changing". An understanding of policy, and perhaps even 'wish fulfilment', needs to be employed in order to begin to understand this process of mythologisation.

individual and collective responses, attempting to provide some structure, some meaning, a narrative, is difficult to justify. And yet, there *is* a popular narrative which lies at the heart of the event, the sense of a myth that has been built around the global signifier: "9/11". It is a narrative punctuated with deviations and tangential additions, a winding path, but a path nonetheless. What is the destination of that path, where does it lead? This is difficult to say with any real certainty, but in a world of fiction, in the narrative that is being built, there are signs that point to an end: sometimes a very literal 'end'.

This thesis began some time ago when, during the course of my reading, I came upon this fragment of an idea in Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future*: 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.'[32] It was this that sparked my interest in apocalyptic cinema as a site (or sight!) for the exploration of how culture courts disaster. But more than this, it begs a diachronic examination of how the apocalypse movie adapts and changes in accordance with cultural history. Through my watching of these films several patterns began to emerge which can be traced to historical social conditions around the time of the new millennium and of September 11. These trends and patterns are explained in detail in the second half of this thesis and are the origin of my interest in September 11 as a moment of cultural change. There is something more at work than simply 9/11 as a historical schism, as I will demonstrate in the first part of this thesis with an examination of 9/11 texts which allow a glimpse at the wider social conditions which

[32] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, (London: Verso, 2005), p. 199. This actual quotation is often attributed to Slavoj Žižek, but never seemingly referenced. Peter Paik, is an example of this, giving the same quotation and citing Žižek but without actually giving a reference - Peter Y. Paik, *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 123. For the purposes of this work I will use this Jameson reference, since it can be properly cited, but wish to acknowledge that the origin of the thought is probably Žižek.

enforced a shift in the type of apocalyptic culture in production during the last decade.

During this thesis I engage in a form of textual analysis which primarily focuses on literature and film but is essentially eclectic, including some media sources such as journalism, photography, and documentary, as well as some architectural analysis.[33] This eclecticism is anchored by a methodological approach akin to that of Cultural Studies which, importantly, provides a way of reading, 'cultural products, social practices, even institutions, as "texts."'[34] Cultural Studies opens up the space for a study such as this, allowing the critic to make intertextual links which can help to establish a more inclusive analysis of a cultural myth as a whole. The close relationship between Cultural Studies and Structuralism, which can be observed at work in Barthes' *Mythologies*, is also in evidence in this thesis. Perhaps the most overt example of this is the later use of genre theory which underpins Part Two. Whilst I wish to shy away from the pitfalls of Structuralism by avoiding reductionist and facile conclusions about the nature of post 9/11 culture, some such methods are required in order to impose a semblance of order on such a proliferation of texts. Essentially, this type of analysis is necessary because 9/11 infiltrated culture in such a permeating way, as to be inflected in all manner of cultural artefacts, and although the second half of the thesis deals exclusively with apocalyptic cinema, this would not be possible as such a detailed analysis without a wider understanding of the cultural myth that was in construction subsequent to 9/11.

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[33] I use the term 'media' throughout this thesis to describe primarily those sources with are journalistic in nature. Whilst there is clearly some overlap when it comes to literature and film as types of media, for the purposes of this thesis it seems more prudent to separate the two. Certainly, after 9/11, there was at times little difference between the ways in which the event was portrayed by *the* media and the way in which it was perceived in culture at large. Yet, as will be made much clearer by my analysis of the image of the 'Falling Man' in chapter one, the differences between the way in which the event was censored and sanitised on news networks, in newspapers and magazines, bares a stark dissimilarity when compared to such cultural output as Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*.

[34] Graeme Turner, p. 87.

The works examined in this thesis epitomise the response to 9/11 in popular culture, and the intertextuality in evidence here merely replicates the way in which the myth of 9/11 has saturated all forms of cultural imagination.[35] As Graeme Turner explains, '[t[he term *inter-textuality* forces analysis to move continually between the text and the social conditions that frame its consumption, and limits textual interpretations to specific historical locations.'[36] Its use-value, then, is in the frame of reference offered by 'specific historical locations' such as the post 9/11. Whilst such a method may 'limit' textual interpretations, it also opens up new possibilities for structures built by the inter-linking of texts with other texts and also their wider contexts.

Although in this thesis I deploy numerous textual examples, not all of these can be dealt with, or should be dealt with, in equal detail. It is for this reason that I also employ a case study type approach to some texts in order to provide the more complex readings and analysis required to understand the workings of the cultural myths being tackled in this thesis, and the conclusions which come from my reading of apocalyptic films. To an extent, this thesis is written back-to-front since it is my reading of apocalyptic filmic texts in the second half which instigated my examination of cultural change after 9/11. This does mean that the thesis is more heavily weighted towards direct textual analysis in its second half. However, in order to provide a more linear framework to my argument, it made sense to first examine the impact of 9/11 on culture and move forward to show how this has had an impact on culture's outlook towards the future in an analysis of apocalyptic cinema post 9/11.

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[35] A further explanation of my use of 'popular' culture and how Cultural Studies allows me to explore a more political angle can be found at the beginning of Chapter Two of the thesis.
[36] Graeme Turner, p. 125.

That it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism seems undeniable in the light of culture's preoccupation with apocalypse post 9/11. My subsequent question is simply: why? Why is it that, an event which threatened global change has seemingly offered us a reinforcement of that self same structure which provoked the strikes on the Twin Towers in the first place: capitalism? Why is it that, when change threatened, so many chose to stop believing in it altogether? It is interesting that President Barack Obama's successful 2008 Presidential Campaign was fought on the back of this very slogan: "Change we can believe in." But it seems hollow to pronounce 9/11 the moment when "everything changed" simply because most people got up, brushed themselves off, and went back to work. In President Bush's statement to the American public he was also careful to emphasise that it would be business as usual: "Our financial institutions remain strong and the American economy will be open for business as well."[37] The attacks were couched not as attacks on US ideology, on capitalism, or on globalisation, but as attacks on "freedom." This was the beginning of the careful and systematic attempt to reinforce the status-quo that had been threatened by 9/11, an agenda not simply supported by government policy and rhetoric but, in large part too, by culture and the media.[38]

I wish to take Jameson's statement a little further and talk about the price that must be paid for this inability to imagine a future without capitalism, and suggest that it has further implications with regards to the virtual disappearance of utopianism in contemporary culture. Of course, there is a slight contradiction in this statement that,

[37] CNN, 'Text of Bush's address', http://articles.cnn.com/2001-09-11/us/bush.speech.text_1_attacks-deadly-terrorist-acts-despicable-acts?_s=PM:US [accessed 06/02/2010].
[38] The speed with which Americans were advised to return to work after the attacks has also come under scrutiny in the light of the thousands of people who have since developed severe illnesses which doctors believe are related to the World Trade Center dust.

'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.'[39] Clearly, to imagine the end of the world *is*, at the same time, also to imagine the end of capitalism. It is, instead, preferable to think of the concepts of apocalypse and utopia as two, quite radically different (although admittedly not mutually exclusive), ways of looking beyond capitalism. One is popular today, and the other is not. And so there are two things to consider here: not just; what is the cost of the absence of utopia, but also, what is the cost of our obsession with apocalyptic culture?

Because it is perhaps easier to talk about a presence rather than an absence, and because this is a thesis about the impact of *popular* culture (pop culture being far more measurable in terms of its contemporary global significance than high culture), the work here will explore the role that the apocalypse plays, not only in helping shape ideas about the future, but also in helping to understand the role that recent history has played in shaping ideas about the present. Nevertheless, this discussion of apocalypse implicitly raises questions about the absence of utopianism in post 9/11 society. Thoughts of utopia are, therefore, never far removed from the issues of apocalypse which are more extensively dealt with in this thesis, and are certainly likely to be the site of productive future studies. It is the primary objective of this work to ask the important questions: what has been the impact of 9/11 on contemporary culture? How has it promoted certain ideological discourses? What are the affects of such discourses? And how do they help or hinder the imaginations of the future?

In contemporary culture, as in politics, looking to the future does not seem to be in vogue. By this I do not mean that science-fictive modes are unpopular, but rather that science-fiction itself is too frequently used as a mode to examine the

[39] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, p. 199.

present, rather than to offer a framework for the future. As Veronica Hollinger writes,

> These days science fiction is everywhere, as a discourse of choice through which to describe a present which perceives itself as both technological and apocalyptic. In fact, this is a present which perceives itself *as already existing in the future*. The implication here is that, when faced with the immediacy of millennial/apocalyptic events, science fiction's future orientation becomes blocked and science fiction becomes a *present*-tense kind of literature.[40]

Whilst written before the tragedy of September 11, Hollinger's words seem truer now than ever before. Films about apocalypse have seen a resurgence over recent years,[41] but it is not as simple a case, as Mathias Nilges seems to suggest, to equate these types of films with moments of cultural crisis.[42] How would this explain the proliferation of apocalyptic films which coincided with the turn of the millennium? These were not films with doom laden messages, in fact they were rather the opposite, and were far more in-keeping with a moment of cultural optimism about the future echoed by scholars like Francis Fukuyama. What we must do is separate these films not just by genre, although an understanding of genre is also crucial in establishing the trends which occur and will be dealt with in the third chapter, but by explicit content. As this thesis will demonstrate, there is much to be gained by examining these films individually, rather than merely as products of the apocalyptic film genre.

Fukuyama's very positive ideas about the evolution of society, and gravitation towards capitalist liberal democracy, put forward in his early 90s work, *The End of History and the Last Man*, are now accused of reflecting a sense of innocence and

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[40] Veronica Hollinger, 'Future/Present: The End of Science Fiction', in *Imagining Apocalypse: Studies in Cultural Crisis*, ed. David Seed, (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press LTD., 2000), pp. 217-218.
[41] To name just a few: *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *War of the Worlds* (2005), *I Am Legend* (2007), *Sunshine*, (2007), *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, (2008), *The Road*, (2009), *The Book of Eli*, (2010), *Legion*, (2010).
[42] Mathias Nilges does just this in his chapter 'The Aesthetics of Destruction: Contemporary US Cinema and TV Culture', in *Reframing 9/11* (p. 23).

perhaps naivety in academic circles.[43] However, as Mark Fisher points out, 'Fukuyama's thesis that history has climaxed with liberal capitalism may have been widely derided, but it is accepted, even assumed, at the level of the cultural unconscious.'[44] Fukuyama's controversial argument essentially asks the question as to whether or not there is an end point to a universal history of man, gravitating towards a particular political system which is most suited to human society. In it, he suggests that the explosive growth of capitalist liberal democracy is an indicator that perhaps this universal history is nearing an end, and that liberal democracy is closer to a universal political topos than any preceding type of governance. As Fisher suggests, this is a thesis which, whilst ridiculed, has seemingly been naturalised in popular culture.

There are two opposing views of history: the first, an oft used expression, is that history repeats itself. In other words it is cyclical, with one tragedy being replaced by another. In this instance history is made redundant as it appears that humanity does not learn from the past, but merely repeats the mistakes of its predecessors. In contrast, a view held first by Hegel and later by Fukuyama, history can be interpreted as progressional and therefore implicitly also didactic. The problem with such a view, whilst it has merit in the use of explaining a gradual migration of political practice towards capitalist liberal democracy throughout the globe, is that it appears weak in the face of events such as 9/11. Indeed it must be questioned as to whether or not Fukuyama's optimism is tenable in a post 9/11 environment.[45] Are the events of 9/11 and the more recent global financial crisis just

[43] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, (London: Penguin Books, 1992).
[44] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: is there no Alternative?*, (Winchester, O Books, 2009), p. 6.
[45] Naomi Klein, in her book *The Shock Doctrine*, shows the disparity between Fukuyama's ideas and the grim economic reality of what capitalism was bringing to these fledgling and hastily constructed democracies: 'It was true, as Fukuyama noted, that there was an emerging and irrepressible consensus that all people have the right to govern themselves democratically, but only in the State Department's

history repeating itself or, if not, how do we reconcile the idea of historical progression with these very same events? Certainly the anti-capitalist rhetoric of *Fight Club* suggests that it is the capitalist system itself which has put a halt to progression altogether, perpetuating a cycle of boom and bust, creation and destruction. But *Fight Club*'s angst towards capitalism is unusual in popular culture, and even this text was written prior to 9/11. Perhaps in the face of these kinds of events, which place the idea of historical progression under scrutiny in terms of any kind of 'moral' progression, we should instead use the term 'directional history'. This is a term Fukuyama himself posits in defence of the idea of a 'Universal History':

> Let us consider at the outset only the question of directionality, leaving aside for the moment the question of whether that directionality implies progress in terms of either morality or human happiness. Do all or most societies evolve in a certain uniform direction, or do their histories follow either a cyclical or simply random path? If the latter, then it is possible that mankind can simply repeat any social or political practice of the past: slavery may recur, Europeans may crown themselves princes and emperors, and American women can lose the right to vote.[46]

It seems entirely plausible that history is directional and that political systems will naturally evolve, refining themselves as they go. This idea does not require the moral evolution of humankind to accompany it necessarily, although it would seem that a true utopia is impossible without this. The idea of humankind's inherent moral ambiguity has been an argument against the true utopia since at least Thomas More's *Utopia*, in the 1500s:

> […] if you cannot turn something to good at least make it as little bad as you can. For everything will not be done well until all men are good, and I do not expect to see that for quite a few years yet.[47]

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most vivid fantasies was that desire for democracy accompanied by citizens' clamoring for an economic system that would strip away job protections and cause mass layoffs.' (p. 183).

[46] Francis Fukuyama, p. 71.

[47] Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Clarence H. Miller, (Yale University Press, 2001), p. 44.

This argument, in itself, mirrors the view that capitalism is not the perfect system; it cannot and will not be as long as humankind remains imperfect. Whether or not we currently have the imagination to envisage a future utopia, the dream of a better society has been the driving force of human development throughout the ages, and it is difficult to see how the historical 'progress' already discussed can be made without it. This is why it *does* matter that contemporary cultural productions are filled with pessimism towards the future. There is a fundamental difference here between the dystopias popularised in science-fiction film particularly in the 1980s and 1990s with films like *Blade Runner* (1982), *The Terminator* (1984), *1984* (1984), *Twelve Monkeys* (1995), *Dark City* (1998), culminating in *The Matrix* (1999), and the outright cynical apocalyptism which has predominated since 9/11. The function of the dystopia, or more specifically as Layman Tower Sargent defines them in his essay "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited" the 'critical dystopia', is to offer a dark vision of the future which is recognised as a warning and is as such avoidable if today a different path is followed.[48] As Rafaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan describe in their introduction to *Dark Horizons, Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*,

> we read critical dystopias as texts that maintain a utopian impulse. Traditionally a bleak, depressing genre with little space for hope within the story, dystopias maintain hope *outside* their pages, if at all; for it is only if we consider dystopia as a warning that we as readers can hope to escape its pessimistic future.[49]

For Moylan and Baccolini the critical dystopias which became popular in the run up to the new Millennium at least left space for hope and so were in some ways a form of utopian text. What this thesis focuses on is a far more worrying genre in the

[48] Lyman Tower Sargent, 'The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited', in *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 5, #1, (Penn State University Press, 1994), pp. 1-37.
[49] Rafaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, 'Introduction: Dystopia and Histories', in *Dark Horizons*, ed. Baccolini & Moylan, (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 7.

apocalyptic: films which do not offer a warning of dystopia but rather tell the spectator that the end is already here.

The recent global financial meltdown, despite not being the focus of this thesis, offers an alternative backdrop against which to set this discussion of the impact of 9/11 on the apocalyptic mentality of cultural productions. Although without the symbolic impact of the September 11 attacks, the financial meltdown is an event which, in years to come, may have a more significant bearing on the direction of society. It has certainly not reversed the apocalyptic sentiment that runs through US culture at large and if anything has surely deepened that sense of impending catastrophe. Returning to *Fight Club*, its finale has been reconfigured in a further way with the concern for world debt having been replaced by fears about personal debt and the stability of the global economy.[50] Far from the catalyst it could have been, the panic has been turned in on itself and now stands as a symbol of capitalism's resilience. This in itself is a worrying blow to those philosophers who may have hoped that an economic slump would be the only way in which we could begin to think beyond capitalism:

> in late Spring 2009 it was successfully "renormalized" – the panic blew over, the situation was proclaimed as "getting better," or at least the damage as having been controlled (the price paid for this "recovery" in the Third World countries was, of course, rarely mentioned) – thereby constituting an ominous warning that the true message of the crisis had been ignored, and that we could relax once again and continue our long march towards the apocalypse.[51]

What was this true message that Slavoj Žižek refers to here? Whether or not it is believable, capitalism, in conjunction with its counterpart, liberal democracy, touts itself as a kind of utopia. The concept of the constant growth economy promises

[50] Tyler Durden's aim to 'erase the world debt record' seems to strike a utopian counterpoint to our current obsession with personal debt and the budget deficits being run in the powerhouse economies of the West. Both 9/11 and the global financial crisis seem to have largely wiped the idea of eradicating so-called 'third world' debt off the political map.
[51] Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, then as Farce*, (New York: Verso, 2009), p. 93.

eventual abundance but if anything has been proven by the economic crisis it has been that this idea, which lies at the heart of the capitalist utopia, is a fallacy. Whilst 9/11 was evidence of the ideological failings of capitalist liberal democracy, the economic crisis is surely further evidence of its fundamental un-sustainability:

> it thus seems that Fukuyama's utopia of the 1990s had to die twice, since the collapse of the liberal-democratic political utopia on 9/11 did not affect the economic utopia of global market capitalism; if the 2008 financial meltdown has a historical meaning then, it is as a sign of the end of the economic face of Fukuyama's dream.[52]

It would be rather naïve of me to claim that 9/11 has caused the death of utopia and, with it, the death of historical progression. As has already been discussed, apocalyptic cinema has seen a number of boom periods, including that period leading up to the attacks themselves.[53] But on 9/11/2001 a fundamental and decisive shift occurred in the nature of these films which I believe is indicative of a change in cultural mentality towards utopia and the imagination of the future. It is the aim of this thesis to demonstrate both what that change was, and how it occurred. Whilst for Žižek the twin events of 9/11 and the financial crisis represent the end of the capitalist utopia, the separation between philosophy and societal realities remain as stark as ever. Yes, 9/11 was a historical schism, but it was not a force for progressive change, rather it was used in a conservative manner to reinforce the same institutions that had come under attack that day.

The notion of 9/11 as a point of historical departure, a point at which "everything changed", brings me to another oft-used saying: people are *afraid* of change. If the US reaction to 9/11 is evidence of anything, it is surely evidence of this. The powerful conservative forces which promoted a regression of civil liberties

[52] Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, then as Farce*, p. 5.
[53] Two boom periods in particular that are not dealt with in this thesis for limitations of space are the 1950s and the 1970s. For an analysis of apocalypse film in these years see Stephen Keane's excellent short book *Disaster Movies: the Cinema of Catastrophe* (2001).

in the name of protecting the American homeland certainly fed off this. The retaliatory attacks by the US and their interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were in the name of protecting the American "way of life". No-one in power took the time to consider seriously why it was that the American way of life needed protecting, why it had come under attack in the first place. Is culture too not participating in this same message? When we think of destruction as the only method towards social change is this not an abdication of the responsibility to fight *for* change? The conflicting messages served only to add to the culture of fear which would become the feature of America's response to 9/11, as Zygmunt Bauman puts it: '"Fear" is the name we give to our *uncertainty*: to our *ignorance* of the threat and of what is to be *done*'.[54] And yes, this does sound remarkably similar to our earlier designation of what is 'evil' since,

> Evil and fear are Siamese twins. You can't meet one without meeting the other. Or perhaps they are but two names of one experience – one of the names referring to what you see or what you hear, the other to what you feel; one pointing 'out there', to the world, the other to the 'in here', to yourself. What we fear, is evil; what is evil, we fear.[55]

So it is, that when President Bush spoke of evil after the 9/11 attacks, he was also speaking about the era of fear which would be ushered in by them. And, whilst I give credence to Faludi's line that the myth of 9/11 was about restoring a bruised national ego and the somewhat tarnished notion of American impregnability, the fact that the moment has been recalled, re-evoked, and re-imagined so many times, not left to rest as merely a dark moment in the history of America, suggests that there is perhaps more at stake too. Politically at least, 9/11 has been the gift that keeps on giving, and this in itself has little to do with it as a myth of American valour.

[54] Zygmunt Bauman, p. 2.
[55] Zygmunt Bauman, p. 54.

Perhaps the myth of American valour on 9/11 served another, more sinister, purpose than that suggested by Faludi. Perhaps it was a way of repackaging 9/11 so that it could be used, and re-used again, to fit in line with a war that has no end: the War on Terror. Perhaps it was necessary to replace images of those decimated bodies of jumpers with images of heroic firemen, still standing amongst the wreckage, so that 9/11 could be safely consumed.[56] There is no doubt that there are some tragedies in recent history that disturb memory. However important it may seem to remember the terrible events of the Holocaust so that they cannot be repeated, it is a moment in history so dark that it is difficult to assimilate. Then there is the Vietnam War, for Americans, a war best left buried. But 9/11 is different, and not just because of the clearly much lower casualty figures. 9/11 is the tragedy *to* remember, something facilitated even by the numbers themselves. Why? Because as Baudrillard told us in the aftermath, 9/11 has 'resuscitated […] events'.[57] And with this resuscitation has come both a commodification and also a culturalisation of catastrophic and life defining events themselves. 9/11 cannot be forgotten because it has been so allowed to infiltrate culture. It has, in effect, become the cultural representation of catastrophe and, with that, also the representation of the future.

II

This thesis takes the form of two parts, each of which contains two major chapters which are in turn divided into a number of sub-sections and punctuated by a mixture

[56] The issue of the censorship of those seen jumping from the towers that day is dealt with in detail during the first chapter of this thesis.
[57] Jean Baudrillard, p. 27.

of theory, critique, and case study. The first part of this thesis, **Part One: 9/11 and the Death of the Capitalist Utopia**, focuses on how 9/11 has been memorialised, mythologised, and mobilised by contemporary culture. It examines a range of eclectic cultural materials from literature, film, and architecture, to 9/11 in the media. This material stretches up to the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. In what David Simpson describes as *The Culture of Commemoration*, anniversaries have become an important symbol of national grief.[58] These are materials that are both born of the 9/11 myth and help to establish it. The section explains, through a fusion of culture and political thought, how the War on Terror became the inevitable continuation of the binary rhetoric of good and evil perpetuated since 9/11.

Chapter One, entitled 'Falling Man', begins with a discussion of the complex relationship between art and 9/11, and an examination of the impact of images of those who jumped to their deaths from the towers. The discrepancy between media coverage of these men and women, or the lack of it, and their appearance in a number of artistic texts, most notably Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, lies at the heart of a study of the censorship that occurred after 9/11.[59] Here a classic example of the 'official' narrative of 9/11 being challenged within a cultural forum can be seen. I will also examine the extent to which, after 9/11, popular culture tended to support the party line of those in government. This chapter also looks at Hollywood's overt response to 9/11 in the films *World Trade Center* and *United 93*.[60]

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[58] David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2006).
[59] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, (New York: Scribner, 2007)., Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, (London: Penguin Books, 2006).
[60] *World Trade Center*. Oliver Stone. USA. Paramount Pictures. 2006., *United 93*. Paul Greengrass. France/UK/USA. Universal Pictures. 2006.

From literature and film I move towards a reading of the 9/11 memorial site which has only recently opened in lower Manhattan, in **Chapter Two**: 'Reflecting Absence'. The powerful symbolism promoted by the site is interrogated, asking to what extent it falls within the preferred narrative of the 9/11 attacks. The memorial is used as a case study around which to build a picture of this preferred narrative and examine its profusion throughout the media and through official channels.[61] The purpose of this chapter is to establish the grounds upon which a regressive rhetoric was produced after 9/11 which aimed at promoting a return to conservative values within the US, and set-up a binary distinction between good and evil, us and them, which would later be used to fuel support for a more aggressive stance towards foreign policy. It is a response to these elements which, I believe, is represented in the wave of apocalyptic films which followed and which are the subject of the second part of this thesis.

In **Part Two: The Earth Burns Again: the Culture of Apocalypse in Contemporary Cinema**, I examine the specific case of apocalyptic narratives post 9/11. This chapter discusses the changes that occurred in the cinematic apocalyptic narrative and aesthetic in the wake of the September 11 attacks. This is achieved largely through comparison pieces between late 90s apocalyptic films and those released after 9/11. It develops much of the theory put forward in the first chapter, showing how this can be applied not just to texts linked directly to 9/11, but also to texts about the future. It is these depictions of our future, or lack of it, that is my primary concern.

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[61] 'The Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer has suggested that the construction of preferred narratives is a common response to events that are overwhelmingly horrible and that pose challenges to existing belief systems. […] Of course, preferred narratives may also serve to distort or censor historical realities, especially if they become substitutes for more troubling issues.' - Stephen Prince, *Firestorm* (p. 130). This idea of censorship in preferred narratives seems to resonate particularly with the complicit erasure of the 'jumpers' from the 9/11 narrative.

Chapter Three: 'The Abuse of Apocalypse', begins with a necessary examination of the nature of genre, and in particular the apocalyptic narrative's place as a sub-genre within the broader framework of the disaster movie. Through a case study comparing the 1990s monster stomping Manhattan movie *Godzilla* to Matt Reeves' 2008 horror hit *Cloverfield*, I start the process of examining changes in both themes, issues, and also aesthetics that occur between what I establish as two distinct 'waves' of apocalypse narratives. I then move on to discuss a fascination with the 'post'-apocalyptic narrative after 9/11, the very idea of 'postness', and its significance to the debate I have set forth regarding cultural visions of the future. Again this is framed by a comparison between 90s apocalyptic film and film post 9/11. Here I address the lone survivor narrative and further discuss the aesthetic differences between the two waves and the ways in which these films use the sublime.

Chapter Four: 'You've Gotta Have Faith: Issues of Religion and Faith in Post 9/11 Apocalyptic Cinema', continues by examining the developing theme of religion within these post 9/11 apocalypse movies and how the change in attitude towards religion in culture post 9/11 is reflected in these films. Whereas the first part of the thesis provides a broader and more theoretical examination of post 9/11 culture, this second part is far more focused on textual analysis, using the theory already discussed to inform a deeper and more specific discussion of the ways in which this movie sub-genre is indicative of the wider issues at stake.

The conclusion of this thesis brings it up to date with a discussion of the new economic apocalypse which is evident in both the text and filmic versions of *Cosmopolis.* It places these ideas concerning an apocalyptic cultural mentality within the contemporary framework of the global financial meltdown, as well as

summarises and returns to the main themes of this thesis, namely ideas about our ability to imagine the future, and the end of ideas of progress in cultural forms.

PART I

9/11 and Cultural Representations of the Death of the Capitalist Utopia

Chapter 1: *Falling Man*

From early on, plans for the reconstituted World Trade Center included an art gallery to display some of the work produced in response to the attacks of 9/11, but this idea was eventually dropped after disputes over which pieces of art could be deemed appropriate.[62] This is symptomatic of the cautious approach taken after the attacks in wide cultural forums which demanded time for people to mourn and a call for American unity in the face of a global common enemy. Despite the subsequent sensitivity of the US public, it did not take long before artistic responses began to trickle out into culture and although Hollywood did not tackle the event fully until the release of both *United 93*, directed by Paul Greengrass, and Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* some five years later a whole host of films, novels, and other artworks based around, or informed by, the events of that day have seen circulation.[63] Many of these early responses were individualistic expressions and therefore could hardly be controlled, but there was still a sense that culture and the media at large should maintain both a considered distance from the brutality of the attacks, and also promote positive messages of American valour, strength, and unity. But individual responses are important reminders that these were people and lives that were destroyed, not just buildings and the pride of a nation. Unlike the media coverage, which hypnotised those watching with a loop of film showing a plane striking a tower and smoke pouring from its open wound, the photographs, paintings, sculptures, and novels produced often tell of the human loss, providing a bridge between those who truly experienced the event, and those who merely witnessed it on the news.

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[62] Stephen Prince, p. 123.
[63] This aside from Spike Lee's 2002 drama, *25th Hour*, which is set in the immediate aftermath and opens with images of the temporary memorial at the site of the WTC.

It is 9/11's appeal to the spectacular which makes Hollywood's treatment of it so interesting and indeed unusual. A quick comparison between the 9/11 attacks and the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center demonstrates the symbolic impact of the former. Of course any comparison between the two attacks is rendered somewhat superficial by the sheer differential in the death counts, 2,996 compared to just 6 in 1993, but nevertheless it is strange that much of the rhetoric surrounding 9/11 seems to suggest that this was the first major attack by a foreign power on American soil since Pearl Harbour. Had Ramzi Yousef's plan succeeded in 1993, the one WTC tower would have collapsed into the other, causing death and destruction on a similar if not larger scale than 9/11. September 11th was significant as the first large-scale and *successful* terrorist attack within America by foreign nationals but, more than that, it was the spectacular visual effect which seemed to augment the potency of the event.

In Stone's *World Trade Center* film the attack itself lasts only seconds.[64] This is, of course, an attempt at 'realism' and an acknowledgement that those in the towers, and many watching, would have been so shocked by what they were seeing that barely any of them would have been able to comprehend what was taking place. Whilst the outside world sat and watched on television monitors, able *only* to witness the spectacular imagery on show, those that were there would have almost certainly seen the planes as ghosts; here one minute and gone the next.[65] That *World Trade Center* chooses not to linger, fetishistically, upon the moment of impact is not in keeping with Hollywood's near universal appeal to spectacular aesthetics. But then,

[64] *World Trade Center*. Oliver Stone. USA. Paramount Pictures. 2006.
[65] The term 'ghost' here refers to the quality of the image of the planes themselves, objects which travelled in and out of the picture so fast as to almost lose their own reality. To all intents and purposes they challenged the spectator's understanding of what they were seeing. Did I really just see that? And yet the image of the planes lingers long after their disappearance like a spectral reminder of the unreality of the event itself.

in the minds of the American public, 9/11 was an event unlike any other.[66] The film deals with this particularly well by subverting our expectations: it would be a fairly typical reaction for an audience to expect a big Hollywood film covering 9/11 to be both action-packed and also to focus on the attack itself. Instead what *World Trade Center* delivers is a rather sombre drama about the rescue of two emergency service workers trapped beneath the collapsing buildings.

As James Kendrick suggests, '*United 93* [the other major Hollywood production to focus on the events of 9/11] and *World Trade Center* are not about the attacks of 9/11 so much as how to overcome them.'[67] The attack is the trigger but the twin towers themselves become the true villains of that day and the focal point of the film, as they gradually crumble, burying those inside. For almost the entire length of the film two NYC policemen (played by Nicolas Cage and Michael Peña) attempt to keep each other conscious and alive by talking to each other, miraculously surviving numerous building quakes as more rubble and dust continues to pour down on them. The buildings played a pivotal role in the events. The sense of horrific verticality and scale exhibited by the buildings themselves is something that makes the visual impact of 9/11 unlikely to be replicated again, simply because the WTC towers were among the tallest in the world. Taking into account the history of the towers, what they stood for in the New York skyline and in the history of the development of the city, the previous failed attempt to bring the towers down, and even the towers' own history as monuments of spectacular disaster in Hollywood

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[66] Stephen Prince points out (*Firestorm*, p. 100) Oliver Stone's left wing persona prior to *World Trade Center* which led to many questioning his appropriateness as director for the film. Prince goes on to indicate that the negative criticism Stone received following some of his comments about the 9/11 attacks led him to take a different approach towards the film which emphasised heroism over any kind of political statement. This is more evidence of the pressure placed on Hollywood productions not to upset the apple cart with productions featuring 9/11, regarded as 'box office poison' (p. 122).

[67] James Kendrick, 'Representing 9/11 on Film and Television', in *Why We Fought: America's Wars in Film and History*, ed. Peter C. Rollins and John E. Connor, (University Press of Kentucky, 2008), p. 521.

film, this particular terrorist attack condensed a kind of global grand narrative and was lent a legitimacy beyond merely the destruction of the thing itself.

It is, therefore, appropriate that Oliver Stone's towers in *World Trade Center* take on a very sinister aesthetic from the outset as the audience is presented with a number of low angle shots looking up at the Trade Center from ground level.[68] Furthermore, as a group of policemen approach the buildings they stare in horror as a suited man falls from the top of one of the towers.[69] It is at this point that the monstrous dimensions of the building become comprehensible as put into perspective by the tiny figure plummeting down its sheer face. The buildings themselves become the site of terror as their construction is dwarfing, creating a sense of powerlessness. Once the heroes of the film have become trapped under the rubble, in a dark and grey claustrophobic set, the towers have completed their transformation into symbolic prisons.

World Trade Center recalls the towers not as the nostalgic and romantic focal points of the NYC skyline, the all-seeing eyes of Manhattan which led to their

[68] Image 2 *World Trade Center* low angle shot.
[69] Image 3 *World Trade Center* "falling man".

appearance in hundreds of movies throughout the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, but rather as a site of terror more akin to their role in the 1976 version of *King Kong* or the sublime terror and wonderment induced by Philippe Petit's wire walk between them in 1974, revisited by James Marsh's powerful documentary *Man on Wire* (2008). Indeed Jean Baudrillard describes them as 'architectural monsters' in *The Spirit of Terrorism*.[70] Despite this, however, the towers were more noticeable in the aftermath of 9/11 for the opposite reason. They are ominously absent from many other productions which appeared shortly after: shots of the World Trade Center in *Zoolander, Serendipity, Spider-Man, Men in Black II* and *People I Know* were removed at the behest of Hollywood studios who thought that the shots 'would offend viewers or pull them out of the imaginary world of the story with a visual reminder of unpleasant reality.'[71] This conservative approach by the studios was hardly surprising considering the cauldron of public feeling and outrage which confronted those who seemed unsympathetic towards the victims. The very public nature of the medium of film means that big budget productions often attempt to avoid unnecessary stigma and controversy. Whilst smaller budget docu-productions like Michael Moore's infamous *Fahrenheit 9/11* could use this controversy as a powerful marketing tool to appeal to a niche audience of conspiracy theorists, for larger budget films which, in effect, had little comment to make on 9/11 itself, sought to erase an image which it was felt some members of the public might feel distasteful or an uncomfortable reminder of something which lurked just outside the bounds of the text.

Novels, on the other hand, have tended to court these limits of acceptability in ways that movies have found more difficult. Don DeLillo's 2007 novel, *Falling Man*, named after a fictional performance artist who traverses New York City

[70] Jean Baudrillard, p. 41.
[71] Stephen Prince, p. 79.

mimicking a man seen falling from the towers, follows the relationship of a family brought back together by the tragic events of 9/11 and the survivor's struggle to cope with the psychological damage of the event.[72] In *Falling Man*, Martin, an art dealer who flits between Europe and the US, argues that the towers justified their own destruction:

> "But that's why you built the towers isn't it? Weren't the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction? You build a thing like that so you can see it come down. The provocation is obvious. What other reason would there be to go so high and then double it, do it twice? It's a fantasy, so why not do it twice? You are saying, Here it is, bring it down."[73]

What makes a statement like this possible is DeLillo's own style as a writer, in particular the way in which his characters are detached and distanced from the reader. This allows DeLillo to explore extreme worldviews to the point at which the reader begins to notice a circularity of thought; the kind of circularity which places the novelist alongside the terrorist. This is exemplified in his prophetic 1991 novel *Mao II* which foresees the erosion of the power of the novelist, as it is replaced by the power of violence and that of the terrorist.[74] Here these two figures are seen as competing powers both vying to assert their influence in the theatre of popular culture.

Martin's suggestion that the towers were representative of an American fantasy is powerful and goes someway to explaining why the terrorists may have targeted them. Murray Pomerance suggests that,

> The WTC constituted what we can already comprehend as excess; reflected the excess of the culture that built it, the excess of capitalism, the excess of ethnocentric superiority. It is this guilt about excess that is relieved and re-relieved as we watch the edifices turn to dust and ruin in videotape replay. But

[72] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, (New York: Scribner, 2007).
[73] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 116.
[74] Don DeLillo, *Mao II*, (London: Vintage, 1992).

> immediately, as the tape loop circles, we have the buildings whole again, presto!, and we can taste triumph and power, the recipe for disaster.[75]

It seems here that he is describing not just the recipe for disaster, but also the appetite for it. Cultural responses to 9/11, particularly those produced soon after the event, were always bound to attract a degree of negative press, questioning whether or not they were in fact exploiting the tragedy of those killed in the attacks. But it was the media's obsessive replaying of the footage which provides the most startling reference point.

Of the obsessive television coverage of 9/11 Winston Wheeler Dixon asks, 'Is this catharsis or exploitation? Can one pay respect to the dead through silence alone?'[76] But perhaps here he misses the point: the television coverage never even made pretence towards paying respect. Neither, for that matter, was it intentionally exploitative. Instead, the camera's fixed gaze echoed the state of shock which gripped the nation and indeed most of the world. It was merely a candid response to the spectacle itself. Although the title role of the performance artist in the *Falling Man* plays only a small part in the overall narrative, it nevertheless seems to represent a significant comment on the place of art in the event as a whole. Not only was 9/11 visually spectacular, it also relied on a technical element of performance which added to its symbolism:

> They dispatched the hijackers, armed with the most low-tech weapons imaginable (box cutters), to ride one of the emblematic technologies of the modern world, the passenger jet, from the periphery – that is, those lands where many feel like globalization's losers – to the center, where the winners were beginning another workday.

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[75] Murray Pomerance, 'The Shadow of the World Trade Center Is Climbing My Memory of Civilization', in *Film and Television after 9/11*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon, (Southern Illinois University Press, 2004) p. 56.

[76] Wheeler Winston Dixon, 'Introduction: Something Lost – Film after 9/11', in *Film and Television after 9/11*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon, (Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), p. 12.

> It was mass murder as performance art. The staging and timing guaranteed maximum coverage worldwide.[77]

The resulting coverage looked undeniably like a scene from a Hollywood disaster movie and, much like the television repeats of the planes striking the towers, shown for days after the event, over and over, all around the globe, the falling man in DeLillo's novel too draws a perverse gaze mirroring both the horror, repulsion, and simultaneous attraction of the 9/11 act itself: 'Every time she saw a videotape of the planes she moved a finger toward the power button on the remote. Then she kept on watching.'[78] In short, the people watching this man are transfixed by the same experience of sublimity offered by the spectacle itself.

Falling Man deals explicitly with the contrast between those who really experienced the event, and those in the public domain who merely watched on television. The isolation of the survivor, or the victim, from those around him who could not share the experience, is achieved in multiple ways. Protagonist Keith's brief affair with Florence, another survivor of the attack with whom he subsequently shares a special bond despite the two being complete strangers, marks these two out as different from the other characters. Despite this, Keith and Florence deal with the event in polar opposite ways. Florence obsessively retells the story of her journey down the stairs of the tower, saying that, "I feel like I'm still on the stairs. […] If I live to be a hundred I'll still be on the stairs."[79] For Keith this was not his experience at all, and he is happy to let Florence's words roll over him, keeping his own experience bottled inside. The reader does not really understand Keith's trauma until the very end of the novel during which they are returned to the day itself and to a brutal account of Keith's attempt to rescue his mutilated friend Rumsey from one of

[77] Nayan Chanda and Strobe Talbott, 'Introduction', in *The Age of Terror: America and the World After September 11*, (New York: Basic Books, 2002), p. xiii.
[78] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 134.
[79] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 57.

the rooms. It is not until this point that we are told he is 'Keith Neudecker,'[80] as if the revelation of his full name so late in the novel brings with it the understanding that it is during these moments in the tower when his true identity is shaped and established. It is the graphic nature of this final scene which underlines the different levels of experience. The novel rejects the sanitised version of the event presented by the media in favour of, on occasion, gruesome detail. Whilst Keith is at the hospital we are told, in disturbing fashion, the literal way in which the terror gets under the skin:

> "In those places where it happens, the survivors, the people nearby who are injured, sometimes, months later, they develop bumps, for lack of a better term, and it turns out this is caused by small fragments, tiny fragments of the suicide bomber's body. The bomber is blown to bits, literally bits and pieces, and fragments of flesh and bone come flying outwards with such force and velocity that they get wedged, they get trapped in the body of anyone who's in striking range. Do you believe it? A student is sitting in a café. She survives the attack. Then, months later, they find these little, like, pellets of flesh, human flesh that got driven into the skin. They call this organic shrapnel."[81]

The effectiveness of the novel relies on its ability to interchange between the mundane lives of its characters, as they seek to renormalize their existence, and these kinds of detailed and horrific narrative interruptions which lay embedded in the psyche of the characters.

Starkly, *Falling Man* presents an inability to move on from 9/11, and to see beyond its symbolism. The event saturates the characters and they begin to see it, and discuss elements of it, in the most common of places. During a conversation between Lianne and Martin they both agree that they see the two smoking towers in a still-life hanging on the wall.[82] In Ian McEwan's 2006 novel, *Saturday*, we see the logical conclusion of this way of thinking:

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[80] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 239.
[81] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 16.
[82] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 49.

> It's already almost eighteen months since half the planet watched, and watched again the unseen captives driven through the sky to the slaughter, at which time there gathered round the innocent silhouette of any jet plane a novel association. Everyone agrees, airliners look different in the sky these days, predatory or doomed.[83]

McEwan's narrator here is suggesting that the actions of 9/11 have inescapably changed the way in which the world can be viewed. It is not just the airliners that appear 'doomed' but it is this apocalyptic attitude that has made the world appear so also. Even the opening line of *Falling Man* can be seen to allude to this; 'It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night.'[84] This street is not just another street, but the world post 9/11. Now, over the major Western cities, looms the potential for another Manhattan skyline and another devastating act of terrorism.

Where McEwan and DeLillo converge is in their representation of time as two tiered: there is only the time before the planes, and the time after. We are often reminded of this overtly; for instance *Falling Man*'s Chapter 9 concludes with, 'thirty-six days after the planes,' and this is a device DeLillo uses on multiple occasions to bridge between passages of time.[85] It is as if, in order to give the event a kind of purpose, a myth is developed around the event itself which perpetuates a 'before and after' distinction in time, epitomised by the often used statement that on 9/11/2001 "everything changed".

In Spike Lee's film *25th Hour*, an early response to 9/11, the narrative is set very clearly in a post 9/11 environment.[86] After the protagonist, Monty (Edward Norton), finds and rescues a badly beaten dog, Doyle, the credit sequence begins,

[83] Ian McEwan, *Saturday*, (London: Vintage, 2006), p. 16.
[84] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 3.
[85] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 170.
[86] *25th Hour*. Spike Lee. USA. Buena Vista Pictures. 2002.

laid over a number of images of the temporary 9/11 memorial.[87] 9/11 is implicitly made the point of departure in a film whose plot is centred on issues of crime and justice. The impact of 9/11 is peripheral to the actual progression of the narrative and yet seems to represent the cause of an underlying division within the film (rather than a sense of unity like that supposed to have taken over New York in the aftermath) which occurs not just in its temporality, but also in the relationship between characters and other characters, and characters and New York City itself. During a monologue in which Monty speaks angrily in front of a bathroom mirror he attacks the people of New York, and eventually Osama bin Laden. Although the rant is not exclusively racist, as he opens with, "fuck you and this whole city, and everyone in it," he goes on to express his anger at "Sikhs" and "Pakistanis" who he describes as "terrorists in training". His anger towards Osama bin Laden is no doubt a reflection of the feelings of many in New York after the attacks; Monty continues:

> "Fuck Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, and backward-ass cave-dwelling fundamentalist assholes everywhere. In the names of innocent thousands murdered, I pray you spend the rest of eternity with your whores roasting in a jet-fuel fire in hell."

But the 9/11 attacks are merely a reflection, they are not the real focus of Monty's anger. However much he tries to redirect his feelings of rage, eventually he has to admit that it is his own life, his own choices and criminality that he should resent:

> "Let an earthquake crumble it, let the fires rage, let it burn to fucking ash, and then let the waters rise and submerge this whole rat-infested place. No. No. Fuck you, Montgomery Brogan. You had it all, and you threw it away, you dumb fuck!"

Monty cannot blame 9/11 for all the problems in his life, but the resentment he feels is very real. The problem for the spectator is the attachment that Lee provokes towards Monty. This is established from the outset when he rescues Doyle. Despite

[87] This was 88 search lights pointed skywards from the site of the former WTC to create two huge towers of light. More on this later.

the fact that he is obviously guilty of his crime as a drug dealer (notably we see little of this side of Monty – surely to protect the spectator/character bond), the spectator is left hoping for his escape. His criminality is a spectre from his time before he rescues Doyle, and importantly also, from before 9/11. It is tempting to see this time distinction as offering a clean slate to those in the wake of 9/11. Not only is it a departure in history, it is also a moment of real life change for those characters on a personal level. The one thing we are certain of is that Monty has changed, whether it is because of his impending prison sentence, his rescue of Doyle, or 9/11 itself, we cannot be sure.

Stephanie Hoth claims that: 'When an event is declared to be historical, it gains the quality of a caesura which divides the world into a 'before' and an 'after'.[88] This can clearly be seen in Lee's film, and in *Falling Man*, but it is also an important part of the overarching myth of 9/11, a myth which gave a license to those in power to implement new states of emergency and laws based on the notion that the event itself had changed the nature of US foreign affairs. That culture played a part in this shift, and the remaking of itself in the image of 9/11, was surely a necessary accompaniment to the political movements and messages of the time, but as Susan Faludi suggests, there is an inherent danger in this myth:

> By September 12, our culture was already reworking a national tragedy into a national fantasy of virtuous might and triumph. No doubt, the fantasy consoled many. But rather than make us any safer, it misled us into danger, damaging the very security the myth was supposed to bolster. There are consequences to living in a dream.[89]

[88] Stephanie Hoth, 'From Individual Experience to Historical Event and Back Again: 9/11 in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*', in *Kulturelles Wissen und Intertextualität*, Marion Gymnich, Birgit Neumann, Astrid, Nünning (Wvt Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier; Auflage: 1., Aufl., 2006), p. 286.
[89] Susan Faludi, p. 289.

In attempting to create a united front in support of the victims of 9/11, the usual paths of scrutiny, echoed through culture and the media, became closed, and the myth exaggerated.

The children in *Falling Man* go one step further in the creation of this myth, knowingly creating the false character of Bill Lawton:

> "He was hearing Bill Lawton. They were saying bin Laden. […] So, together," he said, "they developed the myth of Bill Lawton."
> "Katie's got to know the real name. She's way too smart. She probably keeps the other name going precisely because it's the wrong name." […]
> "Searching the skies for Bill Lawton."[90]

What is particularly interesting about this is that Bill Lawton is not really the children's mythical creation at all, but rather the creation of the media. To an extent the children are satirising the media's coverage of bin Laden. It is through the television that the children mishear the information and construe further meanings from it, but their myth reads just like a tabloid newspaper cutting:

> "Bill Lawton has a long beard. He wears a long robe," he said. "He flies jet planes and speaks thirteen languages but not English except to his wives. What else? He has the power to poison what we eat but only certain foods. They're working on the list."[91]

As the children compile ways in which bin Laden can threaten them in their daily lives, so too do the media and the US government. Their mishearing also serves to highlight the cultural gap between Islamic nations and the US which on its own terms cannibalises the names of its attackers through mispronunciation. The myth extends beyond simply the name to an implication of polygamy that is not just restricted to bin Laden himself but is also used as a model for the figure of the Arab more generally in culture. Whilst there is evidently a lack of understanding about terrorism and Islam portrayed here, it is also intentional: Katie is 'too smart' not to

[90] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, pp. 73-74.
[91] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 74.

know the truth behind the myth, but she plays along with it simply because myth building is self-perpetuating. In a similar way, the idea of creating a list of certain foods that Bill Lawton has the power to poison is not done out of fear but is rather playful instead. The children turn the politics of fear in practice after 9/11 into a game and in doing so are able to expose the falsity of it. Žižek says that in the wake of 9/11,

> We are entering a new era of paranoiac warfare in which the greatest task will be to identify the enemy and his weapons. In this new warfare, the agents assume their acts less and less publicly: not only are "terrorists" themselves no longer eager to claim responsibility for their acts (even the notorious al-Qaeda did not explicitly appropriate the September 11 attacks, not to mention the mystery about the origins of the anthrax letters); "antiterrorist" state measures themselves are clouded in a shroud of secrecy – all this forming an ideal breeding-ground for conspiracy theories and generalized social paranoia.'[92]

Perhaps it is for this reason that spectacular apocalyptic cinema has sought to make visual the fear of destruction, viscerally detailing that fear which bubbles beneath the surface. But this fear is not by coincidence. Whereas the government may keep a tight leash of secrecy around some information, it is particularly vocal when it comes to stoking the fears of the public. In some ways this could seem to be a contradiction, but in fact it was much more productive to valorise 9/11 not to keep the public from being afraid, but rather to allow the event to be remembered safely, and to be evoked repeatedly. 9/11 would become a site of anger and hatred for many and this itself could be used to popularise a much tougher foreign policy and a restriction in homeland liberties.

[92] Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, p. 37.

The Stockhausen Syndrome

On the 16th of September 2001, Karlheinz Stockhausen, a well-regarded German composer, controversially described the World Trade Center attacks of five days previous in words that have been roughly translated as: the greatest work of art there has ever been. Although he later claimed that his comments had been misconstrued, his words provoked a vociferous critical response, prompting the cancellation of a number of his shows. Despite his words remaining somewhat injudicious, Stockhausen's description of 9/11 at least displays a crude awareness of the purpose of the act itself. Whilst the 2,996 deaths that day were significant, the attack appeared to have a greater symbolic impact than it did collateral: 'the "terrorists" themselves did not do it primarily to provoke real material damage, but *for the spectacular effect of it*.'[93]

There was, as there always has been, a complex relationship between politics and art which would come to the fore. On September 11 2001 art was not being employed to sell politics, instead a political statement was being made on such a grand scale that it came to take on many of the characteristics of art. Perhaps Stockhausen considered September 11 to be a work of art because it was the sublime stuff of movies, a destruction which had the appearance of having been choreographed. It was about more than just murder, instead demanding to be read as a statement. This was a form of terrorism designed to do as much damage as possible with extremely limited resources. That it took only 19 men to kill almost 3,000 is a measure of the terrorists' success but more than that, the attack was able to strike terror into the hearts of the millions of citizens of the most powerful nation in

[93] Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, (London: Verso, 2002), p. 11.

the world. No longer could Americans feel safe at home. What followed was both predictable and planned upon by those who orchestrated the attacks. The War on Terror was the inevitable reaction of a wounded nation. Seeking to restore the national pride, and with its people demanding revenge, the US began to step up its operations abroad, including the invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq. In doing so, and with further interventions from extremist groups inside the fragile nations of the Middle East, bin Laden's goal of destabilising the region, and fostering anti-American sentiment, was achieved:

> In striking against targets nearly 7,000 miles away from his Afghan lair, part of bin Laden's intention was to stir up populations closer to home – and to stir them up not just against the Great Satan, but against their own repressive, corrupt, frightened rulers as well. In addition to the twin towers in Lower Manhattan, the terrorists were trying to bring down two other less sturdy edifices, the pro-Western military regime in Pakistan and the House of Saud. The attack was a classic provocation: an attempt to goad the U.S. into lashing out far and wide, throughout the Arab world and the Gulf, thus turning the public in those countries against the powers that be, local and global.[94]

Certainly tensions between the West and nations in the Middle East still run high, and the threat of increased violence is not over. With the US's stature in world politics it is easy to forget that it has a very large and diverse population, and many of its own citizens hold extremist views. The threat of a US pastor in Gainesville, Florida, to organise a communal Koran burning on the 9th anniversary of the September 11 attacks caused tensions to rise both in the US and in many Arab nations. Whilst President Barack Obama took measures to prevent the event taking place, a minority of Muslims abroad reacted ironically in turn by burning American flags and effigies of the pastor. Obama claimed that the event would be a

[94] Nayan Chanda and Strobe Talbott, 'Introduction', in *The Age of Terror: America and the World After September 11*, (New York: Basic Books, 2001), pp. xv-xvi.

'recruitment bonanza for al-Qaeda' and certainly the actions of some extremists in countries like Pakistan suggested he was right.[95]

Politically, the impact of 9/11 is still being felt and this seems unlikely to change in the near future. But the profound impact that it has had on Western culture can only really be explained by its appeal to art as a whole. Due to the event's reliance on symbolism many have followed Stockhausen in seeing a connection between the 9/11 act and art itself. It is this symbolism which truly separates it from other terrorist attacks around the globe, which have tended to be seen as either designed to cause maximum damage or simply as opportunistic attacks. For Stockhausen, what qualified the 9/11 attacks as art was not just scale in terms of the numbers of dead, but in terms of the overall vision, the co-ordination and rehearsal required by a relatively large number of people in order to achieve an effect that was both visually spectacular and also viscerally devastating.

Some have argued that the attack on the WTC simply took the American fantasy of destruction and realised it.[96] Does Hollywood's penchant towards the disaster movie reveal a desire for destruction embedded at a subconscious level? For most Americans the way in which 9/11 was consumed held little difference to that of a disaster movie:

> For the great majority of the public, the WTC explosions were events on the TV screen, and when we watched the oft-repeated shot of frightened people running towards the camera ahead of the giant dust cloud from the collapsing tower, was not the framing of the shot itself reminiscent of spectacular shots in catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others[?][97]

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[95] BBC news, 'US President Obama condemns plans to burn the Koran', http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-11243711 [accessed 09/09/2010].
[96] Most notably both Baudrillard and Žižek were quick to proclaim that 9/11 was a Hollywood fantasy, Baudrillard writing that, 'At a pinch, we can say that they *did it*, but we *wished for* it.' (*The Spirit of Terrorism*, p. 5).
[97] Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, p. 11.

It outdid all other special effects because it was real. But just how real was the effect? Was this not something seen before many times in films like *Independence Day* and *Godzilla*?[98] What could have been an experience of the everyday destruction, pain, and suffering, inflicted upon many Third World countries, was rendered ineffectual by the banality of the filmic image which the scene replicated. Adding to this, the event was watered-down by the media, replacing pictures of the dead and mutilated with a hypnotic looped video of the planes colliding with the towers. Perhaps, in order to protect the public from the sheer horror of the event, the media turned it into a fictional movie of a kind:

> while the number of victims – 3,000 – is repeated all the time, it is surprising how little of the actual carnage we see – no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people … in clear contrast to reporting on Third World catastrophes, where the whole point is to produce a scoop of some gruesome detail. […] Is this not yet further proof of how, even in this tragic moment, the distance which separates Us from Them, from their reality, is maintained: the real horror happens *there*, not *here*?[99]

At least partly, this lack of what could be called 'gore' was also due to the nature of the attacks themselves. The majority of the victims were crushed when the towers came down leaving little to no evidence of their fate. However, this absence does raise important questions as to the censoring of 9/11 images and footage which will now be elaborated on in a discussion, in particular, of images of those seen jumping from the towers.

[98] *Independence Day*. Roland Emmerich. USA. Twentieth Century Fox. 1996., *Godzilla*. Roland Emmerich. USA. Tristar Pictures. 1998.
[99] Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, p. 13.

The Forgotten Man

In Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, the narrator, a nine-year old boy named Oskar who has lost his father in the 9/11 attacks, is angered not by a lack of censorship and details but rather the opposite:

> "I need to know how he died." […] "Why?"
> "So I can stop inventing how he died. I'm always inventing. […] I found a bunch of videos on the Internet of bodies falling. They were on a Portuguese site, where there was all sorts of stuff they weren't showing here, even though it happened here. Whenever I want to try and learn about how Dad died, I have to go to a translator program and find out how to say things in different languages, like 'September,' which is 'Wrzesień,' or 'people jumping from burning buildings,' which is 'Menschen, die aus brennenden Gebäuden springen.' Then I Google those words. It makes me incredibly angry that people all over the world can know things that I can't, because it happened *here*, and happened to *me*, so shouldn't it be *mine*?"[100]

In grieving Oskar is essentially on a journey of discovery, seeking to uncover as much about 9/11 as he can. After all, he says, 'it happened to *me*, so shouldn't it be *mine*?' His sense of ownership of the 9/11 attacks clashes with the censorship he encounters not just as an American, but also as a young boy. It is not only the media which has censored images of people jumping from the buildings, but Oskar's mother too helps to perpetuate Oskar's exclusion from media coverage more generally, telling his Grandma: 'Don't let him see the news.'[101] This censorship from the images and the details of what happened to his father impedes Oskar's attempts to come to terms with the tragedy. The problem is that Oskar has already heard the messages left by his Dad on the answer phone, messages which he then hides from his mother. To this extent both Oskar and his mother have isolated themselves from the event and from each other.

[100] Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p.256.
[101] Jonathan Safran Foer, p. 225.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close organises its narrative around the idea of exploration and discovery. Oskar's search for the lock that fits his father's key is the spur for an exploration of New York City, not as it was, but as it is after September 11: inhabited by the pain and individualised stories which grew out of the attacks. As Oskar, and later with the aid of his estranged Grandfather, traverse the city in an attempt to meet everyone with the surname Black (the name on the envelope in which Oskar finds the key) they uncover a network of personal grief. To this extent, Foer's novel is representative of a widespread characterisation of the 9/11 attacks as both a national trauma and yet at the same time as a vast web of individual tales of tragedy and heroism. It is this reliance on the individual narratives of those involved in the events of the day that has led to the highly sensitised cauldron of public sentiment and which, in turn, precipitated an environment that has been heavily censored and has, in fact, dealt in censorship. Censorship is one of the most overt ways in which myth construction can take place. This is because censorship that is either imposed externally or internally directly affects the dissemination of cultural information.

The way in which the US media dealt with 9/11 is summed up by the coverage of the jumpers. In 2006, Henry Singer directed a documentary entitled: *9/11: The Falling Man*.[102] The documentary details its attempt to uncover the identity of one of the victims of 9/11; a man photographed falling from the North Tower. It is reported that as many as two hundred people 'fell' from the towers that day and this wording in particular epitomises the response of the media to the event itself. The distinction between 'fall' and 'jump' is an important one to many of the families left behind. Clearly to 'fall' implies that the act is choiceless, which, in a

[102] *9/11: The Falling Man*. Henry Singer. UK. Darlow Smithson Productions. 2006.

way, it is since the victim is not choosing between life and death as such, just the manner of that death, whereas to 'jump' infers free-will upon the action. To this extent neither of these words seem quite appropriate, but this is further complicated by the Christian attitude towards suicide, shared by many of the families involved.

The images of men and women jumping to their deaths from the towers are certainly striking, and they perhaps best describe the true horror of the event. This makes the media's self-censorship of these images all the more surprising. The documentary details how one US newspaper, *The Morning Call*, in Pennsylvania, decided to run Richard Drew's powerful photograph which would later become known as 'the falling man'.[103] Since TV stations had already censored footage of the jumpers, the newspaper was taking a risk by printing the image. The response from the readers was both passionate and angry. The US, it seemed, was not ready to face the true horror of what had happened.

[103] Image 4 "The Falling Man", as photographed by Richard Drew on 9/11. Tom Junod, 'The Falling Man', http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP_FALLINGMAN [accessed 06/03/2010].

Oskar's demand for knowledge and openness in the face of tragedy is clearly at odds with the response of many of the readers of the *The Morning Call*. This is why censorship of this nature is not a straight forward affair. Oskar has no problem with the idea that his father might have jumped from the building:

> "I printed out the frames from the Portuguese videos and examined them closely. There's one body that could be him. […] It's just me wanting it to be him."
> "You want him to have jumped?"
> "I want to stop inventing. If I could know how he died, exactly how he died, I wouldn't have to invent him dying inside an elevator that was stuck between floors, which happened to some people, and I wouldn't have to imagine him trying to crawl down the outside of the building, which I saw a video of one person doing on a Polish site, or trying to use a tablecloth as a parachute, like some of the people who were in Windows on the World actually did. There were so many different ways to die, and I just need to know which was his."[104]

And similarly, one husband interviewed in the *The Falling Man* documentary would prefer to think that his wife, found on the ground just outside the towers, jumped, describing it as the last act of control that those inside would have had left. For this man, it is preferable to think that she escaped the trappings of the building, the heat, and the pain. The photographs of people hanging out of windows to find air justify this response and again reinforce the idea of the buildings as metaphoric prisons.

Those captured falling in the photographs exhibit an air of stillness and calm when frozen in frame and time. These photographs are not graphic, but rather they are the one real link to the human loss of life on September 11.[105] It is this reminder that censoring these photographs scrubs from history. Not only this, but they show the towers in their true and monstrous proportions, made larger and more terrifying by the scale exhibited by a falling figure. Indeed some people who witnessed the

[104] Jonathan Safran Foer, p. 257.
[105] Image 5 Collage of "jumpers". member KPDX, forum post, http://www.airliners.net/aviation-forums/non_aviation/read.main/1150423/ [accessed 22/08/2010].

event have claimed that they did not realise, or even refused to realise, that what they were actually seeing were people falling from the sky.[106]

In many ways Drew's photograph captures a kind of beauty that transcends the horror of that moment and in so doing threatens to disavow it. But if the photograph ultimately makes the viewer question the dominant picture of the attacks, or see them in a new and painfully real light, then rather than sanitise the attacks by reproducing them as art or spectacle, it in fact lends a new dynamic to them.

In Tom Junod's *Esquire* article, on which the documentary is based, he describes the photograph in poetic terms:

> In the picture, he departs from this earth like an arrow. Although he has not chosen his fate, he appears to have, in his last instants of life, embraced it. If he were not falling, he might very well be flying. He appears relaxed, hurtling through the air. He appears comfortable in the grip of unimaginable motion. He does not appear intimidated by gravity's divine suction or by what awaits him. His arms are by his side, only slightly outriggered. His left leg is bent at the knee, almost casually. His white shirt, or jacket, or frock, is billowing free of his black pants. His black high-tops are still on his feet. In all the other pictures, the people who did what he did -- who jumped -- appear to be struggling against horrific discrepancies of scale. They are made puny by the

[106] *9/11: The Falling Man*. Henry Singer.

> backdrop of the towers, which loom like colossi, and then by the event itself. Some of them are shirtless; their shoes fly off as they flail and fall; they look confused, as though trying to swim down the side of a mountain. The man in the picture, by contrast, is perfectly vertical, and so is in accord with the lines of the buildings behind him. He splits them, bisects them.[107]

What Junod is referring to here is that this photograph is different, special even. It is not that this is the only photograph taken of a person jumping from the towers, but that in this fleeting moment this man strikes a beautiful symmetry against his overbearing surroundings. Richard Drew himself said of the photo: "That picture just jumped off the screen because of its verticality and symmetry. It just had that look."[108] It becomes almost impossible *not* to look at this man. Those who wished to hide the image no doubt would have argued that the photograph was exploitive; that in capturing this man in his ultimate moment of terror it probes too deeply into the event itself. But nonetheless Drew's photograph does lend him a grace which befits the tragedy of his death. It is difficult to look at such a photograph and to believe that what has really been captured is a ghost. It certainly seems to represent art in a traditional sense: it finds a beauty in symmetry, it has historical significance, it carries a powerful message, and it also shocks.[109]

Why does it matter that the image of the falling man was so heavily censored and provoked such a response? It has again to do with the notions connecting 9/11 and art. If it is accepted that this picture is exceptional for its visual qualities, then it most certainly has an artistic integrity that transcends its subject matter; we just need

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[107] Tom Junod, http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP_FALLINGMAN.
[108] Tom Junod, http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP_FALLINGMAN.
[109] The debate surrounding what constitutes 'art', a debate which has implications far beyond this thesis, can often come down to a matter of taste. Nevertheless, there is clearly a certain level of skill involved in photographing subjects and whilst a photographer may snap many rolls of film before selecting the image which becomes iconic, as was the case with Richard Drew and the 'Falling Man', such an image must still conform to certain artistic qualities in terms of its appeal to aesthetics and its conveyance of a certain message. Even when a photographer has taken many photographs they will still have exercised some element of subjectivity through focus, camera angle and positioning. Finally, the photographer has their say with regards to message by selecting which image best represents an event as they witnessed it.

to look at Junod's description of it to understand that he is talking about more than just an ordinary photograph. Let us also take a look at another photo which has more recently become synonymous with the 9/11 attacks: Thomas Hoepker's picture, which shows five Americans apparently relaxing in the sun in Brooklyn whilst smoke pours from the WTC in the background, provokes a different kind of reaction to the image of the falling man. Nonetheless the image sparked controversy and debate when it appeared in 2006. Hoepker himself chose not to publish the photograph in 2001 and Jonathan Jones, in his article for *The Guardian*, suggests this reason:

> It is the only photograph of that day to assert the art of the photographer: among hundreds of devastating pictures, by amateurs as well as professionals, that horrify and transfix us because they record the details of a crime that outstripped imagination […] this one stands out as a more ironic, distanced, and therefore artful, image. Perhaps the real reason Hoepker sat on it at the time was because it would be egotistical to assert his own cunning as an artist in the midst of mass slaughter.[110]

It is difficult to begin to rationalise either the people in the photograph or the choices made by Hoepker himself. Those in the photograph themselves claimed afterwards that it misrepresented their feelings at the time. Nevertheless, it seems interesting that Hoepker chose to hold this image back from general consumption until the dust had well and truly settled on Ground Zero. Rather than Jones' somewhat kind accreditation to Hoepker that he did not publish it out of some kind of desire to avoid the trappings of his own ego, it seems more logical to assume that he feared the same kind of treatment as Karlheinz Stockhausen received following his comments about the connection between art and 9/11. Censorship, after all, does not always have to be imposed from without, and in this case Hoepker's own decision probably tells us more about the state of the media post 9/11 than it does about his own morality.

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[110] Jonathan Jones, 'the meaning of 9/11's most controversial photo', http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/sep/02/911-photo-thomas-hoepker-meaning?fb=native&CMP=FBCNETTXT9038. [accessed 02/05/2012].

If we examine the ways in which the Hoepker photograph can be interpreted we find various different possibilities.[111] What truly stands out is that none of the five young New Yorkers are actually looking at the carnage going on in the background. They appear instead to be deep in conversation with each other. It is the otherwise picturesque nature of the scene, if we remove the image of the smoking towers, which in fact endows the people with an apparent sense of indifference and even pleasure. It is the way the light reflects from them which seemingly removes them from the ash and near apocalyptic night of the scenes occurring across the expanse of water. They are both metaphorically and physically distanced, and so also disconnected, from the scene of devastation. But this is only appearance. Just as the falling man photograph seems to exhibit a calm and orderly nature which does not befit the notion of falling,

terrified from a skyscraper, this photograph too only makes sense as a piece of art when it is divorced from the context of the internal thoughts of those portrayed in it. It is this, fraudulent, starting point which allows the photograph to be read as a comment on American ignorance and un-touch-ability. Considering the torrent of images which were disseminated following 9/11, it is telling that these two images, so completely different in their content, produced such a stir. What they share is

[111] Image 6 Americans "relaxing" in the sun on 9/11, as photographed by Thomas Hoepker. Jonathan Jones, http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/sep/02/911-photo-thomas-hoepker-meaning?fb=native&CMP=FBCNETTXT9038.

nothing coherent as such, only that they both lie outside the dominant ideological reading of the attacks as a moment of American valour and unity. Whilst the falling man photograph shows the most disturbing element of the day itself, the 9/11 ghost, Hoepker's photo depicts a world, even if this is not reflective of those in the picture itself, which carries blissfully on, a world where *nothing* changed, rather than *everything*.

By blanketing over the jumpers the US media shielded many from the true horror of 9/11, and in the process an important part of that experience was lost for some. For Junod, these images represent the last border of experience that the US public was not prepared to cross:

> In the most photographed and videotaped day in the history of the world, the images of people jumping were the only images that became, by consensus, taboo -- the only images from which Americans were proud to avert their eyes. All over the world, people saw the human stream debouch from the top of the North Tower, but here in the United States, we saw these images only until the networks decided not to allow such a harrowing view, out of respect for the families of those so publicly dying. At CNN, the footage was shown live, before people working in the newsroom knew what was happening; then, after what Walter Isaacson, who was then chairman of the network's news bureau, calls "agonized discussions" with the "standards guy," it was shown only if people in it were blurred and unidentifiable; then it was not shown at all. […] In a nation of voyeurs, the desire to face the most disturbing aspects of our most disturbing day was somehow ascribed to voyeurism, as though the jumpers' experience, instead of being central to the horror, was tangential to it, a sideshow best forgotten.[112]

This is where novels like *Falling Man*, which attempt to reflect the absence of graphic horror in the coverage, are particularly powerful. As Mikita Brottman rightly draws attention to, the coverage of 911 was 'remarkable not for its horror but for its *absence* of horror.'[113] These cultural artefacts, or works of art, are reminders that these were people and lives that were destroyed, not just buildings. Unlike the media coverage, which hypnotised with a loop of film showing a plane striking a

[112] Tom Junod, http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP_FALLINGMAN.
[113] Mikita Brottman, 'The Fascination of the Abomination: The Censored Images of 9/11' in *Film and Television after 9/11*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon, (Southern Illinois University Press, 2004) p. 166.

tower, smoke pouring from its open wound, these photographs and these novels remind us of the human loss. It is this gap that remains between those who truly experienced the event, and those on the outside, that precipitates the following damaging attitude:

> She asks for copies of the pictures so that she can show them to the people who believed that Norberto jumped out a window, while Catherine sits on the step with her palm spread over her heart. "They said my father was going to hell because he jumped," she says. "On the Internet. They said my father was taken to hell with the devil. I don't know what I would have done if it was him. I would have had a nervous breakdown, I guess. They would have found me in a mental ward somewhere...."[114]

Although it is almost impossible to argue that these men and women did not 'jump', because there was a degree of agency behind their actions, is this really akin to suicide? This attitude is representative of a stigma towards the jumpers which disavows their role in the events of that day as the only real visual record of the human destruction which took place.

The 9/11 Memorial Museum took the decision to hide a display of photographs showing jumpers in an alcove, intended to allow those viewing them to have privacy, but also to protect those who would not wish to see the graphic images.[115] Like Tom Junod, David Smith, writing for *The Sunday Times* in the lead up to the tenth anniversary of 9/11, describes his difficulty in finding people willing to talk about the 'jumpers'. People who ask questions are greeted with disgust, as if they have a morbid fascination with something best left forgotten. Smith, however, does find sympathy for the jumpers in an unusual place. On September 11 fireman Daniel Suhr was killed when hit by a woman who had jumped from the South tower.[116] This was the only case of someone having been struck by a jumper. Daniel's wife

[114] Tom Junod, http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP_FALLINGMAN.
[115] David James Smith, 'And they Leapt into the Unknown', in *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 04/09/2011. pp. 40-49.
[116] This was a particularly unlikely occurrence since very few jumped from the South tower. Most of those seen falling had come from the North tower.

Nancy could be excused any grievances with those who jumped that day but instead she is sympathetic:

> Later that night she learnt how Danny had died, and all she could remember thinking was: "How horrendous for that poor person." What had been going through their mind before they jumped or fell? How horrific for those people up there to have to choose. Danny did not choose, but they had to.[117]

Nancy's acceptance of her husband's death is almost certainly made that bit easier by the knowledge that had he not been killed by the jumper on his way into the building, he would have surely been killed when it collapsed with his fellow firemen who had gone in ahead. In fact, by dying in the way he did, he inadvertently saved the lives of those who helped carry his body to safety, and those who accompanied him in the ambulance. But surely these gruesome facts are not things that need to be censored from the public at large. If women like Nancy can have sympathy for those who had to make that fateful decision, then what were the majority of Americans being protected from?

As Nancy points out, the true horror for the jumper, and in turn for those who witnessed them or have since seen the photographs, is a horror born out of an excess of choice, or choice where there should be none. It was a split second decision to decide how you would prefer to die. Perhaps in a society built on the premise of continually expanding consumer choice this represents that logic to its horrific extreme. These jumpers were men and women who exercised their quintessentially American right to choose until the bitter end.

E. Ann Kaplan offers us one explanation for why Americans might choose to forget certain aspects like the jumpers, saying that:

[117] David Smith, p. 49.

> Individuals and cultures, then, perform forgetting as a way of protecting themselves from the horrors of what one (or the culture) has done or what has been done to oneself or others in one's society.[118]

The 'performance' aspect of this helps to explain the reaction of repulsion that many feel towards the jumpers as the representatives of the real visceral damage seen on that day. It is not simply enough *not* to look; one must also be outraged by such images. Perhaps their disavowal has as much to do with these images as a reminder of what has been done in America's name across the globe as it is of what was actually *done* to America on 9/11. Their denial shows a lack of willingness to accept this as any ordinary attack. By hiding behind the spectacular nature of the attacks and the destruction of the buildings themselves, the connection to real world carnage and human death is pushed to one side:

> On September 11, the USA was given the opportunity to realize what kind of world it was part of. It might have taken this opportunity – but it did not; instead it opted to reassert its traditional ideological commitments: out with feelings of responsibility and guilt towards the impoverished Third World, *we* are the victims now![119]

This victim syndrome is not just a product of media censorship but is an integral part of the 9/11 myth as a whole, a myth which is willingly participated in by the general public at large. This is born out particularly clearly in people's reactions to the photographs of those who jumped.

Whatever the identity of the Falling Man, nothing is more damning of the US response to 9/11 than the media's response to his image. To close one's eyes to these pictures is to deny his existence, an existence made all the more powerful by his lack of identity. With unknown motivations, he is captured in a perpetual fall like a man who has lost his wings. This is the choice the jumpers faced:

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[118] E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 74.
[119] Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, p. 47.

> It would be getting so hot that my skin would start to get blisters. It would feel so good to get away from the heat, but on the other hand, when I hit the sidewalk I would die, obviously. Which would I choose? Would I jump or would I burn? I guess I would jump, because then I wouldn't have to feel pain. On the other hand, maybe I would burn, because then I'd at least have a chance to somehow escape, and even if I couldn't, feeling pain is still better than not feeling, isn't it?'[120]

Oskar here defends the actions of the jumpers in a way which makes a mockery of those who turn away from their existence. Again, the two levels of experience are on display. How can one presume to know how they would have acted in a similar position? It is not enough to have even been there, as a horrified onlooker, to be able to rationalise the kind of decision that these people had to make.

It is difficult to escape the idea that this man is representative of something larger than just the atrocities committed that day; that somehow *The* Falling Man is really falling for people everywhere. Oskar's final act of the novel is to try and put his Dad's death behind him by reordering the pictures of the Falling Man:

> Finally I found the pictures of the falling body. […] I reversed the order, so the last one was the first, and the first was last.
>
> When I flipped through them, it looked like the man was floating up through the sky.
>
> And if I'd had more pictures, he would have flown through a window, back into the building, and the smoke would've poured into the hole that the plane was about to come out of.[121]

The process of narrative restructuring that Oskar undertakes here shows a concrete desire to return to that time before the planes, that time of 'remembered innocence.' But ultimately this happy ending is fraudulent. Editing the pictures cannot hide his real loss just as censoring them cannot erase their historical significance. Mitchum Huehls suggests that,

> Oskar thinks he will be healed if he can reverse time. While this reversal is clearly just so much wishful thinking, its temporal form – the flip-book's

[120] Jonathan Safran Foer, pp. 244-245.
[121] Jonathan Safran Foer, p. 325.

> cinematic, real-time performance of motion – proves crucial to Oskar's healing process.[122]

But what is crucial to his healing process is not the flip-book as such, but what that book represents: his understanding that narratives need temporal closure. In order to move on, Oskar must end his journey. Whatever lock the key fitted was irrelevant; in order to finish grieving he merely needed to finish his coming-of-age narrative by finding the lock. It was never a treasure hunt. While it is still a preferable end for Oskar to reverse the images of the man, propelling him back into the safety of the tower, it is any sense of closure which allows Oskar to deal with the death of his father. After all, the reader is told that it is the 'not knowing' that he finds most difficult. Censoring details in order to protect him merely increases his paranoia.

But Oskar's story can never end in a positive way. Though his quest may be over, and the pictures may be reversed, this cannot bring back his Father, and goes only part way to healing the damage caused by September 11. Oskar may well always carry with him the scars of that day. He lists the fears he has developed since the death of his father:

> Even after a year I still had an extremely difficult time doing certain things, like taking showers, for some reason, and getting into elevators, obviously. There was a lot of stuff that made me panicky, like suspension bridges, germs, airplanes, fireworks, Arab people on the subway (even though I'm not racist), Arab people in restaurants and coffee shops and other public places, scaffolding, sewers and subway grates, bags without owners, shoes, people with mustaches, smoke, knots, tall buildings, turbans.[123]

These are not just Oskar's fears, however; they are the neuroses of the state reflected in Oskar's paranoia. He is young and impressionable, and most of all he is very vulnerable. Oskar's thoughts here recall those more carefree but nonetheless serious attempts toward myth developed by the children in DeLillo's *Falling Man*. Whereas

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[122] Mitchum Huehls, 'Foer, Spiegelman, and 9/11's Timely Traumas', in *Literature after 9/11*, ed. Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn, (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 43.
[123] Jonathan Safran Foer, p. 36.

their paranoia is clearly an extension of reports they have seen in the media, and appears ultimately light-hearted, Oskar's fears stretch to full-blown syndrome status and effect his development as a child. The reader is even privy to his visits to a psychiatrist. In both these novels, terror is presented as pervasive and perpetuates an atmosphere of paranoia. Žižek says of 'terror':

> The truly ominous feature which underlies all these phenomena is this metaphorical universalization of the signifier "terror": the message of the American TV campaign against drugs in spring 2002 was: "When you buy drugs, you provide money for the terrorists!" – "terror" is thus gradually elevated into the hidden universal equivalent of all social evils.[124]

Not only then has terror become a signifier of all contemporary evils, it is also to be located everywhere. It is the inescapable threatening outside of an inward thinking society. Both the media and the government became obsessed with talking about it after 9/11 and the public were, and still are, being made constantly aware of its impact on daily life even as those figures of authority ironically declare that the terrorists will not destroy our spirit, and that we will not live in fear. This is further evidence of a rift between the ideals of contemporary culture, which commonly seeks to be liberal, diverse, and universal, and the actions of government and the media.

Like DeLillo's narrator, Oskar too refers *not* to the event itself but more frequently to 'the worst day.'[125] It is considered the point of change in the narrative, an apocalyptic juncture at which point the lives of the characters are turned upside-down. In other texts it is what is *not* said about 9/11 which creates the impression of a deep and silent shift in consciousness that has a very real impact on the lives of those who happen to be close to the event. Joseph O'Neil's *Netherland* is an interesting example of this: a novel which seems to come from out of 9/11 and yet

[124] Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, p. 111.
[125] Jonathan Safran Foer, p. 12.

barely begins to talk about the day itself.[126] It is a novel primarily set in New York and centres around the strange goings-on in the life of its protagonist, Hans van den Broek, subsequent to 9/11. Importantly it would seem that the break down of his marriage is in some way connected to that day, as if it were the cause of a rift between Hans and his wife, or the catalyst for some problem already underlying. This is something frequently found in fiction of the twenty-first century, be it in the form of literature or film. Perhaps Hans, in seeking to cope with and explain his marital difficulties has merely projected them onto 9/11, or perhaps they really did have an impact, this is something left for the reader to surmise. The important thing is that the reader *wants* something to blame for the breakup and so also wants to see 9/11 as a point of historical departure, as the marker of a change in attitudes. Post 9/11 narratives tend to organise themselves as if that date represents a temporal impasse. Yet at the same time it is very difficult to pinpoint something concrete that came out of that day that has reordered the world.

Is it, then, that culture is merely compensatory, rather than an indicator of real social change? If anything, 9/11 has strengthened the hegemony of the USA which, instead of examining the problems of the systems upon which the country is founded, and which was attacked on that very day, has chosen to lash out blindly at an illusive outside enemy which it itself created. A major historical event like September 11 demands two levels of experience. There are those who were directly involved in 9/11: who were in the towers, who saw it unfolding first-hand, or who lost loved ones, and then there are the majority of us who probably watched it on TV or read about it in newspapers or on the internet. As Oskar's character demonstrates, those on the outside, who presume to understand the needs of those victims of the attacks,

[126] O'Neill, Joseph, *Netherland*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).

will necessarily fail to group such a wide range of individuals together into a collective response. Ewa Kowal seems to be stating the obvious:

> 'It is impossible for us to know what the *real* victims would have preferred; it can be surmised that among almost three thousand people opinions would have varied, as on any subject.'[127]

And yet, as obvious as this may seem, it is censorship and myth building which ultimately attempts to build a singular narrative out of the 9/11 attacks, whilst simultaneously sending the message that it was a day of individualistic tragedy.

What is the role of art in this? In the case of 9/11 it is not that art is merely exploitative. Art may aid our experience and understanding of an event. It may help to cut through the rhetoric and reveal the gruesome message beneath that those who covered the events thought best to censor. Because 9/11 was so widely covered, it took on the dimensions of a global event, but it is art's individualistic nature which is important in helping to recognise that, whilst the many political applications of an event like September 11 attempt to unify responses, channelling them and redefining the narrative of such an event in order to further an agenda, it is the diverse individual horrors that took place which really define the event. It may seem strange to advocate a need for a more vivid experience of an event as tragic as September 11, but it is only through this experience, and through an interaction with art that people are able to come to terms with such an event and begin to view it as if it were a positive chance for change.

[127] Ewa Kowal, 'To Accommodate the Mess: (Audio-) Visual Media in the Post – 9/11 Genre', in *James Joyce and After: Writer and Time*, ed. Katarzyna Bazarnik and Bożena Kucala, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), p. 204.

Chapter 2: Reflecting Absence

Thus far, in our examination of culture and the media after 9/11, what we have seen is a kind of censorship and a refusal to look the facts of the event squarely in the eye. All of this is part of a broader trend towards cultural pessimism which will be explored in the second half of this thesis. Before this can be done, however, we need to think more about this term and what it means for our analysis of the cultural artefacts which epitomise the range of responses to 9/11 seen in cultural forums.

In order to measure the impact of September 11 on culture, it would be wise to again return to the concept of Cultural Studies itself. As critics, our choice of material, generally, is not, and certainly should not be, arbitrary. The question implicit, but not always asked, is why do we choose certain materials or certain types of materials and how does this have a bearing on the conclusions of our analyses themselves. Pausing, only briefly, to ask that question here, forces us to confront the obvious perils of cultural eclecticism. Perhaps the best way to attempt to answer such a question would be to reveal a political agenda behind this writing. By this I do not mean an agenda of my own, a bias, but rather a desire to *be* political. This comes from the fact that, it is not only difficult to study such politically charged material without referring to the politics of the matter itself, it is also not really of any value to separate politics from 9/11 culture.

This is where the importance of Cultural Studies becomes apparent. Cultural Studies is a methodology which foregrounds the role of cultural and media related sources in constructing notions of 'reality'. The centrality of ideology to a study of contemporary culture means that the cultural and the political become inseparable. Pierre Bourdieu's use of Cultural Studies clearly connects itself with Marxism in the

way in which Bourdieu sees ideology and its manifestation in culture as 'systematically favour[ing] the dominant class.'[128] Whilst, to an extent, this thesis shares some similar concerns its primary focus is on the naturalisation of capitalism and issues surrounding globalisation, rather than traditional Marxist notions of class struggle.

At the same time, where is the line to be drawn? Angela McRobbie urges caution when applying Cultural Studies:

> We have gone so far down the road of the popular (where there is no art/non-art, no good/bad) that we are in danger of choosing out our own canon for analysis and being able to justify this only on the grounds that it has mass appeal. Worse still we now run the risk of entering into a meaningless pluralist paradigm for studying the popular, where everything goes, where only in the popular does there lie the possibility of resistance, and where unpopular questions like the value to young people of reading literary classics rather than teen magazines are simply no longer asked.[129]

This is certainly a good point. However, when Cultural Studies is deployed, as it is here, in order to ascertain the political function of a text, then this seems to be a far more productive methodology.[130] It is for this reason that it is necessary that this thesis is inclusive. It does not focus on high or low forms of culture as such, but instead analyses cultural texts as jigsaw pieces in a wider puzzle of the cultural representation of a political event. Rather than attempting to make a judgement as to whether a text has high or low cultural value, an impossible task without some element of subjectivity, I prefer to deal with the most engaging forms of text which attempt to articulate the post 9/11 moment. Returning to Bourdieu and our previous discussion about what constitutes art, he links 'taste' with class by claiming that it is

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[128]Bridget Flower, Pierre Bourdieu and Cultural Theory, Critical Investigations, (London: Sage Publications, 1998), p. 43.
[129] Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 94.
[130] Angela McRobbie also suggests that the political function of Cultural Studies, in her analysis of the work of Stuart Hall and his critique of Thatcherism, overcomes the polysemous nature of cultural output that Hall himself advocated as a response to what he considered as crude political readings of autonomous texts, in her book *The Uses of Cultural Studies: A Textbook*, (London: Sage Publications, 2005), p. 22.

governed primarily by the level of a person's education: 'Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.'[131] But this is certainly not my intention. In seeking to dictate an American narrative post 9/11, class was not eradicated totally from the response of the US but does remain curiously quiet. When put into context, the attack on the WTC was an attack on some of the richest people/families/companies in the world. New York is the world centre for capitalism, so how can 9/11 not have been about class? And yet, instead, 9/11 was reduced to the signifier of good versus evil. It is for this reason that my analysis does not focus on class, nor should it stray into a circular Humian debate relating to what constitutes art, taste, high-brow, low-brow, the popular, or the un-popular.[132] What is important here is the post 9/11 narrative as a whole, the myth, and more widely its implications both *for* culture, and *as* culture.

A sophisticated analysis of culture must recognise that culture is self-perpetuating, that sometimes culture is influencing and at other times it is influenced. There is, therefore, a balance between talking about culture as shaping attitudes and culture as being shaped *by* attitudes (and so by global events like 9/11). Culture is defined as, 'the ideas, customs, and art of a particular society.'[133] Going further than this, culture could be described as; a shared consciousness created by the assimilation of the various forms of art, media, and praxis which surround us in our day to day lives and which help to give us a sense of identity, be it national or international. This means that our culture both makes us, and is made *by* us. Although each individual's experience of culture is varied, seeing as we have at least the perception of freedom to choose what films we watch, what books we read and so forth, there is

[131] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction, a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 6.
[132] Reference to the work of 18th Century philosopher David Hume on aesthetics.
[133] *Collins English Dictionary*, (Glasgow: Caledonian International Book Manufacturing Ltd., 1997), p. 202.

still a sense that culture is linked to national identity and so a shared experience. This makes the definition individualistic and blurry. As new forms of technology, particularly the internet, help to spread culture all around the world, many people begin to lose their sense of national identity and come to share a global culture. This culture will inevitably be shaped predominantly by the global hegemony of the period, namely today the USA.

Whilst the USA's position as the economic powerhouse of the world has come under threat in recent years from the Asian economies, the circulation of English as the lingua franca will almost certainly ensure the domination of US culture for the foreseeable future. Whilst it is very difficult to give any precise data as to the impact of US culture on its export market, because culture is not only sold directly but also serves to spread brand awareness and US influence throughout the world, it is clearly a major tool in cementing the domination of both US multi-national products and also US ideology. It is in this context that the following examination of the impact of 9/11 on cultural attitudes is also tempered with an understanding of how cultural attitudes themselves have been received by antagonistic forces outside of the homeland bubble created by 9/11 itself.

Attitude is 'the way a person thinks and behaves'.[134] It is important here to talk about how attitude relates to culture because as we have seen, on its own culture is a very illusive term. But when we have an attitude towards a certain culture then we are able to begin to define ourselves. What we appreciate and surround ourselves by, culturally, may not always equate to a particular attitude; yes culture is *influencing* but not wholly indicative of our more general behaviour and thinking (attitude). Not only this, but if we talk about culture as a shared consciousness we

[134] *Collins English Dictionary*, (Glasgow: Caledonian International Book Manufacturing Ltd., 1997), p. 46.

personify it and hence make it capable itself of having an attitude. September 11 2001 definitely had an impact on the attitude of cultural discourse, both what has been created as a result and what has been consumed. It is important to understand that this cultural attitude has not been derived simply from the events of that day itself, but also significantly by the subsequent actions of the USA, particularly its shift towards a more outwardly aggressive foreign policy. This change in cultural attitude is not exclusively American, although as culture itself it is in part at least *influencing*, and the global tensions which in themselves precipitated 9/11 are evident in the clash between the cultural attitudes of the USA and those who are outside and feel stifled by the sway of US culture on a wider global culture. It is, therefore, the aim of this chapter to examine the way in which culture, and specific cultural artefacts, take a political form in the wake of 9/11, extending my analysis of the cultural myth of 9/11, and the way in which this form can be read from both inside and outside the US.

The Memorial

In *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Baudrillard links the building of the World Trade Center to a shift in the development of capitalism:

> All Manhattan's tall buildings had been content to confront each other in a competitive verticality, and the product of this was an architectural panorama reflecting the capitalist system itself – a pyramidal jungle, whose famous image stretched out before you as you arrived from the sea. That image changed after 1973, with the building of the World Trade Center. The effigy of the system was no longer the obelisk and the pyramid, but the punch card and the statistical graph. This architectural graphism is the embodiment of a system

> that is no longer competitive, but digital and countable, and from which competition has disappeared in favour of networks and monopoly.[135]

Baudrillard's comments here seem to air an element of nostalgia, a longing for the great architectural 'competition' of the past. Perhaps this competition in part was a representation of ambition and idealism amongst architects: a desire to build bigger and better. For Baudrillard, this changed with the building of the original WTC towers, which represented a shift symbolic of a new era of monopoly driven capitalism. In turn, if we examine the plans for the new WTC towers we see not the punch cards and statistical bar charts of the original, but instead a more fragmented picture and an almost postmodern concentration on surface and reflection. Here we see not the coherency of design that was embodied by the twin towers, but an assortment of shapes with seemingly no attached meaning. If anything the towers have a sense of emptiness and the way in which they reflect the skyline makes them appear to vanish into it. Despite this, Daniel Libeskind's composition is full of symbolism.[136] The most obvious manifestation of this can be seen in the design for the Freedom Tower, the tallest of the proposed new WTC scrapers. This will stand at 1368 feet, the same height as the original twin towers, but atop the tower will be an antenna reaching skyward to 1776 feet, the

[135] Jean Baudrillard, pp. 38-39.
[136] Image 7 Plan for the reconstituted WTC site. Squared Design Lab, 'World Trade Center Master Plan', http://www.renewnyc.com/News/mediaresources.asp [accessed 24/07/2010].

year of American independence.[137] The design itself was supposed to mimic the torch of the stature of liberty, and also, as a composition, to surround and protect the memorial plaza below. Even the name, Freedom Tower, is a reaffirmation of the 'greatness' of America, but nonetheless it feels as if it is a further example of the fraudulent ideological purity which provoked the attacks in the first place.

The decision to build not one, not two, but four towers on the site of the previous World Trade Center typifies the failure to recognise that something other than money and building material was lost that day. It is a multiplication which echoes the capitalist logic of New York City as a whole. Far from being an act of defiance, the wrangling over the design of the new WTC site and the gradual erosion of the intended meaning behind Libeskind's master-plan is testament to the primacy of business to the site. Far from being a smooth process, both the new towers and the memorial site involved bitter disputes between the owner of the site Larry Silverstein, the architects commissioned, and the general public too; in particular many family members of those killed in the towers. Add to this the need for heightened security at the new site and it becomes clear why construction there has been a slow and difficult process.[138] As Marita Sturken suggests, 'Ultimately, the Freedom Tower will most likely end up being a symbol not of U.S. power, but of its fear, deeply embodying the new aesthetic of security.'[139]

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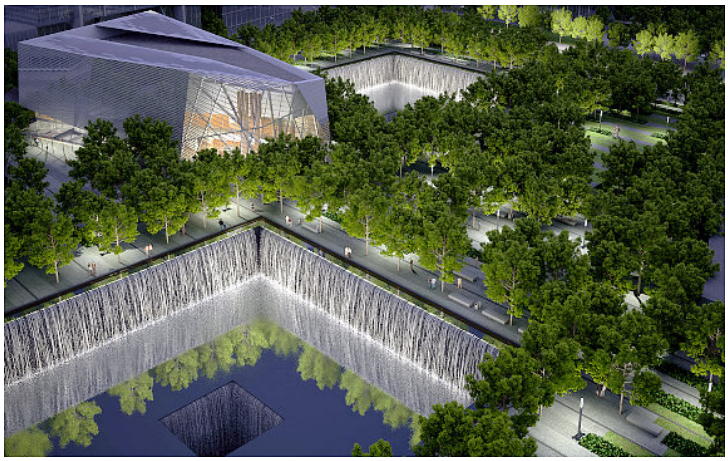
[137] Perhaps then Baudrillard would see these new designs as evidence of a return to some sort of 'symbolic' order after the attacks of 9/11 which itself, according to Baudrillard, 'resuscitated the image'. But is this kind of symbolism anything more than empty provocation? Many in America had called for the Towers to be rebuilt exactly as they had stood before, but this message of defiance would surely have provoked another attack. Is the symbolic jingoism of the new Freedom Tower, however, any less likely to seem like a backward step?

[138] Marita Sturken's book *Tourists of History* takes an in depth look at the development of the site after 9/11 and the competing powers which shaped a process which is still currently ongoing.

[139] Marita Sturken, p. 254.

'Reflecting Absence', the huge memorial project at the former site of the WTC which opened to the public on the tenth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, fares little better in terms of its symbolic value.[140] In 2003 the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation launched a global competition to design a 9/11 memorial. The competition received 5,201 entries from artists and architects around the world. As the name suggests, the winning memorial design is certainly sombre. To this extent, the architect has resisted the temptation to eulogise the dead, but the language of loss and absence used to describe the memorial is also a retreat, or a recoiling, from the event itself. An examination of the language used in the proposal shows us just that: 'This memorial proposes a space that resonates with the feelings of loss and absence that were generated by the destruction of the World Trade Center.'[141] It is interesting to note the reference not to those victims of 9/11 but to 'the destruction of the World Trade Center' itself. This is an early indicator as to the general philosophy of the 9/11 memorial and its concern with the materiality of destruction. Absence and loss are writ large in the language of the proposal but are not engendered with a human element.



'Reflecting Absence' is essentially two pools of water situated where the towers once stood, described as: 'large voids, open and visible reminders of the

[140] Image 8 rendering of the "Reflecting Absence" memorial pools. Squared Design Lab, 'Reflecting Absence', http://www.renewnyc.com/News/mediaresources.asp [accessed 24/07/2010].
[141] Michael Arad and Peter Walker, 'Reflecting Absence', http://www.wtcsitememorial.org/fin7.html [accessed 5/6/2010].

absence.'[142] These pools are surrounded by an arrangement of trees forming small clearings and groves. David Simpson explains that,

> The very title of the project, "Reflecting Absence," mimics and pays homage to Lutyen's great memorial at Thiepval, also composed of names where no bodies could be found, also evocative of an emptiness both physical and metaphysical, an "embodiment of nothingness" [Jay Winter's phrase in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*].[143]

But, in the case of the 9/11 memorial, does it mourn the absence of bodies or the absence of buildings? While the names which appear on the memorial represent a human loss, the fact that the waterfalls are effectively the sunken footprints of the former WTC towers suggests perhaps that it is ambiguous as to which is being memorialised.[144]

In architect Michael Arad's proposal he describes how the designs are meant to portray a sense that the destruction of 9/11, and the deep outpouring of emotion which followed, is somehow unattainable; that it cannot be assimilated into consciousness. In his short description of the experience which the memorial would offer, Arad says that:

> At the bottom of their descent, they find themselves behind a thin curtain of water, staring out at an enormous pool. Surrounding this pool is a continuous ribbon of names. The enormity of this space and the multitude of names that form this endless ribbon underscore the vast scope of the destruction. Standing there at the water's edge, looking at a pool of water that is flowing away into an abyss, a visitor to the site can sense that what is beyond this curtain of water and ribbon of names is inaccessible.[145]

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[142] Michael Arad, http://www.wtcsitememorial.org/fin7.html.
[143] David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 78-79.
[144] If we compare 'Reflecting Absence' to the rather understated 7/7 memorial in London for those who died in the July bombings we see that here there is a much clearer emphasis on mourning the individual. This is not a site reflecting the grief of a nation, although clearly it must be noted that the death toll of 52 compared to the nearly 3,000 that died on September 11 makes this kind of memorial considerably more feasible, it is clearly for the families of those who died. It seems to make no statement whatsoever about Britain, or more broadly terrorism, but instead each of the 52 stainless steel cast columns was cast in a sand mould at high temperatures to give each a unique finish. This is a memorial for the victims of the bombings, not the kind of symbolic statement we see in the 9/11 memorial: Ellis Woodman, '7/7 Memorial in London's Hyde Park', http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/architecture/5767512/77-Memorial-in-Londons-Hyde-Park.html [accessed 17/09/2011].
[145] Michael Arad, http://www.wtcsitememorial.org/fin7.html.

Note how, it is the 'enormity of this space' as much as the names on the walls, which signify the 'scope of the destruction'. This is because the space is directly representative of the size of the towers themselves. Here Arad also refers to something 'beyond' the names. Whilst he quite rightly recognises that 9/11 has, as an event, transcended the death roll which accompanies it, by seeking to reflect a wider context outside of those deaths, the memorial itself neglects its primary function as a site of grief for those who actually lost loved ones in the attacks, becoming instead embroiled in the politics and rhetoric of the post 9/11 moment. For all the sense of beauty, of peace, and of respect that the site does offer it is the concept which is troubling. Reflecting absence, both in its name and its design, seems to suggest a void which can never be filled. It is this very design which came under attack from some victims' families since,

> Although *Reflecting Absence* is not minimalist with a radical intent, it is imbued with a modernist aesthetic of emptiness. While it is designed as a memorial to the people who died, its aesthetic of absence also seems […] an evocation of the towers.[146]

It is this which some families understandably objected to. In its very name Reflecting Absence speaks less of mourning than it does of a demand that we are somehow indebted to loss. It perhaps suggests that by reflecting the absence we are not able to deal with it and move on. Furthermore, it walks the tightrope between the personal and the public, risking becoming a glorified tourist attraction at the base of the new WTC buildings.

[146] Marita Sturken, pp. 266-267.

Reflecting Absence represents only the second major attempt to memorialise the towers themselves. In the immediate aftermath of September 11, and before an official memorial could be built, six designers worked together, creating a $500,000 tribute to the World Trade Center.[147] This temporary memorial consisted of 88 searchlights pointed towards the sky to create the illusion of two 'phantom towers' looming over the Manhattan skyline.[148] The memorial proved so popular, in fact, that when it was finally removed, many complained: 'they had become accustomed to the phantom towers, as if they represented an actual structure.'[149] The idea that these were ghostly towers personifies the buildings in such a way as to question again whether it was the buildings themselves, those massive monuments to wealth and success, which became the objects of grief in the days after 9/11.[150]

Sturken claims that it is this very desire to re-imagine the towers which 'disavows' the truly horrific tale of September 11 itself:

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[147] Image 9 the temporary 9/11 memorial. Nick Leshi, 'tribute in light continues', http://nickleshi.blogspot.co.il/2010/09/tribute-in-light-continues.html [accessed 9/01/2011].
[148] Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Visions of the Apocalypse: Spectacles of Destruction in American Cinema*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), p. 37. Image from: http://www.acclaimimages.com/_gallery/_free_images/0420-0906-1122-5738_memorial_for_9_11_o.jpg
[149] Wheeler Winston Dixon, p. 37.
[150] Ann Kaplan also describes how one newspaper printed a ghostly vision of the Twin Towers on its front page: 'People tried to fill in or recover the absence of the Towers by creating images of them, The *New Yorker* created an unforgettable front page that was apparently totally black, but within whose dim darkness one could glimpse shadows or the ghosts of the Towers haunting the city.' (p.13).

> It is to disavow the most harrowing images of that day, that of people falling and jumping to their deaths because they were trapped by the buildings themselves. The mourning of the loss of the buildings thus acts to screen out the deaths of those who died there.[151]

The favouring of images of valour over those of direct victims of the attacks is just one way in which the myth of 9/11 was being willingly constructed, and it is understandable since there was, perhaps, something comforting in the towers of light, a sense of that indestructibility that was lost the day the towers, in their corporeal form, collapsed. As Jean Baudrillard poetically describes, the collapse of the towers was not the end for them, but rather part of their transformation:

> although the two towers have disappeared, they have not been annihilated. Even in their pulverized state, they have left behind an intense awareness of their presence. No one who knew them can cease imagining them and the imprint they made on the skyline from all points of the city. Their end in material space has borne them off into a definitive imaginary space. By the grace of terrorism, the World Trade Center has become the world's most beautiful building – the eighth wonder of the world![152]

This imaginary space is what the temporary memorial seems to project itself onto, mourning the loss of what was in effect a very cinematic monument. The two beams of light recall the image of the movie projector and with it the glory days of the Hollywood film industry itself. To this extent it is a memorial inclined towards nostalgia rather than the healing of grief.

The sense of grief without an end, which is so clearly articulated by Reflecting Absence, is concurrent with the same principle as the War on Terror: just as the war can have no end, since terror itself is an abstract concept and therefore not a force to be defeated, neither too can the absence be made into presence since attempts to do this meet with reflection. Both the continual cycle of the waterfalls and the 'endless' ribbon of names continue the theme of an unanswerable absence.

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[151] Marita Sturken, pp. 242-243.
[152] Jean Baudrillard, p. 48.

The 9/11 memorial designs invert space itself, locating the pools in recesses where the towers previously stood. Here the landscape itself appears to shadow the loss of the towers, leaving two quite literal abysses. For this reason the memorial site bears a resemblance to Oskar's imaginary skyscrapers for the dead in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*:

> So what about skyscrapers for dead people that were built down? They could be underneath the skyscrapers for living people that are built up. You could bury people one hundred floors down, and a whole dead world could be underneath the living one.[153]

This is certainly what you would call keeping the dead close. It seems almost morbid that the memorial occupies the space at the foot of the proposed new WTC towers, which is after all effectively a graveyard for those victims whose bodies were never recovered and whose remains were buried beneath the rubble.

As a memorial its impact, however, is best appreciated from an aerial view, or at least from the top of one of the many skyscrapers which huddle around and almost seem to shield the pools in lower Manhattan. This fits the general topological logic of the Manhattan cityscape. Verticality is everything, even when the memorial is situated at ground level. This is certainly not something which has changed since 9/11. Whilst the memorial site is certainly beautiful in terms of its scope and architecture, it does seem to lack that personal nature already discussed which is essential for any great memorial. Whilst in Manhattan you can also visit a much more private memorial site, the Ground Zero Museum Workshop, located in the Meat Packing district some hour walk north of the main site. Having opened in 2005, the Museum offers visitors an intimate story of the attacks told through exhibits from ground zero itself and the recovery period, and photographs taken by Gary Marlon Suson, the official photographer for the Uniformed Firefighters

[153] Jonathan Safran Foer, p. 3.

Association and the only photographer granted access to the site during the clean-up operation. The power of the stories told through this museum sweeps away the grandiose spectacle of the official memorial site, all inside a space only large enough to accommodate around twenty to thirty people. What most strikes you about this museum is the lack of political rhetoric. There does not seem to be any anger towards those who committed the atrocities of September 11th, but instead a recognition that the attacks were the outcome of two radically different cultures failing to understand each other and a reverence for those who lost their lives as a result, as well as exulting those who participated in rescue and recovery operations.

Amy Waldman's novel, *The Submission*, is fraught with tension, depicting an America embattled by conflicting ideologies.[154] Although the story centres on a fictional 9/11 memorial designed by Muslim architect Mohammad Khan, it mirrors many aspects of the public and political problems faced during the design and construction of Reflecting Absence. In the novel, which takes place only a short number of years following 9/11, an anonymous competition is launched in order to design the memorial. After a jury, made up mostly of artists, is persuaded by Claire Burwell, the lone family member on the jury who lost her husband in the attacks, to back a design known as 'The Garden', there is shock in the room when Paul Rubin reads out the name of the architect behind the design. Paul, chairman of the jury, is perhaps the rational centre of the novel, around which a sea of emotional turmoil erupts from the other characters. Ultimately Khan's selection becomes the scapegoat for a re-ignition of the hatred and division within America between the American Muslim population and those who see their religion as responsible for the attacks of 9/11. This is a short summary of a novel which attempts to depict the deep rooted

[154] Amy Waldman, *The Submission*, (London: William Heinemann, 2011).

emotional sentiments and racial discrimination brought about by the 9/11 attacks. The novel itself is filled with the almost hyperbolic language of conflict, but the division becomes much more complex than Muslim versus Christian, or Muslim versus victim. When racial hatred begins to spill out onto the streets, with Muslim women having their headscarves pulled from their faces, a stunt first pulled by family member Sean Gallagher at an anti-Khan demonstration which inspires copycats in cities across the nation, groups of Muslims themselves make public their desire for Khan to withdraw his entry.

Both Mohammad Khan (Mo) and Claire, find their principles severely tested by the situation. Claire is the supposed representative of the victims' families on the jury and, despite her own liberal support for Khan, she becomes increasingly disillusioned with both the treatment she receives from angry family members, and with Khan's own refusal to explain his design. On the other hand Mo, who is both American born and not a practicing Muslim, is angered by the prejudice displayed by those who rally against his design. His response to fears that his garden is based on an Islamic martyr's paradise is to refuse to answer questions which he feels would not be asked of a non-Muslim. His stubborn refusal both to condemn the September 11 attacks and to explain the Islamic influences in his design alienates him from Claire, the public, and eventually many of his own supporters. But for Mo he is merely standing up for his right to be treated as any other American would.

Mo is a challenging hero character, if indeed he can be described in this case as a hero at all. Even he, it seems at times, struggles with his own motives; is his relentless pursuit of his right to design the memorial based on his own ambitions as an architect, a move to further his career, or is it a statement of the liberal sensibilities he believes should be the foundations of America? There are other

liberals depicted in the novel who support Khan for these reasons too; Claire's ex Jack returns out of the blue to remind Claire, much to her irritation, that supporting Khan is in the interests of a liberal and peaceful America:

> "There's more, much more, at stake here than a memorial – don't you see that? […] The attack made everyone afraid of appearing unpatriotic, of questioning government, leaders. Fear has justified war, torture, secrecy, all kinds of violations of rights and liberties."[155]

But Claire is wavering in her support, and seeking the definitive answers decides to confront Khan himself.

By the time the two meet, Mo's cynicism, justifiable after his brutal treatment at the hands of both the press and public, has hardened him beyond the reach of Claire: 'She didn't understand her own country, he [Mo] thought: it would take more than a new memorial to unite it.'[156] In fact, the actions of the press come under heavy scrutiny in the novel, a move made particularly interesting by Waldman's own background as an important figure at the *New York Times*.[157] Both Mo and Jack are clearly right to an extent here, in that the memorial comes to stand for much more than the peaceful and beautiful garden originally intended by Mo. His simple explanation of the Garden barely becomes an issue, as both his name and heritage overwhelm most talk of the design itself. At one point Mo describes his design as follows:

> "The Garden has order, which its geometry manifests, for a reason, which is that it's an answer to the disorder that was inflicted on us. It's not meant to look like nature. Or like confusion, which is what the attack left behind. If anything, it's meant to evoke the layout of the city it will sit in."[158]

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[155] Amy Waldman, p. 201.
[156] Amy Waldman, p. 274.
[157] Journalism in *The Submission* is depicted as a dirty dog eat dog practice in which journalists will go to any lengths to get their next scoop. Alyssa Spier is the character who most embodies this, a journalist who is always striving to be the first on the scene, and looking for any way to twist words into a more sensational story. This eventually results in the death of Asma Anwar, a Muslim Bangladeshi immigrant.
[158] Amy Waldman, p. 139.

This stands in stark contrast to the other memorial fought for by some of the artists on the jury, the name of which, 'The Void', seems to evoke 'Reflecting Absence' in both its darkness and in its suggestion of a hole rent in the American psyche which can never be filled. It is, however, difficult to see Waldman's novel as giving any real comment on the actual design of 'Reflecting Absence' which in some ways lies between the hopelessness of 'The Void' and the beauty of 'The Garden'. What clearly does come under scrutiny, however, is the jingoistic reaction which came to the fore after 9/11 and also the critique of the involvement of the press in stirring up hatred and division.

The ending of the novel is telling in this aspect, jumping some twenty years into the future to listen to testimonies from various people involved in the memorial process. A student, Molly, has decided to make a documentary about 'The Garden' and the struggles involved, and through her visit to see Mo, the reader hears how the story eventually unfolded. We discover that Mo did eventually withdraw his plans after the enormous pressure put on him to do so and that 'The Garden' was never built.[159] In interview an ailing Claire Burwell describes with distaste what was built in its place:

> "A Garden of Flags? Hideous. As ugly as the whole process. […] And so many more Americans ended up dying in the wars the attack prompted than in the attack itself that by the time they finished it this memorial it seemed wrong to have expended so much effort and money. But it's almost like we fight over what we can't settle in real life through these symbols. They're our nation's afterlife."[160]

[159] Although it must be noted that Mo does go on to build 'The Garden', or a version of it, as the 'private pleasure garden of some rich Muslim' (p. 296). This is after Mo's international reputation takes off.
[160] Amy Waldman, p. 295.

Although clearly not specified, it can only be assumed that this 'Garden of Flags' is in fact

a garden of *American* flags. This is rather 'hideous' in Burwell's estimation because of its connection with symbolic nationalism. Indeed, students at Pepperdine University, Malibu, attempted something along similar lines on the ninth anniversary of the September 11 attacks when they planted a national flag for each of the victims.[161] This is just a small part of the vast culture of memorialisation that has developed around the September 11 attacks and which carries a distinct sense of jingoism. This is a jingoism that is relied upon but that is also threatening to internal relations between many Americans and the US' Muslim population. *The Submission* suggests in its finale that, the sacrifice made by Khan is indicative of a 'submission' of the American Muslim, who must give up certain rights in order to reside in a post 9/11 USA. Although it appears that in the twenty years after Khan withdraws his design that relations have healed considerably, it would seem that it is largely through the 'submission' of the American Muslim population than the giving of ground by the majority of the US public.

So the memorial in *The Submission* may be less a comment on 'Reflecting Absence' as much as it is a reaction to the outcry which emerged over plans to build an 'Islamic Centre' close to Ground Zero. The plans to build the centre, which

[161] Image 10 a garden of flags at Pepperdine University, Malibu: BBC, 'In pictures: US marks 9/11 anniversary', http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-11272386 [accessed 11/09/2010].

include a Mosque, were reported in late 2009 and caused a stir which reminded everyone that the pain of 9/11 was still fresh for many people, particularly those whose family members died. The Imam, and leader behind the development, Feisal Rauf, told the BBC that: "It wasn't until the election cycle began that this became used as a wedge issue, and our story was hijacked and misrepresented and the fears of the people were whipped up."[162] Nonetheless, on the ninth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, thousands of people took to the streets to protest over the plans. While some came out in its support, many family members were moved to condemn the insensitivity of the proposal.

The Submission is largely a balanced text which does show sympathy towards the victims of 9/11, those who lost loved ones, and yet by making Mohammad Khan one of its key characters it cannot help but promote empathy for those whose religious beliefs have made them the target of much racial hatred in the aftermath of the attacks. Mo is presented as a headstrong yet likeable and contemporary character. He is distinctly unthreatening and barely even religious. It is for these reasons that his persecution appears so out of proportion. The myth of Islam as an inherently violent religion is one of the unspoken corner stones of US foreign policy in that it allows Islamic countries and peoples to be targeted with impunity. Ansar, member of the MACC (The Muslim American Coordinating Council), sums this up well saying,

> "They say that when you watch the movies, you root for the cowboys, but when you read the history, you root for the Indians. Americans are locked in a movie theater watching Westerns right now, and we've got to break down the walls."[163]

[162] Laura Trevelyan, 'Imam Feisal Rauf: New York Islamic centre "dream alive"', http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-12002914 [accessed 12/01/2012].
[163] Amy Waldman, *The Submission*, p. 80.

Here, he places the blame for the myth squarely at the feet of culture. *The Submission* represents a world of symbolism, suggesting that Americans live in a world of black and white binaries, where you are either a cowboy or an Indian, a patriot or a terrorist, a Muslim or an American. Of course the purpose of the book is to challenge that world, doing so through an attack on the three pillars which have in essence created it: politics, culture, and the media.

Wounded America

The wound at Ground Zero is the symbolic centre of Spike Lee's *25th Hour*. When the camera follows Monty's friends Frank and Jacob into Frank's high-rise apartment it is immediately brought to our attention that the apartment directly overlooks the site. The pair walk straight to the window and the camera takes a long and lingering look downwards at the ruins. Dark and foreboding music swells into the foreground and when it recedes, as the two begin to converse, it continues to linger beneath the scene. Jacob tells Frank that the *New York Times* says that the air down here is bad, but Frank retorts that he reads the *Post*. In a shot spanning around five minutes, while Jake and Frank discuss the grim prospects of Monty's prison time, Ground Zero is squarely in the background, the two characters on either side of the window. There is a clear connection between Monty's prison term and the site itself, the grey walls of the ruins and the military presence there signifying it as a kind of prison. It is when their conversation ends that the site is brought alarmingly and sharply into focus, the music volume increasing as we are confronted by close ups of the

devastation. The scene seems almost reminiscent of a lunar landing with its grey desolation, and the American flag planted there, lonely and fluttering. It is, to all intents and purposes, an unearthly place.

It is hard to imagine how New Yorkers must have felt when coming face to face with the gaping hole that was Ground Zero for so many years. Many refused to return to the area, some choosing to leave New York altogether and relocate. Even a decade after the collapse of the towers the site's rejuvenation plans were years from completion and during this time the ugly mess of Ground Zero was a blot on the landscape. In *The Submission* it is described as a 'suppurating wound', but what does this language of 'wounding' represent?[164]

The word 'wound' presents New York as a living, breathing organism, and one in need of 'healing'. It is a further example of the personification of the towers which helped to draw them in to the national narrative of trauma, grief, and vengeance:

> Again and again, the towers are described with the same terms used for suffering people: from George Bush saying "the evil doers… have hurt our buildings," to the repeated use of expressions like "wounded buildings," "victimized buildings," "tortured structures," "death of the towers," and "death of the twins."[165]

Mark Wigley makes the telling observation that, '[t]he buildings became victims, and in so doing victimize those who watch them suffer.'[166] Perhaps it is too far to suggest that all those who watched became victims of 9/11, since the obsessive replaying of the footage seemed to turn much of its audience into voyeurs rather than grievers. Nevertheless, there was a sense of complicity that came from watching the towers come down. As already discussed, the terrorists' actions on September 11

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[164] Amy Waldman, p. 29.
[165] Mark Wigley, 'Insecurity By Design', *After the World Trade Center*, ed. Michael Sorkin and Sharon Zukin, (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 72.
[166] Mark Wigley, p. 72.

were not merely about killing people, but they also were designed to render a space unsafe. By attacking the World Trade Center the terrorists not only killed 2,996 people, they also traumatised the family members of those who died, those who worked in the buildings, those who worked there but survived, even those who had ever set foot in the towers and were left to think, 'that could have been me'. More than that, they rendered the skyscraper itself an 'unsafe space' and recalled other attacks which had aimed to deal strategic civilian casualties such as those on public transport systems:

> Terrorists […] play with […] fantasies about architecture, wounding buildings as often as people. Damaged buildings represent damaged bodies. […] Terrorism is not about killing people, but about dispensing the threat of death by producing frightening images.[167]

When I began writing this section I decided to look back at my own previous uses of the word 'wound'. I found that I had used it in three different ways; firstly to describe the state of America after the 9/11 attacks ('wounded'); secondly in reference to the gaping hole in the sides of the towers themselves before their collapse; and the final way in which I, and Waldman's narrator, use the word 'wound' is to refer to the barren site itself. What is interesting is that in none of these three cases can the wound be said to have healed in the subsequent decade: the wound in the side of the towers caused their inevitable collapse; the site itself is being slowly rejuvenated but the language of loss spoken by the two enormous and open pools of 'Reflecting Absence' signify still open wounds; and America persists in wounding itself in the wars that have followed 9/11.

The word 'wound' itself is important. Not only was it frequently used in connection with both America and Ground Zero in the aftermath of 9/11, its significance in portraying a harm which remains still open but also still painful

[167] Mark Wigley, pp. 71-72.

elevates it above other similar words such as scar. Wounds can be dressed, but often take a long time to heal. They can be both physical and psychological but importantly, they can be as much a wound to a reputation as to a body itself. Wounds that are left untreated become infected, hence the description of Ground Zero as a 'suppurating wound'. And even when wounds have finally healed they will always leave a scar.

It is difficult to see how the healing of wounds can take place in a post 9/11 culture which seems to draw recycled images from the reservoir of the attacks themselves and continues to employ the rhetoric of wounds which will never heal. E. Ann Kaplan, in her book *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, sees evidence of a *positive* move behind the memorial designs, saying that with them,

> We have begun to translate the trauma into a language of acceptance while deliberately keeping the wound open; we are learning to mourn what happened, bear witness to it, and yet move forward.[168]

But surely 'keeping the wound open' is the complete opposite of 'moving forward'. The memorial itself should play an important part in the 'healing' process, splintering a fractured America back together again. This is certainly what Paul Rubin hopes will come out of the selected memorial design in *The Submission*:

> The trauma, for Paul, had come later, when he watched the replay, pledged allegiance to the devastation. You couldn't call yourself an American if you hadn't, in solidarity, watched your fellow Americans being pulverized, yet what kind of America did watching create? A traumatized victim? A charged up avenger? A queasy voyeur? Paul, and he suspected many Americans, harboured all of these protagonists. The memorial was meant to tame them.[169]

But 'The Garden' memorial that is eventually built fails in its attempt to unite America and sew up the gaping wound at Ground Zero, instead exposing the wound

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[168] E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 147.
[169] Amy Waldman, p. 13.

in American race relations. Rubin's dream of an America 'tamed' by the memorial, is just that: a dream. The reality is, of course, far more complicated:

> "Instead of providing solace, the work of fiction cauterizes the wound with uncomfortable questions and unflinching reflection. It sears the event into the collective imagination by embedding the initial shock in narratives, poems, theater, and tales". [Ulrich] Baer argues that as against political explanations, which aim for closure in the manner of Hollywood cinema, "literature resists the call for closure."[170]

This can certainly be extrapolated beyond simply literature to include culture and even language itself more broadly. Essentially what is being argued is that culture leaves a permanent and historical reminder of the pain. The cultural outpouring that accompanied 9/11 marks it indelibly into the fabric of US twenty-first century consciousness.

Like *The Submission* and literature more broadly, as characterised by Baer, the memorial too 'resists the call for closure'.[171] The open wound, so positively described by Kaplan, is surely reflective of something which can never heal, or at least which will never be allowed to heal. After 9/11, US cultural and media outlets became saturated with a lexical rhetoric which was pro-military and obsessed with discussing the notion of 'freedom' and the idea of democratising the world. There was a shift in language which echoed the shift to a militant culture. Words like 'liberate' replaced 'conquer' in the vocabulary of the military and the signifier 'terror' became the key bargaining chip in US diplomacy (or non-diplomacy in most cases). David Simpson highlights just a few of the stock terms which became a common currency:

> so we have *sacred ground*, *Ground Zero*, the *heroes* of 9/11, the careening hyperbole that shifted from *shock and awe* to *infinite justice* to *enduring freedom* to the *Freedom Tower* itself. All of these terms, and others like them, have already been naturalized and pass by without question in the national

[170] E. Ann Kaplan, p. 137.
[171] It is also interesting that Baer should align Hollywood and politics so, considering the way in which Hollywood seemed to tow the party line after September 11.

> media and the popular imagination. The normalization of these terms within the standard lexicon so that they can be reported without question is precisely one of the most effective ways in which culture is remade.[172]

That these words were passed from the media coverage of the event and were absorbed into public and cultural discourse suggests an agency behind the 'remaking' of culture, as if culture were somehow controllable from inside any one organisation. The growth of culture after 9/11 was an organic response to overblown fears which certainly had a basis in media and political output, but which were also a natural response to the conditions of the attack itself. Far from being indicative of any kind of government conspiracy, the language employed after 9/11 is evidence of the 9/11 myth at work in its most subconscious form. That most of this language is still in popular use today suggests that the wounds of 9/11 are very much still open.

While many works of popular culture have tended to support increased militarisation and promote a culture of fear, and this can be seen in the expansion and increased popularisation of the thriller and war genres in both contemporary literature and film, there have also been examples of texts which have attacked the role played by the government and the media in the aftermath of 9/11. Amongst the conspiracy theories suggested by texts such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* and the internet movie sensation *Zeitgeist*, the popular tract of Trey Parker's scathing puppet comedy *Team America: World Police* stands out as the most interesting satirical attack on US foreign policy and cultural attitudes. [173]

The stereotype projected by *Team America* is a commonly held view of American egotism and military incompetence, with the ironic twist that the entire cast are puppets. In the name of fighting terrorism, Team America proceed to travel around the world accidentally blowing up the most important historical and cultural

[172] David Simpson, p. 17.
[173] *Zeitgeist*. Peter Joseph. USA. GMP. 2007., *Team America: World Police*. Trey Parker. USA. Paramount Pictures. 2004.

landmarks they encounter such as the Sphinx and the Eiffel Tower. It is not that the team are represented as evil doers, just that they show a complete lack of understanding for other cultures, believing fervently that the world *wants* them interfering in their countries. They deliver such lines as "Don't worry, we stopped the terrorists" whilst all around them natives cry and buildings burn.

American ignorance is satirised in *Team America* by the film's rigorous appeal to stereotypes. The film opens in Paris where we are greeted by art, berets, market stalls, and a French child singing "Frère Jacques". Furthermore locations around the world are defined by their geographical relationship to America: Paris is introduced as 'Paris, France 3,635 Miles East of America,' whilst Kim Jong Il's palace is 'North Korea, Asia, 5,945 Miles West of America.' No-one is stereotyped more obsessively in the film than the terrorist figure himself. When actor/team member Gary is asked to infiltrate a terrorist group in order to find the location of WMD the team do little more than wrap a towel around his head, paint his face darker and stick thick hair on it.[174] The effect is highly comedic and is added to by the leather jacket he continues to wear. Rather than subtitle foreign languages throughout the film they are instead reduced to a small set of words which are both recognisable to the audience, stereotypical, and also in their contexts nonsensical. The best example of this is the terrorist figures whose main vocabulary consists of 'derka derka, Mohammad Jihad.'

[174] Image 11 stereotyping in *Team America*.

The main problem, however, is not the team's ignorance but a combination of that ignorance with a naïve belief that they understand the situation. Lisa, the team's 'psychology expert' summarises this when she succinctly describes 'how the terrorists think' as 'usually a case of malignant narcissism brought on during childhood.' A similarly reductive view is expressed by the team's leader, Spotteswoode, during his first encounter with Gary:

> SPOTTESWOODE: "I hate to break this to you Gary, but some people out there want you dead. They're called terrorists, Gary. And they hate everything about you."
> GARY: "Why? What did I do to them? I'm just a Broadway actor."
> SPOTTESWOODE: "It's not who you are, Gary, it's what you stand for. And every single minute, of every single day, the terrorists are planning new ways to kill you and everyone else who lives in a free country. The only thing standing in their way is us."

Here the terrorist is presented as *anti-freedom*, a kind of motiveless nihilist. Spotteswoode appeals to a global threat; it is not a war against America but against freedom. But in turn it is America's problem to deal with, it is an American responsibility:

> LISA: "Every country in the world is in danger."
> GARY: "How is it my responsibility to do something."
> LISA: "Because, like it or not, you're the one with the power to do something."

And whilst Gary begins by questioning this responsibility, in part wanting nothing to do with the dangerous fight against terrorism, the rest of the team seem to relish the opportunity which gives them a heightened sense of importance: 'Let's go police the world,' announces Spotteswoode.

The US government itself has built the country's reputation as the World Police Force so ridiculed in *Team America* and with this comes a moral responsibility to do so under a banner of truth. The War on Terror has been couched in such a way that it is perceived by many as a war for freedom and furthermore a war against evil. In his book, *The Abuse of Evil*, Richard Bernstein describes how

the term 'evil' has been grossly misused since 9/11 and the dangers he associates with this 'abuse':

> But something different happened on 9/11. Overnight (literally) our politicians and the media were broadcasting about evil. We were flooded with headlines about evil and images displaying evil […]. Suddenly the world was divided in a simple (and simplistic) duality – the evil ones seeking to destroy us and those committed to the war against evil. […] What is so disturbing about the post-9/11 evil talk is its rigidity and popular appeal. Few stop to ask what we really mean by evil.[175]

Such a binary opposition as is presented by the term 'evil' oversimplifies the complex political and socio-economic climate which is at the heart of today's terrorist threat.[176] The term evil is a particularly emotive one, making it difficult to analyse in an objective fashion: 'It is an abuse because, instead of inviting us to question and to *think*, this talk of evil is being used to stifle *thinking*.'[177] To express the opinion that terrorists are evil is to imply that they are motiveless, driven by an innate hatred and an unfathomable will to destroy.

Despite the, at times, harshly critical nature of *Team America* towards US foreign policy and intervention, as well as an American ignorance and naivety, some critics found the film's message either confused, contradictory, or even self-defeating. Mark Kelly, for instance, writes,

> The problem is that it ultimately presents a really stupid view of geopolitics in an uncritical way, and which thus appears in the piece as the logical, positive conclusion from the movie's negative, satirical force.[178]

Kelly finds the film ultimately conservative and lacking in irony, and Parker and Stone certainly complicate what would otherwise be a very leftist picture by also

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[175] Richard J. Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion Since 9/11*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 10.
[176] Interestingly, this was not a rhetoric restricted to the US. Phil Fitzsimmons, also notes the use of the word 'evil' in Britain after 7/7: 'In the London newspapers alone over sixty articles and short pieces were headed with the word "evil"' – Phil Fitzsimmons, 'Little White Lies: 9/11 and the Recasting of Evil through Metaphor', in *Promoting and Producing Evil*, ed. Nancy Billias, (New York: Rodopi, 2010), p. 10.
[177] Richard J. Bernstein, p. 11.
[178] Mark G. E. Kelly, 'Only in America', http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/48/teamamerica.php [accessed 20/02/2012].

heavily satirising those phoney leftists who 'jump on the fuck Team America bandwagon'. Criticism is heaped upon 'left-wing' celebrities such as Michael Moore, who is described as a 'giant socialist weasel', and a whole network of celebrities with the invented title of the 'Film Actors' Guild' which neatly abbreviates to FAG. Furthermore, America's pro-activity in the fight against terrorism is justified by the incompetence of the UN, the toothlessness of which is demonstrated during a scene in which Hans Blix, who was at the time the UN's chief weapons inspector, visits Kim Jong Il's palace:

> BLIX: "let me see your palace or else."
> IL: "Or else what?"
> BLIX: "Or else we will be very very angry with you and we will write you a letter telling you how angry we are."

So *Team America* manages to both champion and at the same time demonise the left, particularly its stance on freedom. Where it defends American actions is where it recognises a need to protect the national interest at a cost, demonstrated in the ironically titled song, 'Freedom isn't Free'. Kelly attacks the film for its 'America-centric' logic, but perhaps this misses the point that *Team America* does not need a coherent political message in order to present a coherent vision of recent US interventionism and its role in popular culture. Here he admits that, '*Team America* speaks to us from and about the contemporary American perspective, the real American perspective that isn't right or left but just monstrously ill informed.'[179] *Team America*, therefore, embraces its own limitations as a piece of popular culture by sitting itself spectacularly on the fence. In the end, it leaves its audience no choice but to wave the American flag in the face of terrorism even if much of the film satirically attacks US foreign policy.

[179] Mark G. E. Kelly, 'Only in America', http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/48/teamamerica.php [accessed 20/02/2012].

What was presented after 9/11 was a national wound, not just an attack aimed at New York but at the very core values of what it meant to be an 'American'. *Team America* certainly seems to originate from inside this cauldron of jingoistic action-movie-esque sentiment. The nationalistic fervour, however, led to an environment in which it became very difficult to criticise the government's actions and led to conservative voices dominating the media. This excessive nationalism was typified by the description of the dead of 9/11 in governmental addresses and media formats as 'heroes', a word certainly designed to provoke an aggressive national pride. But describing these men and women as 'heroes' already placed them within the global grand narrative of the war on terror. They were, 'paraded to legitimate more deaths elsewhere – the deaths of others as innocent as themselves.'[180] Immortalising these casualties only lent more potency to the actions of those who committed the crime in the first place and crystallised the inevitable path towards global conflict.

Around this same time the cultural landscape was also being changed by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. At times these wars began to throw up questions which unsettled the general post 9/11 narrative of American victimisation and retribution. Aside from the obvious accusations of US imperialism which accompanied, in particular, the conflict in Iraq, the outcry in response to photographs appearing out of Abu Ghraib prison was a serious challenge to the 9/11 mythology which had thus far served to prop-up US interventionism in the post 9/11 period.

When, in 2004, photographs surfaced showing the torture and sexual abuse of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison by US soldiers, the Bush administration tried understandably to distance itself from these soldiers. These were said to be

[180] David Simpson, p. 47.

unrepresentative of American values but it is difficult to avoid allegations of the American hypocrisy displayed in these photos:

> The Abu Ghraib photos have narrowed the gap between them and us as declared by government propaganda – narrowed it to a point where it ought to have become impossible for George Bush to announce, without being shouted down, that America is engaged in "a war to save civilization itself."[181]

Despite denial from those in the government in response to the atrocities at Abu Ghraib, Stephen Prince identifies a new wave of popular horror films which seem to respond to the abuses, including films such as *Saw* (2004), and *Hostel* (2005) which revel in extreme scenes of torture.[182] It is interesting that the treatment of such horrific practices abroad enters the cultural domain so rapidly in comparison to what we have seen of Hollywood's comparatively slow response to the horror at home (September 11th). Furthermore, the torturing at Abu Ghraib exposes the myth of 9/11, and asks powerful questions about the nature of good and evil which are taken as rigid in the US conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is interesting that simultaneously, in many contemporary action films, the standard American hero figure was being replaced by the anti-hero, or a hero who is either conflicted or struggles with his 'human' darker side. These are not always just flawed heroes, but rather heroes who often make extreme and dubious moral decisions and walk the tightrope between hero and villain. Perhaps the most obvious example of this figure in US popular culture is *24*'s Jack Bauer, but the figure has also become prevalent in film post 2004.

This phenomenon, which openly displays the moral ambiguity inherent in the hero character who, in order to fight for justice, must also sacrifice others for the cause, can be seen in films such as *Casino Royale* (2006), *The Dark Knight* (2008),

[181] David Simpson, p. 112.
[182] Stephen Prince, p. 283.

Watchmen (2009), and *Kick Ass* (2010). *Kick Ass*, starring Nicholas Cage, is probably the most basic example, taking a superhero story and adding excessive scenes of brutal vigilante justice and killings, perpetrated by both Cage's character, Big Daddy, and his rather young daughter, Mindy (Chloë Grace Moretz). That these are revenge killings allows the characters to revel in the violence in a way normally reserved for villain figures. As heroes, both in filmic terms and in literal terms (since they are dressed as comic book heroes), they demand the support of the audience, but their revelry asks moral questions of the way in which heroes are defined in popular culture.

In Christopher Nolan's Batman film *The Dark Knight* we see Batman (Christian Bale), traditionally a character who is the embodiment of justice, struggling with his inner demons when he comes face to face with the Joker (Heath Ledger). As the representative of anarchy, the Joker character is really the antithesis of Batman, but he is also presented as inherently a part of the human psyche which Batman must confront and overcome in order to vanquish him and restore order. Certainly the rhetoric after 9/11 alluded to the superhero nature of both those in command and those involved in the September 11th rescue and clean up operation. This is clearly expressed in Susan Faludi's *The Terror Dream*. It is not until after the war in Iraq, and the surfacing of the Abu Ghraib photographs that the hero becomes such a tormented figure in US film. When Daniel Craig took over from Piers Brosnan for the James Bond film *Casino Royale*, a conscious effort was made by the creators to give Bond a much colder temperament. Since Bond is, effectively, little more than a hit man, this is perhaps befitting, but nonetheless this new direction for Bond surely says something about an increased recognition of the damage being a

hero causes to the psyche of those who must do what is asked of them (especially in the name of their country).

The final example is perhaps the most interesting and comprehensive attempt to portray this anti-hero figure. Zack Snyder's *Watchmen* is a film in which its superhero protagonists display very different approaches to the administration of justice. The most problematic and extreme case is represented by the villain of the film, Ozymandias (Matthew Goode), who decides that the only way in which the US and Russia, set as the film is during the Cold War, can learn to live in peace, is to kill millions on both sides in an event staged to blame one of the other superheroes, the immortal Dr. Manhattan (Billy Crudup). This planned catastrophic event is justified by Ozymandias as killing millions in order to save billions in the face of an impending Cold War Armageddon. The other superheroes attempt to stop Ozymandias when they eventually discover his plans but arrive too late and must eventually make the decision to cover-up their knowledge in order to safeguard the peace bought by the deaths of the innocent. Only Rorschach (Jackie Earle Haley), a masked vigilante, refuses complicity in the cover-up and is subsequently killed by Dr. Manhattan. Rorschach's own brutal methods mark him out as another dark hero figure and there is also the Comedian (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), a hero character who is shown engaging in rape and murder whilst fighting for the US in the Vietnam War.

That *Watchmen* places its heroes in the alternative scenario of a past in which the Cold War progresses along a different path and is again teetering towards the brink of Armageddon, perhaps allows for the safe exploration of a sensitive topic relating to the position of the US military and hero figures. It is interesting to note that *Watchmen*, *Kick Ass*, and *Batman* all also use the superhero as a literal and figurative mask to explore these issues.

A documentary broadcast in 2007, *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*, details the abuses which occurred within the Iraqi prison and goes further to suggest a chain of responsibility leading directly to Bush and the then Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld.[183] The documentary begins with an account of the Stanley Milgram experiment conducted in 1961 during which subjects were asked to administer what they thought were electric shocks to a victim in another room. The results of the experiment came to show that most people were willing to commit acts of torture as long as they believed that they were being ordered to do so by a higher authority. The documentary goes on to discuss, through interviews with former prisoners and guards from Abu Ghraib, the affect of certain regulations handed down which created an environment in which the torture and abuse of prisoners became not only acceptable but standard practice. To an extent, films which portray the hero as simultaneously monstrous echo the position of US soldiers abroad, valorised as they were by the media but as proven by the photographs, all too human as well.

It is easy to understand why the Bush administration would attempt to lay the blame on a small number of misbehaving soldiers in order to protect the American reputation abroad and also the reputation of the administration itself. As Naomi Klein suggests, the abuse of prisoners is 'a virtually foolproof indication that politicians are trying to impose a system – whether political, religious or economic – that is rejected by large numbers of the people they are ruling.'[184] But not only this, something greater was at stake here: and that is the narrative presented to the American people themselves:

> The international publicity given to the abuses at Abu Ghraib is a source of embarrassment to the US administration. But another important factor is that acknowledging that Americans commit atrocities doesn't fit with the "moral"

[183] *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*. Rory Kennedy. USA. Moxie Firecracker Films. 2007.
[184] Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, (London: Penguin Books, 2007), p. 125.

> universe *constructed* by the administration. After all, we are the good guys who are dedicated to spreading democracy and freedom, and we are fighting the bad guys – the evil ones. In a world where there is a stark black-and-white opposition between good and evil, good guys do not commit evil atrocities.[185]

As Klein suggests, the embarrassment caused by the photographs is reason enough to want to distance these actions from the majority of US troops, not to mention the increased danger to those troops from locals in Iraq. But it may not be fair to say that the Bush administration were overly concerned with the 'moral universe' it had constructed. After all, that universe was already well established and was a necessary part of the US public's complicity with the War on Terror. To an extent this universe was, and still is, self perpetuating. It would take far more than a few photographs showing the abuse of prisoners to convince the majority of US citizens that the US were not the 'good guys'.

It is open to interpretation whether or not films such as *Watchmen* serve to defend the actions of soldiers abroad, suggesting that, after all, they are only doing what they must in order to protect the country, or if perhaps these films play a more complex role in the dissolution of the 'us' and 'them' boundary. In recent years attempts have been made by some writers and filmmakers to humanise the terrorist figure. Demonising the terrorist is certainly of little use since this merely represents a failing to understand the social, economic, and political conditions from which terrorism arises. As Žižek claims,

> in past centuries, Islam has been significantly more tolerant towards other religions than Christianity. […] these facts […] demonstrate that we are dealing not with a feature inscribed into Islam "as such", but with the outcome of modern socio-political conditions.[186]

It is also too easy, and unwise, to dismiss the terrorist as simply a product of religious fanaticism. The attacks of 9/11 were not a religious crusade because they

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[185] Richard J. Bernstein, p. 98.
[186] Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, p. 41.

were not directed at another religion. Neither the WTC nor the Pentagon symbolised the USA's Christian allegiances. The attacks were aimed at the heart of the global capitalist empire itself.

Whilst attempts to humanise the terrorist are often low-key, and take a backseat in the overall narrative, they do remind us of one essential thing: a terrorist is also a human being. In *United 93*, a film about the hijacked plane which failed to reach its target, much of the tension is built around the terrorist pilot who appears to be having doubts.[187] Will he, or will he not, follow through with their plan? Had he decided not to, the terrorist could have easily become the hero of the film, but of course in a film about 9/11 this would hardly be appropriate. To an extent the spectator can sympathise with this man who seems to shoulder responsibility for the others. In comparison they appear quite childlike and easily influenced, following their plan unquestioningly.[188] This theme of representing the terrorist as if he were a misunderstood/misunderstanding child is also present in *Falling Man*. In DeLillo's novel the reader is told the story from the point of view of one of the 9/11 terrorists, a man named Hammad, who seems unsure of his commitment to the attack. Although Hammad feels like an outsider amongst the group of extremists, his obvious sexual desires at odds with the group's religious purity, he is gradually brought closer to them, seemingly by his own force of will and desire to change the world. He may understand the immorality of the acts they will commit, but he allows himself to be persuaded that the cause is just:

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[187] *United 93*. Paul Greengrass. France/UK/USA. Universal Pictures. 2006.

[188] Paul Greengrass can be applauded for avoiding the obvious traps that the film's subject matter presented not only in refusing to demonise the terrorist figure, but also the way in which the film does not partake in jingoism. As James Kendrick suggests: 'Instead of showing the passengers as a clear-eyed, nationalistic fighting force, the film presents them as a group of terrified people facing their own fate. There is no overstated sense of idealized heroism or national duty but rather the true heroism of combat: the jittery, horrifying sense of one's own death approaching, but being brave enough to tackle it head-on rather than accept it without resistance.' (p. 525). This in part is also due to the fact that Greengrass mostly preferred the use of amateur actors, and people who were involved in the action on the day, which undoubtedly adds a sense of authenticity to the action. (Stephen Prince p. 107).

> They looked at videos of jihad in other countries and Hammad told them about the boy soldiers running in the mud, the mine jumpers, wearing keys to paradise around their necks. They stared him down, they talked him down. That was a long time ago and those were only boys, they said, not worth the time it would take to be sorry for a single one.[189]

The act of sheer violence Hammad believes is required to change the world demands that he becomes one with these terrorists, that he changes his beliefs and aligns them with the others so that there can be no turning back. For Hammad, change is in the conditioning of the mind, and the subsequent bringing together and brotherhood of the terrorists:

> The world changes first in the mind of the man who wants to change it. The time is coming, our truth, our shame, and each man becomes the other, and the other still another, and then there is no separation.[190]

The group abide by simple, unspoken rules, such as the growing of facial hair, in order to strengthen their bond and, with it, their resolve. Nevertheless the terrorists seem to take a bizarre kind of comfort in the idea that they will never complete their task, once again reinforcing that these are real people, whose thoughts have been twisted by their group mentality: 'Not that they would ever get that far. The state had watch lists and undercover agents. The state knew how to read signals that flow out of your cell phone'[191]

DeLillo is also careful to assert that the 9/11 attacks were not founded upon religious principles. In several direct descriptions of the group's ideological hatred for the US we have no mention of religion whatsoever. The attack is clearly directed towards globalisation and the injustices of the capitalist system itself:

> There was the feeling of lost history. They were too long in isolation. This is what they talked about, being crowded out by other cultures, other futures, the all-enfolding will of capital markets and foreign policies.[192]

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[189] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 80.
[190] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 80.
[191] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 173.
[192] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 80.

As Hammad walks around New York City, he presents himself as the victim of world affairs. He is the outsider here, and he paints clearly the definition of an *us* and *them*: 'These people jogging in the park, world domination. These old men who sit in beach chairs, veined white bodies and baseball caps, they control our world.'[193] It is finally, pushed by these feelings of powerlessness, that the terrorist is left with only two things which hold any force in this *other* world: his body, and his beliefs. To the terrorist, the Western *belief* in material possessions is the weakness at the heart of capitalism; the weakness that can be exposed through the sacrifice of the terrorist's own body: 'These people, what they hold so precious we see as empty space.'[194]

Hammad is not a villain as such in *Falling Man*, he is merely misguided, believing himself to be enlightened and burdened with the responsibility of this, a responsibility to change the world. For Hammad, the goal seems to be not the destruction of the US, but rather the awakening of its people. He wishes to open their eyes, enabling them to see the world as he does; an empty space that has been filled with the wasteful junk of capitalism. Art dealer Martin clearly understands this and sees a similarity between violent European protest movements against consumerism, such as the actions of the Baader Meinhof gang, and the acts of present day terrorists:

> "[Martin] thinks these people, these jihadists, he thinks they have something in common with the radicals of the sixties and seventies. He thinks they're all part of the same classical pattern. They have their theorists. They have their visions of world brotherhood."[195]

This echoes the thoughts of Žižek who asks, 'Is not [today's fundamentalist terror's] goal also to awaken us, Western citizens, from our numbness, from immersion in our

[193] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 173.
[194] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 177.
[195] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 147.

everyday ideological universe?'[196] Both these attempts to give the acts of terrorists a purpose are constructive uses of 9/11. They encourage self-reflection and an analysis of the capitalist system as a whole. They are perhaps the kind of contemplations that the terrorist act was itself designed to provoke.

Not only are the political retaliations against 9/11 representative of the destructive use of the act, this destruction is evident on a very personal level in *Falling Man*. Whilst DeLillo is busy humanising Hammad, giving him at least some motive for the atrocities committed on that day, he is, at the same time, slowly stripping Keith of *his* humanity. Keith has been made into something other than human by his experience in the tower. He gradually withdraws from his family, spending most of his time away at poker tournaments. The familiarity of poker is for Keith a link to a time before 9/11, before his friends' deaths, to the frequent times the group would gather together to play. And despite his desire to be back there, he still cannot rebuild his connection with one of the other players who survived the attacks, Terry Cheng, who also spends his time haunting the same casino poker tables. Instead, when the two do speak briefly, Keith is upset by his perception that Terry has changed, that he has opened up and is much more willing to talk. It is as if his last link to that group has been severed, and all that is left is the game itself. He resents Terry for being able to let go in a way that he himself has not been able to. Keith has held on to the experience, turning it in on himself as a means of destroying his own humanity.

This is the fate of the 9/11 survivor, the ghosts of an event hijacked by culture, the media, and politicians to sell their misery. The purpose of a memorial which asks that we never finish grieving cannot be to help those who were affected, but can only

[196] Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, p. 9.

serve as a continuing reminder to the public of the moment their suffering began. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, sold on the back of the memory of 9/11, continue to wound America and Americans. They could only be sold this way because the flimsy evidence, particularly in the case of the Iraq conflict, could not have been supported without a general public in a state of fear and inclined towards retaliatory attacks. Although many people are aware that intelligence is often received through underhand methods and can also be manipulated, the general rule is that people are willing to accept this if they believe that it keeps them safe. But just how does entering an unnecessary conflict with a nation that had no proven involvement in the 9/11 attacks and no proven WMD programme, help to make any citizen safer?

The cases of torture highlighted in *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* also serve to highlight the inadequacies of US intelligence. The cultural outpouring surrounding surveillance and intelligence gathering methods began before 9/11 and can be seen in Tony Scott's *Enemy of the State* (1998), but since 9/11 this kind of Big Brother style governing has been a staple of the action and thriller genres. In reality intelligence is much more difficult to acquire, relying as it does on a complex network of informants who are all humanly fallible, or on the results of torture techniques in institutions such as Abu Ghraib or the even more notorious Guantanamo Bay facility which President Barack Obama vowed to close but which as yet still houses detainees. Methods of torture famously provide false information (unless you are an avid watcher of *24*!). The personification of intelligence into a human voice and personality behind the computer screen in *Team America* is surely a response to its true fallibility and bears out that, yes, intelligence can be misinformed: 'That was *bad* intelligence… *very bad* intelligence.' Where this becomes a more thorny issue is in the decision made to invade Iraq. Many take the view that the US were not

simply misinformed by their intelligence over Iraq, but that intelligence was fabricated as part of a deliberate 'threat inflation.' This view is certainly supported by the way in which the US government manipulated public sentiment towards September 11 in the build-up to the Iraq war:

> In making the administration's case for going to war, Secretary of State [Colin] Powell asked the UN Security Council in a speech on February 5, 2003, "Should we take the risk that he will not someday use (WMD) at a time and a place and in a manner of his choosing? […] Leaving Saddam Hussein in possession of weapons of mass destruction for a few more months or years is not an option, not in a post-September 11th world."[197]

By evoking 9/11 in the completely unrelated case of Iraq and Saddam Hussein, Colin Powell here underlines the Bush administration's 'post 9/11' logic of threat inflation in order to achieve public support for more aggressive foreign policy measures. He explicitly recalls the myth of a 'post-September 11th world' and all its attached fears and paranoia.

Barrack Obama was guilty of a similar misuse of 9/11 when in June of 2010 he described the Gulf of Mexico oil crisis as an 'environmental 9/11'. In doing so, Obama was using the same kind of rhetoric as his predecessor and whilst he was undoubtedly attempting to elevate the gravity of the situation in the minds of the public, if the comparison is used in such a baseless fashion it can only devalue it. It is another example of the signifier of 9/11 being used in a utilitarian way by the US government, as a way to manipulate the still strong feelings of pain that many feel in response to the event, but at what cost? The US establishments have already mythologised 9/11 and in an attempt to harness the powerful sentiments created by that day they have, in fact, turned it into an even brighter beacon for the forces of terror. This is all a part of turning 9/11 into a generation defining moment. The

[197] Chaim Kaufmann, 'Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War', in *American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear: Threat Inflation since 9/11*, ed. Trevor Thrall and Jane K. Cramer, (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 100-101.

"post 9/11" discourse, a discourse which sees radical differences between the world prior to 9/11/2001 and the world today, has been naturalised: 'The event has been and will be made to mark a new epoch, and as such it is already generating a mythology and a set of practices of its own.'[198] Indeed, many critics, such as David Simpson and John Gaddis, have argued that the post 9/11 period offered the US a chance to lead in a different, more responsible, way.[199] Simpson goes as far as to suggest that 9/11 offered a utopian opportunity that has since been lost due to the actions of the Bush administration:

> And to a remarkable degree the sight of those falling towers, the fates of those who died, and the grief of those who survived elicited a worldwide outpouring of sympathy and response that was clearly announced and reported. Could this have been a utopian moment, an opening? Was it genuine, and does it matter? […] If so, there was on September 12, 2001, and for some time thereafter such a potential for the making of common cause, has it been lost forever by the invasion of Iraq and the ongoing brutalities it has perpetrated on both the enemy and the homeland?[200]

Was this utopian drive for change not also embodied in the very election of Barack Obama, who swept to power on a tide of emotion, his campaign slogan: "Change we can believe in"?

Wherever the term 9/11 originated, its self perpetuating myth is difficult to escape and stretches into the symbolism embodied by the numbers themselves. It has, as a myth, grown beyond the control of government, even as it still nonetheless has a use value for those in power. In this respect it is a date that will always remain at the forefront of the American psyche since,

> The event known as 9/11 lives on as the emergency telephone number painted on the sides of thousands of police cars, fire trucks, and ambulances […]. The figure 9/11 is not a place (although New York City plays that role in the national imaginary), nor yet even a time, since what is missing is the designation of the year, 2001. It will repeat itself every year, and it will remain

[198] David Simpson, p. 16.
[199] John Lewis Gaddis, 'And Now This', pp. 3-21.
[200] David Simpson, pp. 166-167.

> an open designation, a communications channel for crisis, an emergency number.[201]

It is important to point out that this emergency number is specifically American and whilst 9/11 could have come to represent an attack on democratic global capitalism itself, after all let us not forget that similar events have occurred in other countries since such as the 7/7 underground attack in London and the Madrid 11/3 train bombings, the crisis has been internalised. Whatever rhetoric the Bush administration may have disseminated, this was by and large seen inside America as an attack on American cultural values, and not a burden that could be shared throughout the world. Instead of a push to attempt to understand those who had committed these atrocities, there was a "why us?" attitude. This was not a result of 9/11 however, merely a continuation of a trend of American inwardness which seems at odds with their stature and position in World Affairs: 'Paradoxically, the greater the U.S. involvement in a globalizing world became, the less knowledgeable or concerned Americans became about events beyond their own borders.'[202] Much of this inwardness can be attributed to the American fear of destruction, a fear of being the target. The Armageddon scenario painted so vividly in American popular culture, and which will be the focus of Chapter 3, may represent a view of a coming apocalypse, but it is inevitably American cities which are destroyed, American presidents who attempt to rally the world to find a solution.

It may seem that there is much less of a threat to American National Security today than there was during the heated periods of the Cold War, but John Gaddis believes that this is not the way that the American public view things:

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[201] David Simpson, p. 16.
[202] Charles Hill, 'A Herculean Task: The Myth and Reality of Arab Terrorism', in *The Age of Terror: America and the World After September 11*, ed. Nayan Chanda and Strobe Talbott, (New York: Basic Books, 2001), pp. 88-89.

> Despite moments of genuine fear, however, as during the Berlin and Cuban missile crises, the only images we had of destroyed American cities were those constructed by the makers of apocalypse films and the authors of science fiction novels. We had adversaries, but we also had means of deterring them.[203]

The terrorist of today has taken the place of the Red enemy within, but the Soviet threat at least had a shape and a body which could in turn be threatened. The terrorist threat on the other hand is everywhere and no one action, no one missile, can strike at its heart. In a similar way, the damage caused by 9/11, the national wound, was not something that the people could do anything about. Despite the mass operation to search for survivors in the wreckage only 23 came out alive. And yet this act had to be assimilated in some way, the public could not be left to feel completely helpless:

> In the face of the wildly unexpected events of 9/11, it was the most familiar functions of disaster culture that were produced to assuage the popular concern, and to channel both its desire to lend a hand and its need for outrage. The massive response to the immediate Red Cross appeal for blood donations now look like a communal urge to present the disaster as conventional, as open to the standard remedies, as belonging to a familiar genre of accidents wherein there are bodies for restoration, good deeds to be done.[204]

Of course 9/11 did not result in a shortage of blood requiring a campaign for donors, but this could be seen as an attempt at the time to normalise a disaster that was far from normal. It is not that apocalyptic images of a destroyed America did not exist pre 9/11, but rather that the events of 9/11 gave those images a kind of legitimacy. They brought the nightmares of American culture to life before the eyes of its citizens. Now, instead of looking upon these images as possibilities, they have become inevitabilities.

Reflecting an absence is really a kind of nostalgia, a longing to return to the days of innocence before the planes hit the towers. And Ground Zero, the site itself,

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[203] John Lewis Gaddis, 'And Now This', p. 8.
[204] David Simpson, p. 12.

is really the wound at the heart of this, the site of pain and anger. What 9/11 did most successfully was not to change the world as it was, but to change America's view of its own place within that world, and indeed its own vulnerability. In *The Submission*, Governor Bitman's opposition to Khan's selection as the memorial's architect is steeped in the contrary rhetoric of a politician. Speaking in a CNN interview she says:

> "Even if Mr. Khan is not a security threat – and there is no reason to think he is – his finding his way to victory in this anonymous competition reminds us that radical Islamists could use our democratic institutions and our openness to advance their own agenda,"[205]

If Khan is not a security threat, as she says 'there is no reason to think he is', then how does his victory remind anyone of the dangers of American openness? If anything, it should surely be a celebration of that openness. But Bitman's paranoia over such 'openness' is representative of many American voices after 9/11. Paul Kennedy similarly expresses this as a weakness exposed by 9/11 saying that, '[h]ere was a weakness in our defenses created by one of our social strengths, namely, the permeability of American borders and the mobility and openness of America itself.'[206] At least Kennedy also recognises that it is simultaneously a strength. As a politician it is Bitman's aim to appear to represent the popular sentiment of the moment. Politics is a numbers game, and she makes no attempt to hide this from Paul Rubin: [Paul] "My jury isn't at fault here. It was an anonymous competition – you know that." [Geraldine Bitman] "I do, but polling is showing that 70 percent of Americans don't."[207] Her reference to radical Islam is completely irrelevant since Khan is barely religious at all, Muslim by heritage alone. Here she is stoking

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[205] Amy Waldman, p. 102.
[206] Paul Kennedy, 'Maintaining American Power: From Injury to Recovery', in *The Age of Terror: America and the World After September 11*, ed. Nayan Chanda and Strobe Talbott, (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 64.
[207] Amy Waldman, p. 103.

American fear to advance *her* own agenda, feeling that if she is vocal about her disapproval it will enhance her own popularity.

The supposed weakness that Bitman speaks of, this gaping hole (or wound) torn in the fabric of the American landscape that we see in Lee's film, is not an absence addressed by the memorial culture surrounding 9/11. This absence is reflected still there, in the hollowed out pools, where water churns endlessly, where an 'endless' ribbon of names reminds us of the victims, and in the endless war against terror, a war destined only to produce more of that which it is supposedly meant to destroy. The wounds opened on 9/11 have healed so very little in the last decade not because they were necessarily too deep, but because at every turn politicians and the media have attempted to exploit those wounds and insist on compounding mistakes with further atrocities abroad. The overarching myth of 9/11 and its insidious nature is why *Team America*'s refusal to blame the government, or even one particular group or organisation is in fact a masterstroke rather than the result of an inadequacy of foreign affairs knowledge. Whilst the film recognises that everyone essentially wants to love one's country, it is the 'Team America' mentality that unleashes its powerful ignorance on the world stage and in doing so helps to foster a hatred for the US which only fuels terrorism. In its fun yet satirical attempts to portray the American foreign policy patchwork it certainly attacks the actions of the government and the media, but also too recognises the very role that popular culture itself plays in creating a 'Team America' mentality.

Conclusions: The End of Ideology

Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* became the highest grossing documentary film of all time when it was released in 2004.[208] In doing so, it stands as a testament to the increased popularisation of politics in culture after 9/11. Its release in the run up to the 2004 Presidential election and its highly divisive nature caused controversy which only served to publicise the film. Whilst *Fahrenheit 9/11* was widely praised in reviews, those who were critical of it, particularly rightwing supporters, tended to cite Moore's emotive manipulation of film imagery. Although Moore's film should not be taken at face value as it represents only a highly subjective view of the events of September 11 and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, it does raise some very important questions with respect to the exploitation of the 9/11 attacks. Moore's polemic arrived on screens as election fever was ramping up and it was no coincidence that during this time the discourse surrounding 9/11 had begun to change. This was not as a result of any particular cultural output, although *Fahrenheit 9/11* almost certainly had some impact in that it stirred up and gave fodder to many anti-Bush campaigners, but was caused by a number of factors. With three years having elapsed, the memory of 9/11 was not as fresh and the upcoming election had allowed for a loosening of anti-governmental discourse. This of course included President Bush's handling of 9/11 and the subsequent conflicts in Afghanistan and particularly Iraq, which was opposed by much of the left inside the US. The election itself gave not only politicians the chance to criticise the actions of the administration but also culture too.

[208] *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Michael Moore. USA. Fellowship Adventure Group. 2004.

In Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* the artist draws himself flanked by both George Bush and Osama bin Laden in a section headed, 'Equally terrorized by Al-Qaeda and by his own Government…'[209] In his introduction to the comic, Spiegelman talks of a shift in American discourse around the time he is finishing the book (2004) writing, '[w]hat was once unsayable now began to appear outside the marginalized alternative press and late-night cable comedy shows.' However, he goes on to equate this, not with a freeing up of discourse but rather with a cynical response to US election season. Spiegelman avoids any engagement with conspiracy theory, in the way Moore is often accused of, and instead focuses on the manipulation of sentiment and fear after 9/11 by those in the Bush administration. Pictured is Spiegelman with an eagle around his neck (described as an albatross) spouting the oft used phrases: 'Everything's changed! Awk!', 'Go out and shop! Awk!' and 'Be afraid!'[210] At the top of another page Bush and Cheney ride on the same eagle as Cheney slices its throat and Bush shouts 'Let's roll' in reference to the valorisation of the members of flight 93.[211] These were the final words accredited to passenger Todd Beamer as he and others onboard prepared to take down the terrorists. The words became popularised after Bush used them in his 2002 State of the Union Address. Spiegelman heavily satirises the Bush administration's exploitation of 9/11 but goes further in pointing to a division between the red and blue halves of the US. In one panel Spiegelman announces that 'my "leaders" are reading the book of revelations… I'm reading the paranoid science fiction of Philip K. Dick.'[212]

[209] Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), p. 2.
[210] Art Spiegelman, p. 2.
[211] Art Spiegelman, p. 4.
[212] Art Spiegelman, p. 7.

Whilst *In the Shadow of No Towers* is essentially about the artist's personal attempts to deal with his own 9/11 trauma, Spiegelman also produces a polemic which is highly critical of the way in which the Bush administration used 9/11 as a national trauma. He is less critical about the role of the media but, as has been demonstrated throughout the first part of this thesis, the media played a huge part in the development of the 9/11 myth. The obsessive media coverage surrounding the tenth anniversary of the attacks was a good example of its continuation. There is something morbid about the way in which the History Channel saw the need to relive the event in 'real time'. On the Tenth Anniversary it broadcast *102 Minutes That Changed America* (2008), a sequence of footage of the day which spans from the time the towers were hit to their eventual collapse.[213] This footage, which does not provide a commentary on the attacks, is essentially voyeuristic and undoubtedly a sign of the event's continued influence on culture and politics. Not only this, it is also a sign of its continued exploitation.

In this first part of the thesis I have attempted to demonstrate that the impact of 9/11 is largely latent in that it has had an affect on culture at almost every turn but that overt examples stand as less common monuments to an event which has reshaped world-views rather than the world itself. To view 9/11 as a world changing event is only a partial truth. The world was already in a state of flux and change prior to 9/11, for example the resentment many in the Middle-East feel towards America's monopolisation of culture and capital, its support of Israel and other self-serving foreign policy measures, did not spring up overnight. As Naomi Klein argues:

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[213] *102 Minutes That Changed America*. Nicole Rittenmeyer and Seth Skundrick. USA. Siskel/Jacobs Production. 2008.

> The mantra "September 11 changed everything" neatly disguised the fact that for free-market ideologues and the corporations whose interests they serve, the only thing that changed was the ease with which they could pursue their ambitious agenda.[214]

While this is almost certainly the case, Klein misses the important thing which 9/11 *did* change: culture. The world was already changing but culture needed to catch up with it and 9/11 was the catalyst for this. So, throughout this part, I have analysed the cultural and political myth of 9/11 in its purest forms, dealing with issues of censorship, of language, of the use and misuse of 9/11 as an act of war, of foreign policy and perceptions both within and outside America. I have looked at the ways in which the Americans were encouraged to remember, or in some cases forget, the dead of 9/11, and those images of falling people which disturb easy consumption. But what I have not yet fully dealt with is the connection of 9/11 to a trend of cultural pessimism which seems to want to usher in the apocalypse rather than look towards better forms of society and government.

Utopian horizons are built on our propensity to dream. We may dream of a better job, more money, the perfect family, better governing, even of world peace. But what happens when an event occurs that interrupts our dreaming and we find ourselves questioning either the validity of those dreams, or even the use value of dreaming itself? On the surface it may sound crazy to claim that an act of mass murder like 9/11 is an example of utopianism in action, but is it any less crazy than the assertion that capitalist liberal democracy is the path to utopia? Utopian theorist Ruth Levitas argues that,

> The West lays claim to civilization and freedom […]. This is pitted against an anti-modern Islamic view of the good society, which is no more representative of Muslims and Islam than Bush's and Blair's views are representative of yours and mine. But as the military conflict is presented as such a clash of utopias,

[214] Naomi Klein, p. 299.

> there seems little space in which any vision of an alternative can be articulated.[215]

Instead of being used as a potentially transformative moment, 9/11 has seemingly stifled anti-capitalist thought. Although it may have shattered an American illusion that capitalism is a utopia, it has not empowered the general public to think outside of capitalism at all, seeming to instead promote a culture of anti-utopianism: 'The critical dystopia is the dark side of hope, and hopes for a way out; anti-utopia attributes the darkness to Utopia itself, and tells us the exits are ambushed.'[216] Yes, 'The events of 11 September *are* an example of the dark side of the utopian impulse and of a certain theory of self-other relations.'[217] But if we imagine death and destruction as the only possible outcome of utopian thinking then it becomes *impossible* to ever think beyond the bounds of our current social predicament.

The events of 9/11 made a mockery of Francis Fukuyama's optimistic view of world progress in the 1990s. Indeed this relative optimism seems to have given way to a cultural pessimism in the aftermath of September 11 and the invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq. In Chapter 3 we will see a comparison between the big budget disaster movies which ushered in the new millennium and those post 9/11, that bares this out. The link between capitalism and catastrophe is evident in popular culture as well as economic policy, and will be the focus of the second half of this thesis as we take a deeper look at post 9/11 apocalyptic film. It is, nevertheless, useful to keep this in focus when dealing with ideas of disaster capitalism, since it is this very disaster capitalism which apocalyptic culture seems to respond to. It is also interesting to note the general cultural cynicism towards capitalism that has

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[215] Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson, 'Utopia in Dark Times: Optimism/Pessimism and Utopia/Dystopia, in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, ed. Raffaella Baccolini, and Tom Moylan, (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 24.
[216] Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson, 'Utopia in Dark Times', p. 26.
[217] Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson, 'Utopia in Dark Times', p. 25.

permeated films about the future. The huge success of James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) presents the paradox of making a big budget blockbuster which at the same time demonises a destructive capitalist imperialism.

In the post 9/11 climate, disaster movies replaced their sense of humour with a sense of foreboding. 9/11 seems to be the point at which disaster movies stopped being fun: out with the humour of films like *Independence Day* (1996) *The Fifth Element* (1997) and *Godzilla* (1998), in with the bleakness of *The Road* (2009) and *Knowing* (2009). What does this suggest? Perhaps that disaster is no longer fun because we believe in it now. When the first plane crashed into the first tower it looked like a horrible accident, but by the time the second plane hit reporters could only begin to state in disbelief that this was in fact an unthinkable attack:

> "It still looks like an accident, the first one. Even from this distance, way outside the thing, how many days later, I'm standing here thinking it's an accident."
> "Because it has to be."
> "It has to be," he said.
> "The way the camera sort of shows surprise."
> "But only the first one."
> "Only the first," she said.
> "The second plane, by the time the second plane appears," he said, "we're all a little older and wiser."[218]

What 9/11 symbolises then is the end of ideology. The second plane only comes as a surprise in a pre 9/11 world in which the idea of America coming under attack is seemingly fictional.

A telling text with which to conclude the first half of this thesis is surely M. Night Shyamalan's 2008 film *The Happening*, a film which effortlessly combines the 9/11 paranoia discussed here with an apocalyptic scenario in which the population of the East Coast of America suddenly begin committing mass suicide. *The Happening* shows the development of paranoia following 9/11 in a kind of reversal of the event

[218] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 135.

itself. On 9/11 people struggled to comprehend the idea that the US was under attack. It was not until the second plane hit the WTC that it became obvious that this was no accident. In *The Happening*, however, it is the reverse that is true. Immediately as people begin to kill themselves chemical weapons are blamed. News and gossip are reported as if it is taken for granted that the deaths are the result of a terrorist attack. Even as the phenomenon spreads to nearby states, terrorists are being touted as the likely cause. Watching video footage of a man entering a lion's pen to get himself killed in a brutal fashion an observer asks, "what kind of terrorists are these?"

The implication here is that since 9/11 there is a heightened sense of fear about a potential terrorist attack, so much so that nature itself is feared far less. In a way this is hardly surprising, but also clear evidence that security measures put in place after 9/11 and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have led only to an increase in paranoia. Apocalyptic film culture in particular is still obsessed with recycling the images witnessed in the attacks that day. In a clear evocation of the image of the Falling Man, *The Happening* opens with a scene in which several New York City workers at a construction site throw themselves off rooftops and scaffolding. The camera looks up as bodies rain from the sky. The film trades in the debates surrounding suicide and human agency that many were left to ponder after witnessing the jumpers of 9/11. Just like those who jumped from the Twin Towers, the victims in Shyamalan's film all find themselves committing an act which is to all intents and purposes suicide, but yet the power to end one's own life has been taken from them. Their actions are wholly involuntary. The toxin which the film suggests may be released by plants as a defence mechanism targets anyone and everyone.

At the outset of the film, with the teachers gathered at the school that Elliot (Mark Wahlberg) teaches in, they are told, "There appears to be an event happening." There is something strange about this line. The use of the present tense implies an already advanced knowledge that this is not a single attack but an ongoing catastrophe of indefinable breadth and length. It again speaks to the paranoid state of affairs which suggests a permanent state of panic post 9/11. The way in which *The Happening* fuses 9/11 imagery and a plot line suggesting the infiltration of paranoid fear about coming under terrorist attack with an apocalyptic scenario shows the link between the apocalypse film and 9/11 in a clear way. The imagery of 9/11, as apocalyptic as it was in itself, is not the only way in which that date has influenced apocalyptic films since. The second half of this thesis will examine this in more detail, identifying the changes to this type of film post 9/11.

In the first half of this thesis we have established a wide base of cultural theory eschewing forth from the melting point of 9/11. In the second half, by narrowing this focus to a specific type of film, we will see this theory in action and how it is representative of a shift toward a cultural pessimism for the future.

PART II

The Earth Burns Again: The Culture of Apocalypse in Contemporary Cinema

Chapter 3: The Abuse of Apocalypse

In his book, *The Abuse of Evil*, Richard Bernstein discusses the inherent dangers and implications of the misused lexicon of evil which circulated in the American vocabulary post 9/11. In the last decade popular culture has bombarded us with images of destruction, covering almost every conceivable natural or man-made global catastrophe. This is no less than *The Abuse of Apocalypse*. Nowhere has this culture of apocalypse been more evident than in contemporary Hollywood cinema. The purpose of the next two chapters is to establish just how these filmic depictions of destruction have changed since 9/11, and how such changes are indicative of a larger pessimism in cultural texts which respond to the event.

What follows may, on the surface, appear to be a contradiction, since I have thus far endeavoured to argue that 9/11 was not necessarily the generation defining moment, the epoch-maker if you will, that many have claimed it to be. And yet, in these next two chapters, I will be using that very moment as a point of departure, a schism, in the life of the apocalyptic film. Of course, until this point I have never tried to make the impossible claim that 9/11 changed nothing; this very thesis is evidence that it changed at least something, at least discourse. But what I have objected to is the frequently misused statement that 9/11 changed *everything*. In fact, here I will argue that 9/11 affected a change in culture for the very reason that it did *not* affect a change in real world politics.

In the previous section I examined the way in which change, when it did appear, was more regressive rather than progressive. Primary examples of this can be found in a return to aggressive foreign policy measures; a return to conservatism and a renewed popularity behind the Bush presidency; a sense of nostalgic longing

for old forms of heroism, masculinity and femininity, as illuminated by Susan Faludi; a restriction of civil liberties to be found particularly in the "Patriot Act"; and the language of loss, absence, wounding, and never ending terror/war that was rife in media description, cultural texts, and governmental addresses after 9/11. In many ways, it would seem that the 'terror alert level', with its colour coded system for telling the populace how terrified it ought to be, is no more than a replacement for the Cold War Doomsday Clock.[219] That so little has changed after the tragedy of 9/11 may seem to come as a comfort, but on the other hand is this not a severe indictment of our very capacity for change?

In many ways the apocalypse is the perfect vehicle for expressing these anxieties about the future (and the present). What better way to deal with the awkward questions that history asks us than to erase it altogether? Maria Manuel Lisboa, in her book *The End of the World*, suggests that depictions of apocalypse are more about beginning than ending. And going even further, she asserts that: 'The establishment of utopia […], almost without exception demands a prior radical purge'.[220] This kind of thinking has led some scholars of the apocalypse to the conclusion that it is in times of cultural crisis that the apocalyptic form is at its most potent and is most popular.[221] But this is surely only half of the story needed to

[219] The Doomsday Clock, which first made its appearance in 1947, is a symbolic clock face which is supposed to indicate how close the world is to its end. Having largely followed the curvature of the Cold War, the clock has been set at different times on 19 occasions since its first setting of 7 minutes to midnight, by the 'Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists' at the University of Chicago. The closer the clock reads to midnight, the closer the world is to catastrophe. Although it is still in existence today, and now is supposed to take into account environmental factors and not just the idea of nuclear Holocaust, it is still largely associated with the Cold War; for example, its earliest setting was 17 minutes to midnight in 1991, with the Cold War seemingly at an end. For a more comprehensive explanation and review of the actions of the Doomsday Clock visit: http://www.thebulletin.org/ [accessed 12/03/2011].

[220] Maria Manuel Lisboa, *The End of the World: Apocalypse and its Aftermath in Western Culture*, (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2011), p. 15.

[221] Mathias Nilges, in his article *The Aesthetics of Destruction*, suggests exactly that: 'The first step in such an analysis is to suggest that representations of destruction grow in number and popularity especially in times of (national) political, moral, and psychological uncertainty. Thus, we must analyze the beauty of such representations in relation to the specific fears, anxieties, and desires a

explain the re-emergence of the apocalypse film after 9/11, a story which must also take into account the apocalyptic nature of the event itself. It is not that, since 9/11 we have continued to watch, consume, and enjoy a large number of apocalyptic films that is particularly significant. Nor is it that Hollywood has continued to produce these types of films after the events of 9/11. The significance lies in the radical changes that these films have undergone and what this can tell us about the cultural imagination of the future.

This chapter will analyse the role that the apocalyptic cinematic narrative plays in shaping attitudes towards the future and how this represents an 'abuse of apocalypse.' It will contextualise this analysis through an examination of the practices of contemporary apocalyptic cinema, and in particular trends which have appeared post 9/11. This will include not only a deconstruction of narrative structure, but also a study of the apocalyptic aesthetic which is evidenced in these films.

Returning to where this thesis began, Fredric Jameson's suggestion that today 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism'[222] would seem to speak right to the heart of contemporary culture's preoccupation with the apocalypse and the abandonment of utopian thinking. On the surface, the apocalypse should be a construction which is both radical and progressive in that it offers the often much sought after *tabula rasa* effect, but in contemporary science fiction (if we can even call the apocalypse a science-fictive mode any longer – I will return to this question later) it has been somewhat reduced to a series of spectacular digital images which have the effect of sedating the audience rather than broadening their capacity to think deeply about the subject at hand, namely death and the end of the world as

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historical period produces – psychological reactions that directly affect cultural form and our understanding of beauty.' (p. 23.)

[222] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, (London: Verso, 2005), p. 199.

we know it. For example, during the Cold War period, nuclear anxieties dominated films with apocalyptic content. Films such as Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove* (1964) acted as a kind of warning about the direction that society was headed in. Post 9/11 apocalyptic films, however, tend to exude a feeling of inevitability which stifles forward thinking:

> The romance of Armageddon is being replaced by the spectre of inevitable destruction, albeit on a smaller scale. Piece by piece, city by city, landmark by landmark, the delicate balance of post-World War II nuclear politics has given way to a new war, in which atomic bombs, capable of decimating an entire metropolis in just one blast, fit in suitcases.[223]

There will be more on this when we come onto the subject of the post-apocalypse more specifically, but for the time being at least, Wheeler Dixon's remark seems to suggest, rather counter-intuitively, that we live in a time now more dangerous than at any point during the Cold War. Perhaps, to an extent, he is right. It is certainly not beyond the realms of possibility (as is frequently imagined in popular American films such as *True Lies* (1994) and TV shows like the hugely successful *24* (Fox 2001-2010)) that a small organisation, or group of terrorists could acquire a nuclear weapon and attack America, or anywhere else in the world. In this instance, there would not be the threat of MAD to deter such an act, but the likelihood of a global nuclear holocaust as a result is clearly far less than was the case during many of the hot points of the Cold War.

Of course it is important to maintain an objective approach. After all, visions of progress have nearly always been clouded by an element of cynicism. Even films which attempt to present a pristine city future must contend with the obvious perils of totalitarianism inherent in this kind of utopian thinking. On the other hand,

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[223] Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Visions of the Apocalypse: Spectacles of Destruction in American Cinema*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), p. 97.

apocalyptic visions have provided science fiction with one of its primary narratives for decades:

> The apocalyptic imagination had already burst forth into film with images of catastrophe in all shapes – from the very likely possibility of thermonuclear holocaust to absurd projections of the human race being overcome by even the most harmless life forms. By the late 1960s, visions of decay and doom had become the normal Anglo-American cinematic view of our possible future,[224]

From where does this doom-laden ontology originate? Although it seems conveniently facile to pin our current rash of apocalyptism on a contemporary historical event like 9/11 (and we must remember that the apocalyptic film is not a new species), there is certainly evidence to suggest that the *nature* of apocalyptic film has changed in the aftermath of September 11. With this as a premise, and the cultural and social implications of such changes also at its centre, this chapter will explore the links between film and apocalypse, culture and apocalypse, and apocalypse and the future, through an examination of the differences between apocalyptic cinema immediately preceding 9/11, and that which has subsequently followed.

Cycles and recycles

First of all then, it would be sensible to establish just what is an 'apocalyptic' film? Could it be considered a genre in its own right? Is it perhaps a sub-genre? Or is it merely a theme? The answer is, predictably, that it can be all three. As many genre theorists, such as Steve Neale and Barry Langford, rightly begin by pointing out, the

[224] H. Bruce Franklin, 'Visions of the Future in Science Fiction Films from 1970 to 1982', in *Alien Zone*, ed. Annette Kuhn, (London: Verso, 1990), p. 19.

term Genre comes from the French meaning "type" or "kind".[225] Beyond this broad definition, theorists have often attempted to take a scientific approach to categorising genres. Rick Altman explains that the term genre has accumulated, at least in Film Studies, a number of other important characteristics that make it more than simply a means for categorising films. These characteristics have been made, historically, within the bounds of genre studies, using a set of assumptions which Altman seeks to challenge. Altman provides a neat four point rule summarising the way in which contemporary genre theory has used the term:

- genre as *blueprint*, as a formula that precedes, programmes and patterns industry production;
- genre as *structure*, as the formal framework on which individual films are founded;
- genre as *label*, as the name of a category central to the decisions and communications of distributors and exhibitors;
- genre as *contract*, as the viewing position required by each genre film of its audience.[226]

These four points imply that genre is the glue linking production, exhibition, and reception. Genre is at work from the very conception of the film and through its production. It governs the film's exhibition and even tells its audience how the film should be received. This makes it a very useful term, but also nebulous. In a most basic sense, all that can ever really be relied upon to determine genre is a film's content.

In simple terms the apocalyptic film presents its audience with a vision of the end of the world (as we know it). But even with this in mind, one would have to ask how comfortably the apocalyptic, or post-apocalyptic, film sits within any particular genre. Lisboa refers to the apocalyptic as a sub-genre of science fiction,[227] but Steve

[225] Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 9. Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. vii.
[226] Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, (London: BFI, 1999), p. 14.
[227] Maria Manuel Lisboa, p. 31.

Neale rightly states that: 'it is sometimes very difficult to distinguish between horror and science fiction.'[228] There are many examples of apocalyptic films which fit far more comfortably in the horror genre than in science fiction (zombie films representing the most obvious cross-over). Finally, the apocalypse film shares many tropes with the Disaster film, and is often mentioned alongside it.

Altman states that, 'film genres are perpetually caught up in the process of becoming.'[229] Not only this, but the way in which studios, exhibitors, and audiences have used genre to inform their understanding of films, to shape both production and expectations, has changed substantially since the beginning of the studio era. The most obvious thing to note is that there now seems to be far more generic classifications than were ever previously needed. This probably does not mean that filmmakers have simply invented new types of film, but rather that the way in which films are classified and packaged has itself changed. This proliferation of genres has meant that increasingly both audiences and critics continue to reshape the margins of particular genres, moving them up a kind of ladder so that new sub-genres emerge, and old sub-genres become genres in their own right. That they are always in 'the process of becoming', means both that their rules of generic verisimilitude are always being adjusted and redefined, but also that new genres are always being born.[230]

Thus far it would seem that the apocalyptic film, whilst one could argue for its status as a genre in and of itself, has not yet graduated from its status as sub-genre; when viewing film data based on generic type it very rarely, if ever, appears, and likewise, when reading theoretical books on genre the apocalyptic film does not

[228] Steve Neale, p. 92.
[229] Rick Altman, p. 140.
[230] As an example of this, the disaster film, despite in essence having been in existence for much longer, only really gained status as a genre in its own right after the 1970s during which a large wave of such films hit the cinema theatres.

seem to feature, unless it is perhaps mentioned in a section about the broader categories of either science-fiction, horror, or disaster film. I do remain convinced, however, that in time to come the Apocalypse film will cement its own place as a genre, given the sheer volume of films which have been produced in the last few decades, and given their tendency towards self-reflexivity and trope forming. Nevertheless, without any clear rules by which to define the apocalyptic film as a genre in its own right, we can only hope to define an apocalyptic film through a definition of an apocalyptic event.

Summarising post-apocalyptic theorist James Berger, Lisboa defines three types of apocalypse:

> first, *eschaton*, referring to the actual imagined end of the world as presented in the Book of Revelation, in millenarian movements and in visions of nuclear or environmental Armageddon; second, significant catastrophes or rupture points which mark the end of something within clear limits, such as for example the Holocaust, Hiroshima, 9/11; and third, apocalypse as an uncovering or revelation regarding both the nature of [what] was put to an end [*sic*] and the nature of the alternatives.[231]

Since Berger's original text predates 9/11 it is clear that Lisboa has added 9/11 to this description. Until reading this passage I had failed to consider the idea that 9/11 might be in itself an apocalypse. 9/11 had always seemed to be that which threatened to bring about an apocalypse (and has thus far failed to do so) rather than an event of apocalyptic proportions. Of course for those at Ground Zero that day it must have seemed as if their world was ending, but whilst 9/11 was a catastrophic loss of life, the numbers pale in comparison to the other two events Lisboa has placed it alongside, namely the Holocaust and Hiroshima. Nevertheless, its inclusion here suggests that defining an apocalyptic moment relies upon more than just the scale and death toll of an event. As Lisboa repeatedly makes reference to in her

[231] Maria Manuel Lisboa, p. 15.

book, the actual end of the world is only very rarely seen in cultural texts anyway.[232] Perhaps, to this extent, the apocalyptic text is more comparable with the kind of nightmare in which you wake up just before you die. Instead, what is often defined as apocalyptic is not the actual end of the world, but merely the end of the world as we know it. In other words, an apocalyptic event can be defined as such if it radically alters the way in which we perceive the world.

For the purposes of this thesis, a line must be drawn. Not every destructive, life changing event can be considered an apocalypse. We are discussing here films which conjure the aesthetics of apocalypse and invoke the idea of a world ending moment, even if the radical changes promised are not always delivered (perhaps by this definition 9/11 *can* be considered apocalyptic). These aesthetics could be biblical in origin, or, as is seen even more frequently in contemporary science-fiction films depicting the end of the world, could be rooted in the fantasy of the crumbling cityscape. One certainty is that when this type of event does occur, for the vast majority, it is a disaster.

The Disaster film has been in existence since the very beginning of film history and can count the second highest grossing box office film of all time, James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997), amongst its major successes.[233] Disaster films tend to be organised around the simple philosophy of cause, consequence, and chance. How does the apocalyptic film differ from the ordinary Disaster film? In many instances it may merely be a case of scale. Apocalyptic films will have at stake not just the lives of those on-screen, as is the case with most Disaster films (*United 93*, 2006),

[232] Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) is probably the most notable exception.
[233] Early examples include *Fire!* (1901), a short in which fire fighters rush to save a family from their burning home, and Fritz Lang's epic silent movie *Metropolis* (1927), which contains a flood disaster. It could also be argued that James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), which displaced *Titanic* as the highest grossing box office film of all time, is a Disaster film of sorts. I will return to *Avatar* later in this thesis.

but those of an entire population. Apocalyptic film can be further divided into the pre-apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic; the before and after. Clearly a pre-apocalyptic film will focus on an impending catastrophe and humanity's desperate attempts to avoid an oncoming apocalypse (*Armageddon*, 1998), whilst the post-apocalyptic film will usually centre on an individual, or group of individuals', battle for survival in the aftermath of a cataclysmic event (*The Road*, 2009). Apocalyptic films also often have religious themes or use religious iconography. This is not least because the concept of the apocalypse is central to many mainstream religions, Christianity included, and there have been a number of recent 'biblical' apocalyptic films which use religion as a moralising force (*The Book of Eli*, 2010).

So, for the purposes of continuity, let us discuss the apocalyptic film as always having within it some form of disaster (even if the outcome of that disaster is occasionally – but rarely – that of a *better* world). Disaster is part of the generic blueprint of the apocalyptic film. It is worthwhile just taking a moment to consider the purpose of genre from the point of view of the spectator. While innovation within genres and filmmaking in general is often seen as vital for the health of the film industry as a whole, genre critics have also recognised that it is the tried and tested formulae which successful films frequently return to. Whilst rules are there to be broken, it is rare to find films which defy categorisation entirely. Those films which are most difficult to categorise tend to take generic mixing to extremes. Then there are still some films which are acts of individualistic expression, and these films 'usually depend heavily on their own internal logic, whereas genre films make heavy use of *intertextual* references.'[234] During this chapter we will see that the apocalypse film tends to look and act like a genre film. What is meant by this is that it has a

[234] Rick Altman, p. 25.

generic iconography (an aesthetic of destruction, set in the landscape of the ruined city); that it has a generic verisimilitude built upon explanations of how the world might end; and that it often makes intertextual references to other apocalyptic films whether overtly through narrative and dialogue, or within its stylised aesthetic.

The primary reason for the success of the genre model is that it appeals to an audience through familiarity and ensures the spectator that their expectations will largely be satisfied. As Altman states, 'The pleasure of genre film spectatorship thus derives more from reaffirmation than novelty. People go to genre films to participate in events that somehow seem familiar.'[235] Despite this, as already discussed, films must differ in some way to prevent a genre becoming stale and too predictable. This in many ways dictates the life *cycle* of a genre (or sub-genre).

Contemporary genre theory, chiefly associated with such critics as Steve Neale and Rick Altman, establishes that the popularity of various genres, and therefore periods of generic proliferation, is cyclical. Furthermore, these cycles can frequently be traced to periodic societal concerns. The term 'cycle' is an attempt to take Genre Studies, which has traditionally adopted a synchronic view of film history, and make it diachronic. But beyond this, it is a way of examining the evolution of genres and sub-genres which helps to account for the problems of maintaining novelty and creation in the film industry. This is because, 'New cycles are usually produced by associating a new type of material or approach with already existing genres.'[236] What we tend to see, then, when we discover new themes, materials, locales, and aesthetics, in what would otherwise fit an older mode within a pre-existing genre, is not a new genre, but a new cycle.

[235] Rick Altman, p. 25.
[236] Rick Altman, p. 60.

Whilst it could be argued that the current wave of disaster/apocalyptic films is a continuation, and decline, of a cycle which began in the late 1990s, there are three primary indicators suggesting why this current wave should be considered a cycle in its own right:

1. There is a gap of approximately five years between the two clusters of films.
2. Those films which appear in the latter half of the first decade of the 2000s exhibit significant stylistic differences to those in the late 90s and these will be discussed later in much more depth.
3. The two cycles of films appear to respond to two different historical events. Those in the latter 90s have distinct millennial concerns, whereas those in the late 00s respond to a cultural pessimism imbued by the events of 9/11; again this will be discussed in further detail later.

There has been much written on the way that Hollywood tends to recycle genres and, indeed, individual films. And, whilst the films of the first decade of the twenty-first century are no exception (in fact if anything they display even more evidence of recycling than the films that precede them) it may be more interesting to analyse the ways in which these films differ from each other, looking beyond areas of generic verisimilitude which can only be anticipated in films such as these. However easy it may be to lampoon Hollywood film-making for a lack of originality, as always scholars must remember that cinema is an industry, and Hollywood in particular, a culture machine. When a type of film is perceived by the industry as successful it will naturally repeat and recycle until audiences appear to be tiring of it.

The 1990s wave of Hollywood disaster movies itself represents a recycling of both the invasion movies of the 1950s and the disaster movies of the 1970s. Stephen Keane, in his book *Disaster Movies: the Cinema of Catastrophe*, identifies the following reasons for the re-emergence of disaster movies in the 1990s:[237]

1. The public's fascination with the impending millennium.
2. The absence of any concrete set of villains (after the end of the Cold War).

[237] Stephen Keane, *Disaster Movies: the Cinema of Catastrophe*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2001), p.79.

3. The advancements in special effects technologies allowing for a cinematic experience in which literally anything imaginable could be realised on-screen.
4. These were films which were easy to watch, largely escapist, entertainment.
5. They were making money.

Interestingly enough not even one of these reasons is particularly applicable to the current spate of apocalyptic films post 9/11. Although millennial fears have been replaced by fears about climate change and ecological disaster, as well as the pervasive threat of terrorism, there is now a tangible villain figure (the terrorist figure himself). And whilst there have been advancements in technology, and these have been evident in contemporary apocalyptic cinema, there is little that can be achieved on-screen now that could not have been visualised in the late 90s. Furthermore these films are often *not* easy to watch, they are *not* family films, and are often violent and gritty films about the processes of death and the inevitable destruction of our way of life. Finally, they are not even making that much money compared to the 90s films: although it is true that most of the films made reasonable returns, recently acclaimed adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, grossed less than thirty million dollars at the box-office world-wide.

A brief examination of box office receipts shows that post 9/11 apocalyptic films have, in general, been less successful than their late 90s counterparts. Throughout the last decade there have been some significant successes: *I Am Legend* grossed $256m (6th highest grosser in 2007), *War of the Worlds* $234m (4th highest in 2005), and *The Day After Tomorrow* $186m (7th highest in 2004).[238] But for every success there was also a flop: *Legion* grossed a paltry $40m (77th in 2010), *The Core*, $31m, (90th in 2003), 28 *Weeks Later* $28m (87th in 2007), and *Sunshine* failed to

[238] Figures courtesy of www.boxofficemojo.com [accessed 14/02/2011]. * note figures are for the US domestic box office only and are not adjusted to account for inflation.

make the top 100 in the same year.[239] Compare this to the performance of the late 90s apocalypse films when the boom year of 1998 had three such films in the top 10: *Armageddon* 2nd, *Deep Impact* 8th, and *Godzilla* 9th. In 1997 *Dante's Peak*, *The Fifth Element*, and *Volcano* made respectable returns of $170m between them. And 1996 in which *Independence Day* topped the box office chart with a gross in excess of $300m.

This begs the question; why these films and why now? In order to answer this question we need to examine the differences between the two waves of films, both in specific cases, and as a broad analysis of the trends and patterns they display. By setting 9/11 as the dividing point, there is already an element of presupposition about their differences. In order to maintain an objective distance when dealing with these films then, it is necessary to separate text from context. Rather than seeing them as films about the trauma of 9/11, and therefore examining them from within a narrow and predetermined corridor of expectations, it is best to try to separate the films from their post 9/11 contexts and examine them instead as pieces of cinema. By contrasting both their narrative and aesthetic styling a larger picture can be built of the cultural changes of which they are indicative. Do the same issues which abound in 9/11-related culture still appear in these apocalyptic films and, if so, in what ways are these issues advanced? In what ways do these films make visual a fear of the end of the world which is specifically predicated on post 9/11 trauma and fear? Let us begin to answer these questions by establishing some general trends through a case study comparing two films, one from the late 90s and the other post 9/11, which both share common ground and yet show significant differences highlighting a shift towards cultural pessimism in apocalyptic films after 9/11.

[239] Interestingly enough, although essentially different types of films to those listed above, both *World Trade Center* and *United 93* also failed to live up to their billing, only managing roughly $100m between them, perhaps justifying the studios' hesitancies with regards to dealing directly with 9/11.

Godzilla vs. Cloverfield

When comparing the 90s apocalyptic film to those of the twenty-first century, some films epitomise the differences between the two waves. Roland Emmerich's 1998 version of the classic Japanese Gojira story, *Godzilla*, and Matt Reeves' 2008 film, *Cloverfield*, represent one such comparison. Both share the essential, 'monster stomps Manhattan' premise but these are radically different takes on it. By the time of the release of *Godzilla*, the short-lived boom of late 90s, big-budget, apocalyptic film was on the wane. The formula was showing signs of strain so much so that the films were becoming self-referential. The tropes were obvious to the audience: Manhattan gets destroyed, the military are ineffective, enter science-geek, there is a thinly veiled romance, after more destruction, near misses, and comedy set-pieces science and the military unite to find a solution and extinguish the threat. To this extent *Independence Day* (1996), *Godzilla*, and *Armageddon* are virtually the same film repackaged:

> Although *Godzilla* added a monster to the developing pattern of science fiction disaster movies, by the time the film came out it found itself located between two other films that were also destroying large portions of New York, and in a cycle which had already reached the point where the films were actually referring to each other. Just as *Independence Day* included a joke about the 'X-Files' television series, for example, the *X-Files* movie reciprocated by having somebody urinating on an old poster of *Independence Day* in an alleyway; and similarly, already wary of the 'Size Does Matter' campaign no doubt, *Armageddon* shows some Godzilla merchandise getting wiped out by its opening meteor shower.[240]

Godzilla also draws from another massively popular film franchise, the *Jurassic Park* films, and in particular the second of these films: *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1997), in which, during the finale of the film, a dinosaur is transported by Cargo ship to San Diego, at which point it duly escapes to wreak havoc in the city

[240] Stephen Keane, *Disaster Movies*, p. 100.

before finally being captured. There is no doubt that Godzilla has the appearance of an over-sized dinosaur, something acknowledged by the film's tagline of 'Size Does Matter'.

By contrast, *Cloverfield* refuses the temptation to reference its predecessors. This is a film which begs to be taken seriously. This is *not* just another monster destroying the city movie. In fact *Cloverfield* owes much of its style and action to the contemporary Horror genre, its handheld camera technique reminiscent of the hugely successful *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) which fairly revolutionised the modern horror industry. Whilst *The Blair Witch Project*, however, became a model for what could be achieved on a small budget, *Cloverfield* would go on to show that slick, big-budget filmmaking could be combined with an amateur aesthetic to lend an air of realism to what could have otherwise become clichéd.[241]

Cloverfield rejects the notion of origin hence there is no verbal reference to Godzilla. The creature remains nameless throughout the film: when asked if he knows what the monster is, a soldier replies simply, "whatever it is, it's winning." Nor do we find out where the creature comes from, or how it ended up in Manhattan. This is in stark contrast to Emmerich's film which opens in French Polynesia, the contentious site of French nuclear testing. Here we are immediately given an origin, a cause, and an explanation. Early on we are introduced to the Japanese myth of Gojira, as the survivor of an ocean attack chillingly utters its name. Ironically it is the monster in *Cloverfield* that more closely resembles the Japanese beast, whose name is derived from the combination of Gorilla and Whale. In the brief moments

[241] This kind of filmmaking has also been adopted by embedded reporters covering the battles in Afghanistan and Iraq: '[Danny] Schecter also finds that television reporters are instructed how to get exciting footage by imitating cinema vérité camera techniques. [Reporter Robert] Pelton [in *WMD: Weapons of Mass Deception* (2004)] describes network instructions to reporters to take their cameras "off the stick." The reporter would be instructed to move around with a handheld camera to make the viewer feel the journalist is in the middle of something.' (Prince, *Firestorm*, p. 181.)

when we actually see the *Cloverfield* monster, it is noticeable how it walks, Gorilla-like, on both its arms and legs.[242]

For *Godzilla*, the creature itself is the centre of the film. There are numerous long-takes of the monster as it destroys Manhattan. These are the 'money shots' of a film which certainly values spectacle over substance. The problem with such an approach is that the monster itself loses its impact by the end of what is also quite a lengthy film. Contrast this to *Cloverfield*, roughly an hour shorter, which chooses to show us only fleeting glimpses of its monster until the very end of the film. In fact, we do not even leave the scene of a party for the first fifteen minutes (a long time in such a short film) as characters are established and the audience lulled into a false sense of security. *Godzilla* opts for an opening popular in 90s action films, making brief stops at exotic locations (it may be up to Americans to prevent catastrophe, but this is the world's problem!). Inside ten minutes we have already visited no less than five different locations: French Polynesia, the South Pacific Ocean, Chernobyl, Panama, and New York (referred to as 'the City that Never Sleeps'). This is a problem created by the French, who are horribly stereotyped in the film: when French secret service agent Philippe Roaché, who is admittedly one of the heroes of the film, is brought a ring donut he looks at it in disgust before saying, "No croissant?" And when later asked, "Where did you

[242] Image 12 the beast in *Cloverfield*.

find this guy!?" the central character, Nick Tatopoulos exclaims, "He's from France!" as if this would explain all his quirks.

On some level it may seem contrived to compare two films which so evidently have different agendas. But the differences here are telling and indicative of the wider tropes of the two waves of films. *Godzilla* is essentially a family film, whilst *Cloverfield* is more likely to be appreciated by a late teen/horror movie audience. Like most 90s apocalyptic films, *Godzilla* is undeniably light-hearted for a film about destruction. From the quite simplistic comedic device of the repeated mispronunciations of Nick's surname, to the laughable incompetence of the US military as they inevitably do more damage to Manhattan than Godzilla itself: when a pilot misses the creature, instead levelling one of New York's largest landmarks, we get this entertaining exchange,

> PILOT: "Oh Damn! That is a negative impact. I Repeat, negative impact."
> NEW YORK MAYOR: "Negative impact!? That's the Goddamn Chrysler Building we're talking about here."

And, although *Cloverfield* also has a number of lines that could be construed as comedic, they are contextualised within a terrifying situation which, aided by its use of the subjective handheld camera style, the audience also feels a part of. Given this context the lines take on a more sinister aspect. They are the reactions of normal people trying to make sense of the situation they find themselves in, not delivered as jokes. These lines, designed to relieve tension in the film, just as quickly turn to despair.

Many of those who populate Manhattan in *Godzilla* are apparently fearless. They stare at the creature in sublime wonderment rather than fear. For example we have the entertaining exploits of news camera-man Animal who seems more concerned about his girlfriend than the danger of getting up close and personal with

Godzilla: "I thought Lucy was going to kill me," he says ironically after chasing the monster in an attempt to get footage. Perhaps for these characters the situation is unreal; it is, in effect, like a disaster movie: a world in which, instead of fleeing in terror, they pronounce "we need bigger guns." This is the default position of the 90s apocalyptic movie: even when the monster is there, trampling the city, they cannot believe it is happening. Theirs is a world where terror is only seen at the cinema and so is to be taken with a pinch of salt. The point here is that the audience too knows exactly how this story will end, because they have seen it so many times before:

> But the other difference is the most symptomatic and that is the fact that it rains in *Godzilla*. This might be, as suggested earlier, in order to turn New York into a fish tank, but most of all it is a deliberate difference that points out the limited variations on offer. *Independence Day* destroyed New York on a clear night and lit it all up like a candle. *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon* showed it getting flooded and bombarded in the clear light of day. *Godzilla* has various parts of the city getting destroyed on a grey day into a dark night.[243]

Cloverfield, however, speaks to an American audience much more accustomed to living in fear. When the footsteps of the creature shake the party many think it is an earthquake, but one member of the party can clearly be heard suggesting that it could be "another terrorist attack." Does this help to explain the loss of humour in apocalyptic films post 9/11; the realisation that this is real now? We will see this further evidenced in many more of these films.

Again the stark differences between *Godzilla* and *Cloverfield* are clearly spelt out by their relative endings. *Godzilla* ends rather predictably, the hatching of an egg leaving room for a sequel aside, with the defeat of the monster, the escape of our heroes, and the re-establishment of a lost love. There is to be no such happy ending for the characters in *Cloverfield*, most of whom we presume dead. We do not even know if the monster has been defeated. While an element of sympathy is afforded to

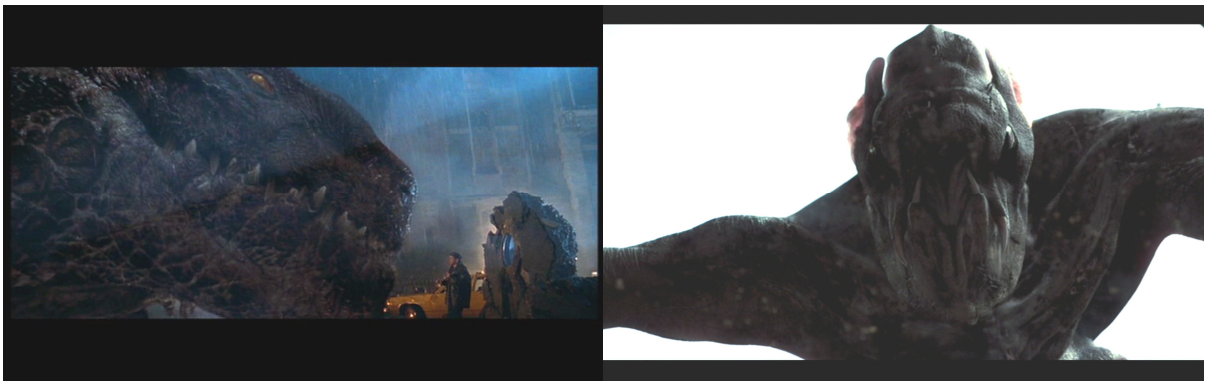
[243] Stephen Keane, *Disaster Movies*, p. 103.

Godzilla, who is presented as a creature who eats fish and not people, who cares for its young, and in whose dying eyes we see a look of sadness, the monster in *Cloverfield* is a brutal killer. A dazed Marlena establishes this before we even get a clear view of it saying, "It was eating people." Its offspring are just as brutal and when the characters are attacked by the spider-like creatures in the subway it is both frenzied and terrifying. Whereas in *Godzilla* the camera lingers, almost fetishistically, on the creature and its young, in *Cloverfield* it is what you cannot see that is the most impacting: what happens to Marlena after being bitten by one of the smaller creatures is clearly too horrifying for the camera to see: she is dragged behind a medical screen and we hear a sickening splat as an explosion of blood hits it in a scene reminiscent of *Alien*'s (1979) infamous chest-buster sequence.[244]

As their disappearance suggests, by the time of the September 11 attacks the apocalyptic films of the late 90s had already lost their appeal. Their formulaic attempts to save the world had failed. In the face of reality people began to realise that, when catastrophe strikes, there are no heroes on hand to save us, just more people like ourselves. When Hollywood again began to revive movies about the end of the world half a decade later, those movies had to do something different. The world they were trying to depict had changed. Whilst looking and feeling completely different, these new films would be fundamentally the same: stories about the end of the world. But these changes in style, in narrative, and in aesthetic

[244] Image 13 *Cloverfield*.

can help to tell us something about the cultural responses to the world we live in today. As *Cloverfield* suggests; this is a world where destruction wins, where being one of the 'good guys' is not always enough to save you, and where it is not just a case of 'Size Does Matter,' but the respective camera angle that counts![245]



Post…

One of the most noticeable things about the last decade is the repeated use of the prefix 'post'. Just some examples include; post-communism; post-structuralism; post-apartheid; post 9/11; and post-apocalypse. The term Postmodernism has been so frequently used that it no longer needs a hyphen. Academics have even begun to describe certain people as 'Posties.' In fact, today, the term 'post' seems to be used to define anything which has already been assimilated into common discourse and is used almost without thought to what it really means. To an extent, classifying

[245] Images 14 *Godzilla*, and 15 *Cloverfield*.

something as 'post' is no more than an expression of the postmodern itself. As Fredric Jameson defines in his seminal *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*,

> The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the "crisis" of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.); taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism.[246]

The question this begs is, where has this obsession with discourse about 'the end of this or that' really come from, and what does it all mean?

In a way the term 'post' is used to indicate both a point of departure, and also a period, object, person, or event of significance. It is often used as a way of referring to history, whilst at the same time attempting to describe the present. In using it we are characterising the present through a direct comparison with the past. For example, when I say that something is postmodern, I am saying both that it adheres to a set of characteristics that have already gathered around the word postmodern itself, and that it also anticipates, and contributes to, an understanding of the modern movement.

Leo Bersani asks about the nature of modernism: 'Is it possible not to be modern? More exactly, can we ever *experience* a time other than our own?'[247] This question that is about our ability to experience the past, something that postmodernism assumes to be impossible despite the fact that it is a school of thought inclined toward retrospection, is also a question about ends: more precisely, can modernity end? Bersani goes on to say that what marks out our current

[246] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalm*, (London: Verso, 1991), p. 1.
[247] Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 47.

'modernity' is precisely this obsession with ends and with the end of modernism in particular:

> Now, however, the modern is understood not merely as a break with the past but as an inability to understand the past. The modernity of the twentieth century includes the loss of what other modernities did not necessarily give up when they defined their own distinctiveness: an understanding of the tradition to which that modernity added something new. The break with the past now is marked by a mournful sense of the break itself as unique. *We* are modern because our modernity makes absolute the notion of discontinuity implicit in all discourses on modernity, reformulates discontinuity as a loss of the aptitude for continuities.[248]

We, as 'modern' in our own right, are discontinuous with the past. But if we are incapable of fully understanding the past, then why do we constantly refer to it? Frank Kermode asks, 'what human need can be more profound than to humanize the common death? When we survive we make little images of moments which have seemed like ends; we thrive on epochs.'[249] So perhaps this is our way of coming to terms with death and so giving our lives a context: 'we humanly do not want it to be an indeterminate interval between the *tick* of birth and the *tock* of death.'[250] This means that we look for both ends and beginnings as a way of giving meaning to the space our lives occupy. 'Posts' are important to us because they allow us to assimilate the past in a way which can help make sense of our present. It does not matter that we cannot fully understand the past because this is not the purpose of the word 'post': that purpose is to help us understand our lives as they are *today*.

The term 'post', then, may be a way of anchoring, or orientating, oneself. We use it as a way to define our present; history is never dead as such because we use it to describe what we are *not*. It is a cultural production, a type of discourse used almost invariably to describe a cultural moment. This is why the term post 9/11 does not necessarily mark the moment (9/11) as anything more than a moment of cultural

[248] Leo Bersani, p. 48.
[249] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, (Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 7.
[250] Frank Kermode, pp. 57-58.

shift. Yes, essentially it marks the end of something, but the end of what exactly? It is particularly interesting that these cultural markers come to take precedence over markers of chronology. Why, for example, should we use post 9/11 when post-millennium, or post-2,000, would seem just as convenient? Perhaps at this point we should return to one of the ideas with which this thesis opened; namely, and with reference to *Fight Club*, the desire for a defining historical moment.

In his search for a defining moment for his generation, Tyler Durden releases anarchy and blows up several skyscrapers, visualised in the film as two towers collapsing simultaneously. This act is carried out at night and is clearly not about taking innocent lives. Nonetheless, it comes as a cry for help, both from Tyler on the individual level, and from those members of his established fight clubs (later Project Mayhem), who Tyler believes represent the forgotten middle-class workers of America. With his grand gesture of destruction what Tyler and his cronies are seeking is an identity, they want to be remembered. In a way Tyler's act is more powerful than 9/11 because it is an attempt to change the course of history. Although without the impact of the significant deaths witnessed on 9/11, Tyler achieves (or at least aims to achieve) something politically significant: the erasure of the World Debt records. *Fight Club* displays a utopian impulse which seems absent in 9/11. In comparison, as Lisboa suggests of 9/11:

> this particular small-scale apocalypse was not the end of anything, merely the re-visiting of a not even-particularly new or original, although undeniably vicious circle. With any luck, in the long term, 9/11 will prove to be not the first stage of a definitive climax, not an actual Ground Zero following which there is nothing, but merely another bloody episode (not the final one) of a very old story.'[251]

This defines 9/11 not as the end of anything, but rather the continuation of a cycle of destruction and creation which has led humanity from one disaster to another.

[251] Maria Manuel Lisboa, pp. 10-11.

Nevertheless, it is somewhat depressing to see one's own time as nothing more than repetition. In seeking an epoch with which to define the current 'modernity', culture has taken the historical significance of 9/11 (that it is in fact evidence that nothing ever really changes) and turned it upside down, insisting on 9/11 as a historical juncture. This is the appeal of the word 'post': it gives the impression of difference, without necessarily requiring any fundamental change in trajectory. Furthermore, is not this obsession with the end of things an extension of the very cultural pessimism that has already been discussed? It is the kind of logic that closes down thinking and discourse, asserting that we have already assimilated the past, that somehow we have learnt the lessons of 9/11 and are now in age less innocent.

The precise definition of post 9/11 is in fact on display when we compare 90s apocalyptic films, with contemporaneous ones. What does it mean to say that something is a post 9/11 text? For one thing it tells us that there is a difference in either the world (context) after 9/11 or the texts themselves (and both, probably, since the two are almost always linked). Again, here, we are talking specifically about a difference in culture, which does not necessarily transpire to any difference in real world politics. But one such textual difference is the rise of the post-apocalyptic film since 9/11. Throughout the late 90s cycle of apocalyptic films we find the world in peril over and over again, but every time the fate of the world is threatened, humanity steps up to save the day. Contrast this to the more recent texts: *The Road*, *The Book of Eli*, *28 Days Later* (2002), *I Am Legend* (2007), in which there is not a world left to save. Then there are yet more films in which the world is saved, but changed radically in the process: *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *2012* (2009). And finally there is the example of *Knowing* (2009), a film in which our hero knows the world will end but ultimately cannot prevent it. To help us

analyse what it means to be in a 'post-9/11' society, we need to take a closer look at these films.

An interesting place to start is the *Terminator* movie franchise, particularly *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991). Despite the fact that it falls just outside our main period of consideration, it is worth a brief examination because it aptly displays a middle-ground between what is essentially late 90s optimism about our ability to save the world, and the pessimistic inevitability with which films since 9/11 have dealt with the apocalypse. *T2* is interesting for a number of reasons but most noticeably for its use of the flash-forward, which is admittedly a continuation of the device used in *The Terminator* (1984). By using this device, the film shows us both the present and also glimpses of the post-apocalyptic future which will ensue unless the timeline is altered. This tension drives the narrative as the characters desperately search for a way to either solidify or change the future. While Sarah Connor hunts and attempts to assassinate Miles Dyson, the man who will eventually create the terminator robots and in doing so set off a chain of events which will lead to a nuclear apocalypse, her son, John, advocates the peaceful approach. With the help of a terminator robot, sent back from the future to protect him, John is able to stop his mother and, instead, reason with Dyson. In the finale, the terminator (played by Arnold Schwarzenegger), who has gained a human-like compassion, sacrifices himself in order to ensure that he cannot be replicated in any way. In the final scene the camera gazes down at the road from a moving vehicle. Symbolically, we cannot see in front of us as we travel with Sarah Connor narrating: "The unknown future rolls toward us. I face it for the first time with a sense of hope. Because if a machine, a terminator, can learn the value of human life, maybe we can too."

The ending of *T2* is marred by the sense that the danger is not over. In essence the film franchise mirrors the cycle of potential disaster that faces the planet as a whole: while the threat of nuclear extinction is defeated it is only temporarily so; just as *T2* is the inevitable sequel of *The Terminator*, in which we are told: "It can't be bargained with, it can't be reasoned with. It doesn't feel pity or remorse or fear and it absolutely will not stop, ever, until you are dead", so too, we understand that *Terminator 3* (2003) will almost certainly follow in the wake of Sarah's words. The optimism Sarah Connor expresses is tinged with a sense of regret: her hope springs from the actions of a machine, not of humankind. The future has been changed, but how we are not quite sure. And although humanity may have been spared the nuclear apocalypse predicted in flash-forwards, the cruelty and violence of the world as it is today has not been altered with it. Unlike most films in which the apocalypse is prevented, there is no great coming together of mankind in *T2*, no union which it might be argued would bring together nations. It is for these reasons that *T2* lies somewhere between the optimistic gung-ho heroism of the late 90s apocalypse, and the downright pessimism of the survivalist post-apocalypse after 9/11.

T2 tells us something different to nearly every other apocalyptic film: that the future is not yet written. When an audience sits down to watch *Armageddon*, or *Independence Day*, or *The Fifth Element* (1997), it is already clear that, come the eleventh hour humanity will save itself. That is the point of these films: the world must be saved so that it can be blown up all over again. In the current, post 9/11 environment, it is the end of the world itself that is inevitable. It is so taken for granted that the cause has become almost an irrelevance. There is little in the way of a nuclear warning, or of the technological threat *T2* presents. In *The Book of Eli* we are merely told that, "the war tore a hole in the sky." Is this a reference to nuclear

explosion, some other futuristic weaponry, or God's judgement? In John Hillcoat's *The Road* the issue of what caused the apocalypse is sidelined by the simple need to survive, we are left to make assumptions; perhaps it was environmental, perhaps nuclear. All we know: "The clock stopped at 1:17. There was a long sheer of bright light, then a series of low concussions." In Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) humans have inexplicably become infertile. It is not that the causes of disaster in these films are insignificant, or petty. There is no doubt that the audience wants to know why this has happened. But by not informing us, these films are presenting the audience with a world in which destruction has become inevitable.

When attempting to describe the post-apocalyptic films of the twenty-first century, a number of key words spring to mind. They are bleak, both in terms of their narratives and aesthetic appeals, they are brutal, and they are serious. To an extent these words share similar meanings and on some level they are connected with the representation of death and darkness. In these futuristic visions of our world it is not just the people we encounter who are dying but the planet too, and this is evident in the landscapes and surroundings which become a focal point of these films. It is not the characters and not so much the monsters that are the stars of the special effects here, but rather the environment. We see frequent long-shots of desolate plains, empty cities, dynamic and alien skies; we see the crumbling buildings and collapsed highways symbolically decaying like unwanted remnants of a now irrelevant past.

The apocalyptic film's desire for spectacle proceeds from that aspect of itself which is shared with the science fiction film. But more than that, the apocalyptic film is so suited to showcasing the sublimity of modern special effects that it becomes a requirement. In his article, 'The Aesthetics of Destruction', Mathias

Nilges offers an explanation for why 9/11 instigated a wave of films which revel in the 'beauty' of destruction.[252] In an uncomplicated account, Nilges suggests that since 9/11 the beauty of destruction comes in its simplifying power, in the way in which the destruction neutralises the chaotic world system we currently inhabit. However convenient this idea, it does seem rather too easy and horribly disproportionate to suggest that after 9/11 people simply decided that life was suddenly too chaotic and we would be better off with destruction. The aesthetics of destruction upon which Nilges bases his piece were also surely in evidence prior to 9/11, as he himself admits:

> The fear of lack of control and stability represented in contemporary cultural production is not new and cannot simply be explained in reference to the "War on Terror." Instead, such cultural narratives indicate a more complex problem, namely the way in which the "War on Terror" is linked to a psychological struggle created by a radical socioeconomic shift that predates 9/11.[253]

The important thing is rather how that aesthetic changes after 9/11 and here he does recognise a key difference, relating specifically to the use of the sublime:

> The beauty contained in contemporary representations of destruction is thus less an immediate aspect of the sublime spectacle that is destruction itself but rather constitutes a result of the effect of destruction. Unlike Cold War-era representations of destruction that mediated a dominant fear of annihilation, contemporary representations of destruction are beautiful because destruction is in fact an antidote to a world that produces the fears we seek to escape.[254]

At this point we need to go back and discuss more fully something which became apparent much earlier in this thesis, and that is that 9/11 was itself a sublime moment, and how that has transformed the use of the sublime in apocalyptic film.

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[252] Mathias Nilges, 'The Aesthetics of Destruction: Contemporary US Cinema and TV Culture', in *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the "War on Terror"*, ed. Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula, Karen Randell, (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), pp. 23-33.
[253] Mathias Nilges, p. 27.
[254] Mathias Nilges, p. 24.

Post 9/11 Apocalypse and the Aesthetics of the Sublime

So, first of all, how is it that 9/11 was a sublime moment? The sublime has always been notoriously difficult to define. Whilst perhaps the most influential and comprehensive descriptions of what constitutes the sublime were shaped in the eighteenth century by the philosophers Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant (Burke focusing on the sublime as a product of the senses and Kant providing a more scientific method to his analysis), critics and philosophers alike seem to have struggled since to come to any concise formula to cover its clearly subjective vagaries. Take this description of the sublime from Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* for example:

> For the sublime has no object either. When the starry sky, a vista of open seas or a stained glass window shedding purple beams fascinate me, there is a cluster of meaning, of colors, of words, of caresses, there are light touches, scents, sighs, cadences that arise, shroud me, carry me away, and sweep me beyond the things that I see, hear, or think.[255]

What Kristeva describes here resembles beauty far more than it resembles the sublime. At times, it would seem, the distinction between the two can be flimsy, and yet it is the introduction of that aspect, so common in contemporary discourse, which proves the difference between the two: 'terror'. Terror is the necessary ingredient which elevates us to that sublime moment, the moment that gives rise to our skin prickling with both excitement and fear. This is not terror undiluted, for that is a different experience altogether, but it is terror mediated by the distance of safety. As Gene Ray explains,

> The sublime always has to do with terror, then, but is not identical with pure, immediate terror: it is rather terror mediated by a certain physical or temporal distance and compounded with enjoyment and fascination—a strange and

[255] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 12.

> singular mix of pleasure and pain. As Kant has it, the feeling of the sublime is an "indirect" or "negative pleasure."[256]

The sublime gives rise to an almost out of body experience, its awe encouraging the ultimate contemplation of life and death itself. For those who perched on the windows of the WTC on September 11 2001, the feeling was probably that of terror rather than the sublime. Theirs was an unmediated gaze into the abyss below. But for those watching the bodies fall, the buildings burn, a sublime awe was clearly visible in their transfixed stares. Likewise, although almost certainly to a lesser extent, those who watched on television that day may have felt that same sublime sensation.

Perhaps the best comparison is made by Philip Shaw in his book *The Sublime*. Here Shaw uses a contemporary, and in this case rather relevant, example of a sublime experience, that of the bungee jump:

> the experience of bungee jumping is pleasurable because the person who engages in this activity is reasonably certain that the elastic cord will rescue him or her from catastrophe. The bungee jump mimics the suicidal descent into the abyss, providing the person who falls with a glimpse of what that decent *might* really entail. Having exerted itself in this way, the individual feels correspondingly energised, more alive and thus more 'itself'.[257]

Perhaps the same can be said for parachute jumping and a whole range of extreme sports which have become increasingly popular, particularly among young travellers. It is surely this aspect of staring into the abyss before the elastic cord rescues you that is mimicked in the apocalyptic films of the late 90s. When, at the last moment, the world is saved from ultimate destruction the audience can achieve that sensation of having stood on the brink and come back. But what of the mass of post-apocalyptic films that we have seen recently; films in which our fate is to die and

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[256] Gene Ray, 'History, 'The Sublime, Terror: Notes on the Politics of Fear', in *Signals in the Dark: Art in the Shadow of War*, ed., Seamus Kealy, (Blackwood Gallery/University of Toronto, 2008), p. 1-2.
[257] Philip Shaw, *The Sublime: the New Critical Idiom*, (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 54.

suffer rather than to survive potential disaster? Where does the beauty come from in these films? Surely it is simplistic to say that the attraction is in the simplifying of the chaos of life into death: do spectators no longer fear death? Surely this is not the case. Neither is it the levelling effect of disaster which is often touted as their attraction, since many of these films are about isolation. Is it instead that there *is* life after disaster? Is that the message that many of these films tell: that disaster is inevitable, and unstoppable, but that there is life afterwards? This is certainly a fundamental difference between the majority of pre and post 9/11 films.

Sublime effects have not disappeared from apocalyptic films by any means, if anything scenes which attempt to produce a sublime effect in the viewer have become more frequent. But the primary way in which these effects have been achieved is subtly different. The sublime is for one thing about terror, and for another about power (or more precisely powerlessness) and scale. While Burke reasoned that objects of large enough size could invoke the sublime because of their ability to make the observer feel powerless (this is not when that object is directly threatening, but only when it is perceived that the object has the potential to be threatening and, in the case that it was, resistance would be utterly futile), Kant theorised that scale could invoke the sublime when it was beyond the comprehension of the individual. He called this the mathematical sublime. As Philip Shaw explains here:

> The length of my body just does not compare to the enormity of the galaxy. I am simply unable to 'take in' this comparison, just as I am unable to get to grips with the fact that my standard unit of measurement, my body, is made up of millions of cells and countless numbers of atoms.[258]

The contemporary apocalyptic film frequently uses both Burke's notion of overwhelming enormity, and Kant's mathematical sublime together in images of

[258] Philip Shaw, p.81.

desolate landscapes. A survivor seen alone in a vast landscape both seems overwhelmed in the sense that they are small in comparison to it, and also carries with them the implication of the sheer number of people who occupy the planet and the survivor's relative insignificance. Both are sublime effects.

In a way, post 9/11 apocalyptic films have tended to mimic that sublime effect witnessed by so many on 9/11 itself in an attempt to reproduce the feelings of powerlessness and an overwhelming scale. Much like in *World Trade Center* and specifically the moment the falling man figure is seen in long shot against the tower, seeing the terrible scale he exhibits against the monstrous dimensions of the building itself, survivalist post-apocalyptic films take every opportunity they can to remind us of the scale of the individual against his alien and hostile environment. A classic example of this can be seen in the opening of Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later*.[259] When the protagonist, Jim (Cillian Murphy), wakes up in a London hospital to find the city abandoned, the camera follows him as he staggers round the city, trying to work out what has happened to everyone. Throughout this passage numerous long shots of the empty streets are prevalent, perfectly illustrating the sense of sublime perspective offered by the shot of the individual against his

[259] Images 16 sublime isolation in *28 Days* Later, and 17 *28 Days Later*.

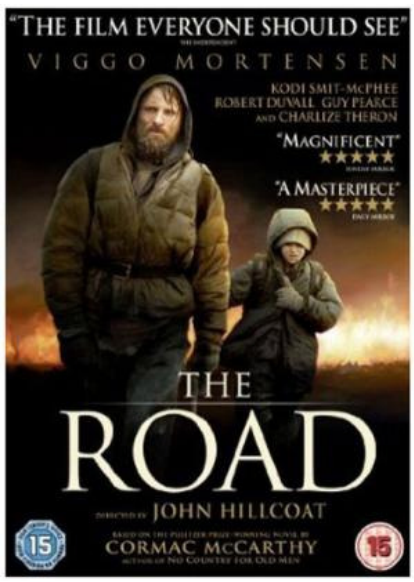
overwhelming environment. Jim displays what appears to be an odd mix of anxiety and elation; on the one hand something catastrophic has clearly happened in London, on the other hand he is free to do whatever he wishes. I will discuss this film more a little later, and as this chapter progresses we will see more examples of this sublime framing of the individual.

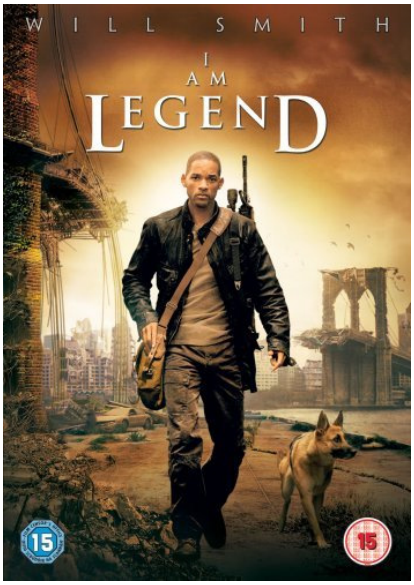
The other recurring motif which links many of these post-apocalyptic films is the image of the destroyed city. This in itself is a sublime image which shows the frailty of human architectural achievement against a hostile nature in the form of natural catastrophes and those other things beyond our control. The destroyed city, whilst a long-term trope of the apocalyptic film seems to invoke the memory of 9/11 itself. The unmistakeable image of 9/11 can be seen in this picture of dilapidated and crumbling towers, and one scene in Roland Emmerich's *2012* so vividly recalls it as to be almost crude.[260]

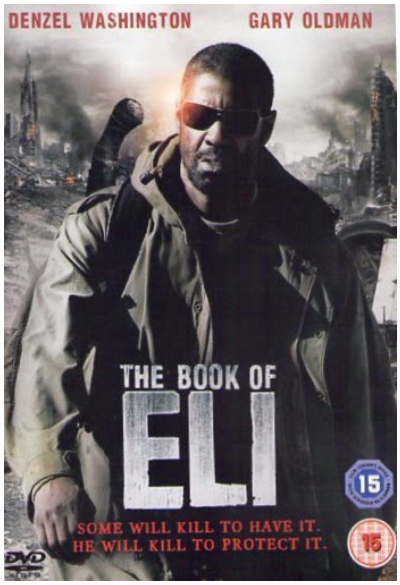
Ultimately, all of these sublime effects can be traced back to one element of the narratives in particular. This is the positioning of these films not as films about the end of the world as such, but as films about the survivor character. In these films we see one man trudge these wastelands: one man and his child (*The Road*), one man

[260] Image 18 the 9/11 image in *2012*.

and his dog (*I Am Legend*), one man and his book (*The Book of Eli*).[261] And this sense of isolation seems to be at the centre.







This is a key difference between the films of the late 90s and those of today: they are isolationist. The 90s apocalyptic blockbusters concentrated on working in teams. Whilst there *were* lead characters, those characters relied upon a network of people to help guide them to a solution which would save the planet. So in *Independence Day* we have the macho Captain Steven Hillier, played by Will Smith, bringing the brawn to the traditional science boffin David Levinson, played by Jeff Goldblum. Along the way we meet many side characters, most notably the American President and a group of pilots, who also have important roles to play in the eventual defeat of the alien invaders. In *Godzilla* there is a very similar set-up: the science boffin, Dr. Niko Tatopoulos (Matthew Broderick), needing the assistance of French Secret Service Agent Philippe Raoché (Jean Reno). Once again we have the interference of an authority figure (Mayor Ebert), as well as a romantic sub-plot,

[261] Images 19 promotional material for *The Road*, 20 *I am Legend*, and 21 *The Book of Eli*.

the American military, and the cameo comedy performance of Animal. In *Armageddon* Bruce Willis' character, Harry Stamper, takes a drilling team into space in an attempt to prevent an asteroid from hitting the Earth, an operation that is only possible with the help and support of NASA, and which would also have failed if it were not for the exploits of a crazy Russian astronaut. Stephen Keane also notices the importance of a team mentality within the film:

> Repeatedly throughout the film Stamper is referred to as a Red Adair, "the world's best deep core driller", but fundamentally his leadership principle is tempered with the value of teamwork: "I'm only the best because I work with the best".[262]

The list goes on; in *Dante's Peak* (1997) volcanologist Harry Dalton, played by Pierce Brosnan, needs the help of the local mayor and love interest Rachel Wando, played by Linda Hamilton, and the rest of his team to persuade the town council to evacuate the town which is located under a volcano that is ready to erupt. And without the efforts of Rachel's ex-mother in law, who sacrifices herself in order to save Dalton, Rachel, and Rachel's children, and a defective piece of machinery, ELF, bought from NASA, the central characters would not themselves have survived to give us our happy ending. The message of these films is clear: if we work together we can avert any possible disaster, from erupting volcanoes and asteroids, to giant lizards and alien invaders.

When this is contrasted with the contemporary post-apocalyptic film a very different approach is frequently on display. Here the characters are lone survivors. They are often hardened men: men who have learnt how to survive in the harshest of worlds, men who take no prisoners, who stop for no-one, and men who have known love and lost it. These men are hard on the outside, but ultimately soft on the inside, and they are men who are also unwilling to sacrifice their humanity. One of the

[262] Stephen Keane, *Disaster Movies*, p. 93.

purest examples of this is *The Road*, as much an apocalyptic drama as it is an action movie. In *The Road* a man and his son wander through a post-apocalyptic wasteland, heading south to the coast in search of warmth and food. On their journey they encounter a number of other people, most of whom are cannibals. This is the bleakest of films with a pervasive sense of despair. In this place where hope does not exist and survival is everything, if not a fruitless endeavour, the pair struggle to keep sight of their humanity. As they slowly die they take solace in the maintenance of their morality:

> FATHER: "We have to watch out for the bad guys. We have to just keep carrying the fire."
> SON: "What fire?"
> FATHER: "The fire inside you."
> SON: "Are we still the good guys?"
> FATHER: "Yes, we're still the good guys. Of course we are."
> SON: "And… we always will be? No matter what happens?"
> FATHER: "Always will be."

Father and son endure through extreme circumstances, constantly on the look out for groups of cannibals which remain their greatest fear. That this is to be the darkest of films is established early on when the father, played by Viggo Mortensen, shows his son how to shoot himself in case they are captured. And when father and son finally reach the coast they find not salvation, but as grey and dead a landscape as we have seen throughout the movie. To an extent, the grim darkness of *The Road*, which stretches into its aesthetic, is a cinematic anti-sublime. Much like *World Trade Center*, it recalls that same sense of fumbling around blind. The characters are simultaneously together and yet isolated, pictured against vast backdrops and yet constrained by a claustrophobic darkness. The air is ashen and so too is the thick grey light which seems to cling to everything within the frame. Despite this, the darkness of the film serves to make the brightness in certain scenes more spectacular. A scene in which the two gaze mesmerised at a raging forest fire is visually stunning

in the film's context, and indeed the theme of fire and flame is evident throughout, no doubt suggesting that humanity has been sent quite literally back into the dark ages.

Despite the son being adopted by a family at the end of the film after Mortensen's character has died leaving him to fend for himself, this is without doubt a film filled with pessimism. Whilst in *The Road* the father relies on the boy to survive not physically but emotionally, it is still a film about isolation. When the two *do* meet a character who does not want to eat them the father's survival instincts tell him that they should move on as quickly as possible regardless. These people are dead weight and only likely to slow them down. They are also isolated by the camera too, with long-shots of the pair framed against the hostile environment predominating.[263]

[263] Images 22 long shots in *The Road*, 23 *The Road*, and 24 *The Road*.

These shots are commonplace in the contemporary apocalyptic film and serve to reinforce the loneliness of a world without people. Whilst in many ways disturbing, these images of abandoned cities also represent a kind of fantasy. As Kim Newman suggests in his book, *Millennium Movies: End of the World Cinema*:

> Quite apart from the fact that contemplating the Apocalypse tends to make everyday problems seem trivial, artistic representations of the end of the world cheerfully pander to common fantasies. What if the world we know were destroyed, but you alone (or suitably partnered) survived? The commonest recurring image of Apocalypse, in literature and film, is the dilapidated and depopulated city. As the survivors tour corpse-littered streets, we are allowed to peer at a world caught unaware by the moment of its extinction. To be the inheritor of worthless riches and an inexhaustible supply of canned food is not perhaps such an unattractive prospect.'[264]

Francis Lawrence's 2007 adaptation of *I Am Legend* is another good example of this: a movie which indulges itself on images of the desolate city.[265]

[264] Kim Newman, *Millennium Movies: End of the World Cinema*, (London: Titan Books, 1999), p. 18.
[265] Images 25 *The Book of Eli*, 26, *The Book of Eli*, 27, *I am* Legend, 28, *I am Legend*, and 29 *I am Legend*.

I Am Legend begins with a scene in which Robert Neville (Will Smith) speeds through the streets of New York City chasing deer. There is a playful element to the way he drives: it is a fantasy, from the shiny red sports car, to the way he uses sidewalks as shortcuts. This is his city now. He is free to break into houses, to take DVDs from the rental store, to hit golf balls at cars left abandoned. His only companion is a dog whose main purpose in the narrative appears to be to give Neville someone to talk to for the first half of the film. When his dog dies after being bitten by one of the infected, who populate the city at night and who appear to be a strange cross between a vampire and a zombie, momentarily he is left utterly alone. Whilst hardened, the men in these films are not removed from emotion. They cling to a shred of life, without which they see no reason to be. In *The Road* this is the boy, in *I Am Legend* it is the dog. Neville's response is to try to commit suicide whilst taking as many of the infected with him. Fortunately he is rescued by a

woman and now, with human company restored, he is able to carry on and eventually complete his quest to find a cure for the infection.

I Am Legend may have a hopeful ending, as the cure is taken to a survivor's colony, but ultimately Neville has given his life to protect this cure. This is a familiar ending for the contemporary post-apocalyptic film: we have already seen that Mortensen's character dies at the end of *The Road*, along with Eli in *The Book of Eli*, and the hero figure Theo Faron (Clive Owen) in *Children of Men*. George Slusser uses the term 'pocket apocalypse' to describe the way in which apocalyptic fictions enable their audience to 'prepare' for the end. His theory is that, if we are always waiting for the apocalypse, if we feel it is always around the corner, this might somehow defer its coming.[266] In this way, all apocalyptic fictions have a use value for a spectator who is not disturbed by or anxious about the images on the screen, but rather comforted by the idea that they have been in some way prepared for their possibility. But if, as these films would suggest, the apocalypse is unstoppable, and if our heroes die for just a small glimmer of hope, do these films really offer comfort? While we have seen some elements of fantasy in the story of the lone survivor, it seems unlikely that this is escapist in the way that the 90s cinema sought escapism through the destruction of the 'indestructible' (our buildings and our way of life prior to 9/11). In the 90s at least we knew that, on the odd occasion when a lead character actually died (Harry Stamper for example in *Armageddon*), he did so in order to save the world.

Thus post 9/11 apocalyptic fiction, on the whole, represents a movement away from the escapist images of destruction seen in the late 90s. Whilst there are still a number of films which revel in over the top set pieces of destruction,

[266] George Slusser 'Pocket Apocalypse: American Survivalist Fictions from *Walden* to *The Incredible Shrinking Man*', in *Imagining Apocalypse: Studies in Cultural Crisis*, ed. David Seed, (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press LTD., 2000), pp. 118-135

particularly Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* and *2012* (his thirst for massive scale disaster seemingly unquenchable), most post 9/11 apocalypses are sober affairs, bringing home the harsh realities of a world gone to hell and a planet slowly dying. Veronica Hollinger describes Science Fiction as a mode which has lost its ability to dream:

> These days science fiction is everywhere, as a discourse of choice through which to describe a present which perceives itself as both technological and apocalyptic. In fact, this is a present which perceives itself *as already existing in the future*. The implication here is that, when faced with the immediacy of millennial/apocalyptic events, science fiction's future orientation becomes blocked and science fiction becomes a *present*-tense kind of literature. That is, it begins to function in the popular imagination more and more as a metaphorical discourse through which to describe/construct the present, rather than as an extrapolative exercise through which to imagine the future. In fact, as millennial thinking catches up with science fiction, the future becomes nothing more than a kind of displaced version of the present.[267]

If Science Fiction is being used as a way in which to describe the world of today, it is no longer being used to comfort us about the direction we are headed in. The message then has become; do not look to the future, because the apocalypse is already here, on our very doorsteps. Issues surrounding the reality of climate change, urban dystopic decay, and debates about the morality of such things as bio-engineering, cybernetics, and the replacement of human labour by machine labour, all prevalent as staples of Science Fiction's recent history, have become ways in which to describe the present rather than the future. We *know* that the climate is changing, cities are bursting at the seams, and supermarkets have already begun to replace till assistants with automated 'swipe your own' machines. Not only this, but the worst visions of destruction seen in the likes of *Independence Day* were witnessed and made concrete on September 11th. These films no longer offer speculation about the future, but a realisation of what is occurring in the here and

[267] Veronica Hollinger, 'Future/Present: The End of Science Fiction', in *Imagining Apocalypse: Studies in Cultural Crisis*, ed. David Seed, (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press LTD., 2000), pp. 217-218.

now, perhaps evidence that we understand our plight but are powerless to prevent it. There is something sublime in this very description; the idea that humanity is careering towards a dramatic and spectacular end.

As we have already seen, the narrative consistencies between these contemporary post-apocalyptic films are numerous, and even more will be illuminated when we later discuss their treatment of religion, but these films also share a common aesthetic. Vivian Sobchack resists the temptation to see the late 90s films as forewarnings of 9/11, saying that,

> while one might want to link the urban destruction in *Independence Day* and the films that follow it with recent and explosive acts of urban terrorism in New York and Oklahoma City, there seems to be no human affect or real consequence attached to it. The cities in these films appear to have little meaning; they seem hardly to matter at all. […] Indeed, in the comedy *Mars Attacks!* manic Martians decimate not only Washington but also Las Vegas in what is less an apocalypse than a wacky celebration.[268]

She is right; the films of the late 90s do not in any way prefigure the atrocities of September 11, if anything they show just how implausible those events seemed at the time.[269] The term 'celebrate' is particularly appropriate when used in conjunction with the 90s films. They are a celebration of both indestructibility and the power of modern technology. This can be seen most overtly on the level of aesthetics.

Films such as *Independence Day* and *Armageddon* are a special effects tour de force. They are big, colourful pictures with a super slick look to match their supersize budgets. Even a film like *Mars Attacks!*, which is essentially a parody of a

[268] Vivian Sobchack, 'Cities on the Edge of Time: the Urban Science Fiction Film', in *Liquid Metal: the Science Fiction Film Reader*, ed. by Sean Redmond, (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), p. 85. – as first published in *Alien Zone II*, ed. Annette Kuhn, (London: Verso, 1999).
[269] Image 30 a celebration of spectacle in *Mars Attacks!*

B-movie in content, overhypes the visuals. It is a film with outrageous colour and sparkle as well as a lot of fun.[270] In comparison *The Road*, *The Book of Eli*, and *Children of Men* all have a bleached look. Their landscapes are overwhelmingly grey and desolate. They act to sap the colour both from the scene and also from the characters who are at constant war with a hostile environment that is destined to triumph over them.

One post-apocalyptic film more than these others uses colour to great effect: Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* is a film whose very raw and gritty look comes from an intentional aesthetic device. The surreal nature of the film, as Jim wanders through empty London streets, is emphasised by its impressionistic look. Jim eventually groups together with fellow survivors Selena, Frank, and Hannah at which point the characters delight in the fun of being survivors: the group laughing and having fun as they drive through a tunnel over scattered cars, enjoy a shopping trip in which Frank playfully leaves his credit card on the counter as they leave, and have a picnic in the countryside. This again is surreal since the audience finds it difficult to understand the way in which they joke and laugh together when they are in such peril. It is evident that this will not last and that there is yet more violence and horror to come. It is the use of DV cameras and colour techniques that give this film the edgy and brutal feel which makes it so effective:

> Throughout the London sequence as a whole, the DV cameras work through emphasis and de-emphasis. The camera angles both frame and cut across the straight lines of the buildings, advertising hoardings and familiar landmarks. […] Long shots and close-ups follow Jim's isolation through what becomes a

[270] Image 31 Burton's use of colour in *Mars Attacks!*

> montage sequence and the dream-like hue takes on more of an environmental blur. As the sun beats down on silver structures through the rising haze, it's a hot day but it also looks like post-nuclear.[271]

Boyle's use of colour is strange and unsettling, and the rapid cutting which often greets the audience whenever the infected attack is designed to shock and shatter any illusion that this new world is in any way idyllic. Boyle himself says of the techniques used:

> "We wanted it to feel different in texture from normal film. Because it's an apocalypse, you can use a different hue, because nobody knows what things will look like if everybody's killed or there are no cars. So … we would tickle the color of the film occasionally to create a slightly strange universe."[272]

Clearly, *28 Days Later* is a horror film and so draws on both different conventions and holds different objectives to films like *Mars Attacks!* or *Independence Day*. Nevertheless, this is a radically different representation of apocalypse. In the movies of the 90s apocalypse has an almost familiar appearance. The films manage to represent a comfortable apocalypse perhaps, in part, because of their aggressive exaggeration and blasé attitude towards destruction. But the intention of the post 9/11 post-apocalyptic films seem to be just the opposite: to take their audience out of their comfort zone. While the bleached colouration of many of these films may make for a depressing view of our planet, there are also other ways for the audience to experience the discomfort of apocalypse:

> The digital composition and aesthetics of *28 Days Later* take us into a world divorced from our own, and to the extent that any flashes of the familiar appear in stark relief. There is something too perfect about the impressionistic and almost hyperreal blue skies and green fields on the road from London to Manchester, for example.[273]

So, by juxtaposing the beautiful with the brutal, Boyle's apocalypse attacks the senses in a way that undermines the audience's feelings of security and re-establishes

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[271] Stephen Keane, *CineTech: Film, Convergence and New Media*, (Hampshire: Palgrace MacMillan, 2007), p. 54.
[272] Stephen Keane, *CineTech*, p. 54.
[273] Stephen Keane, *CineTech*, p. 55.

the apocalypse as something threatening and overwhelming.[274] What we are dealing with here is two different types of movie escapism. Whilst in the 90s a more traditional form can be seen, the films delivering the message that real American heroes exist to keep the world safe, after 9/11 apocalyptic movies disseminate a sense of powerlessness which forces the audience to question the use-value of forward thinking in a doomed world. This is yet more evidence of the kind of cultural pessimism which accompanied the sense that 9/11 changed nothing, instead instigating a cyclical mythology of fear rather than any kind of awakening reality check for the public at large.

[274] Images 32 *28 Days Later*, and 33 *28 Days Later*.

Chapter 4: You've Gotta Have Faith: Issues of Religion and Faith in Post 9/11 Apocalyptic Cinema

Since 9/11 many apocalyptic films have re-imagined the world as a battleground between faith and nihilistic destruction. The forthcoming examples demonstrate that, after 9/11, the apocalyptic film became far more conscious of faith and its importance alongside notions of apocalyptic inevitability (which in itself coincides with a Christian belief in the ultimate judgement of humankind). On 9/11 2001 religion clashed with spectacle in a way that the West had seldom seen in recent history. As previously mentioned, there is some danger in couching the War on Terror as a 'Holy' war. September 11 was not a direct attack on Christianity but an attack on globalisation, as evidenced by the terrorists' choice of targets.[275] There is, nevertheless, a wide ranging sense that this next century could be dominated by increasing tensions between the Islamic nations of the Middle-East and the Christian stronghold of the USA. The centrality of religious and apocalyptic thinking to the politics behind the War on Terror is explored by John Gray, in his book *Black Mass*, who argues that, 'It was only when [George W. Bush] became president that religion began to move into the centre of American politics, and only after 9/11 that it informed policies on a broad front.'[276] Not only this, Gray also identifies an apocalyptic tone to these policies.[277] But the films in this chapter appear to be less a backlash, a reinforcement of Christian faith (although some do seem to promote such a faith), than they are films about the waning of faith in human agency and the power of the individual to resist.

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[275] Although it must be acknowledged that the symbolic connection between American national identity, politics, capitalism, *and* Christianity, make an attack on one likely to be responded to as an attack on all. This will be considered further later.
[276] John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*, (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 161.
[277] John Gray, p. 4.

Whilst this chapter will begin with a description of what is a Christian coded narrative, in M. Night Shyamalan's 2002 film *Signs*, some of the films discussed here are less faith specific. Following on from the last chapter, in which we saw how the lone survivor narrative showcased the sublime submission of its protagonist against the hostile environment of a post-apocalyptic landscape, this chapter is as much about human agency as it is religion: how and why have issues of faith re-emerged as a staple of the apocalyptic (and post-apocalyptic) film in the decade since 9/11? And why is it that faith and passivity have replaced humanism and action? These are just two important questions that this chapter aims to answer within the overall context of the impact of contemporary apocalyptic film on our ability to see a different future which has been shaped by human belief and agency.

Filming for *Signs* began just two days after September 11th 2001. Although the film was clearly written prior to 9/11 there can be no doubt that filming during such a highly charged moment influenced the eventual outcome. Indeed the first scene filmed records ex-reverend Graham Hess' (Mel Gibson) last conversation with his dying wife and the film crew held a candle-lit vigil before they began. This tragic scene is at the heart of a film which is essentially about Hess' loss and regaining of his faith in God. To begin filming with such a scene, which so resonates with the events of two days previous, ties the film up with the complex emotions and debates which were being formed in the early days after the attacks. In many ways, *Signs* became a prototypical post 9/11 apocalyptic film.

Although on paper a film about an alien invasion and its eventual defeat, *Signs* is about as far away from *Independence Day* as seems possible. The film has very few action scenes and relies little on special effects. What sounds like the makings of either a good horror or action film narrative is actually a sensitive film

about the way in which people respond to the end of the world and how to regain one's faith in a seemingly godless world. In many respects *Signs* is representative of a post 9/11 trend in which the apocalyptic narrative is actually a cover for a film whose central concern is that of the faith of its protagonist (often a faith which is threatened or which has been lost and must be re-established). In *Signs* Graham's abandonment of the church, his denomination is not specified, is repeatedly emphasised when he points out to various characters, "I'm not Father anymore." It is clear, in such a time of crisis as the alien invasion precipitates, that the community look towards Graham as a kind of spiritual guide. In one scene he enters a shop and the girl over the counter pleads with him to listen to her confessions despite his assertion that he is no longer with the church.

Signs opens with the discovery of huge and elaborate crop-circles which have appeared on the Hess family farm. It is these crop-circles, later discovered to be used for navigation purposes by the aliens, which become associated with the title of the film. They were indeed used heavily in the film's promotion to emphasise their apocalyptic nature (they are, in effect, signs of the oncoming end of humankind). And yet, while this may be the way in which the film was marketed, the true signs of the film are not the crop-circles, but signs from God which eventually help to save Graham and the rest of his family. In what seems to be the key speech of the film, Graham questions the way in which people see things as signs. When his brother, Merrill, seeking some form of comfort, asks Graham if he thinks the crop-circles and the subsequent lights which have appeared over major cities could indicate the end of the world, Graham gives us this lengthy diagnosis:

> "People break down into two groups. When they experience something lucky, group number one sees it as more than luck, more than coincidence; they see it as a sign, evidence that there is someone up there, watching out for them. Group number two sees it as just pure luck, a happy turn of chance. I'm sure

> that people in group number two are looking at those fourteen lights in a very suspicious way; for them, this situation is a 50/50. Could be bad, could be good. But deep down, they feel that whatever happens, they're on their own, and that, fills them with fear. Yeah, there are those people. But there're a lot of people in the group number one, and when they see those fourteen lights, they're looking at a miracle. And deep down they feel, with whatever's going to happen, there'll be someone there to help them. And that fills them with hope. So what you have to ask yourself is what kind of person are you? Are you the kind that sees signs, sees miracles? Or do you believe that people just get lucky? Or, look at the question this way: is it possible that there are no coincidences?"

Despite what would appear to be an attack on the faithless, Graham then immediately denounces faith. When Merrill asks him what group he falls into, he replies: "There is no-one watching out for us Merrill, we're all on our own." The film then sets about dismantling this idea.

As mentioned, it is the death of his wife which initiates Graham Hess' loss of faith, an event which takes place some time before the on-screen narrative begins. But more specifically it is her last words which lead Graham to doubt the existence of God. Towards the end of the film we see the moment where Graham speaks to his dying wife in flashback as she lies atop the bonnet of a vehicle that has crushed her against a tree. Her last words are "Tell Graham see. Tell him to see. And tell Merrill to swing away." At the time these words seem to Graham meaningless, they are just neurones firing in her brain before death, a death that has no purpose. But it is eventually these words which help Graham to save his family as he spots Merrill's baseball bat on the wall and tells him to "swing away". We have already been informed of Merrill's past as a failed baseball player who would swing wildly, that he has five minor league home run records but also the minor league strikeout record. Now the words of Graham's wife have been given a meaning. When Merrill swings at the alien he knocks over one of the many glasses of half drunk water left around the house by Graham's daughter Bo. Bo, as we are told earlier, has always said there

is something wrong with the water and so is forever leaving the glasses. When the water splashes against the alien it causes clear pain and so provides the means of killing it. Finally, when the alien attempts to gas Graham's son Morgan the gas does not enter his lungs because he has had an asthma attack which results in his lungs being closed. Of course the audience cannot see all these pieces of information as mere coincidence and neither can the characters. These are the true signs referred to by the film's title. The purpose of the narrative is fulfilled in the final lines of the film. As Morgan regains consciousness in his father's arms he asks, "Did someone save me?" to which the emotional Graham replies: "Yeah baby. I think someone did."

The positivity of the ending of *Signs* does not match the pattern of bleak endings in apocalyptic films post 9/11 discussed in the previous chapter. This is probably owing to the film's conception prior to the attacks and also to the close proximity of its release to 9/11 itself, a time at which it would have been difficult to release a film of this nature which also carried a very pessimistic message. Alex Proyas' *Knowing* (2009) is a more crystallised example of this kind of film in action. In *Knowing* John Koestler (Nicolas Cage), an astrophysicist, discovers a list of dates, co-ordinates, and death tolls, charting every major catastrophe over the last fifty years. The list continues into the near future and ends with "EE" which he later discovers means "Everybody Else". The list holds an almost biblical prophecy of the end of the world and indeed John begins to believe that he was given the list for the purpose of saving the world. The film intertwines the concepts of religion, disaster, and fate, and whilst the spectacular disaster scenes mark this out as an action blockbuster, the film also delivers an interesting message.

Like *Signs*, *Knowing* condenses many of its fundamental ideas about determinism into a single passage of dialogue. John, who has also recently lost his wife, although this time in a fire, is giving a class on determinism when he announces his loss of faith:

> JOHN: "I want you to think about the perfect set of circumstances that put this celestial ball of fire at just the correct distance from our little blue planet for life to evolve. […] That's a nice thought right? Everything has a purpose, an order to it, it is determined? But then there's the other side of the argument, the theory of randomness, which says it's all simply coincidence. The very fact we exist is nothing but the result of a complex, yet inevitable string of chemical accidents and biological mutations. There is no grand meaning. There's no purpose."
> STUDENT: "What about you Professor Koestler, well what do you believe?"
> JOHN: "I think shit just happens."

Again, like *Signs*, the film gradually uncovers its narrative to reveal that in fact the events occurring do have a meaning. The film asks a string of confusing questions about pre-determinism. Even in Koestler's speech he contrasts the idea of fate with randomness and yet describes randomness as an '*inevitable* string of chemical accidents [emphasis own]'. There is certainly an inevitability about the disasters on the list which Koestler tries to prevent. Even when John arrives at the scene of a plane crash and helps to save burning victims the number of eventual casualties matches the number on the list implying that he cannot change fate.

The film's message with regards to religion is not wholly coherent. In many respects the film sets up an old dichotomy between John Koestler, the scientist, and his father, who we are told is a pastor. Clearly the events of *Knowing* cause John to question his belief that 'shit just happens', and there are some religious overtones to the film from the fiery Book of Revelations style apocalypse to the final scene in which we see John's son Caleb (Chandler Canterbury) and Diana's daughter Abby (Lara Robinson) on another planet running through a field towards a huge tree evoking the Garden of Eden. Then there are the strangers who whisper to the two

children and resemble angels who issue forth blinding light from their mouths. Nonetheless, that these are in fact aliens who descend on Earth in a spaceship in order to whisk the children away in a presumed attempt to preserve human life places the narrative at odds with any explicitly Christian understanding of religion.

Although *Knowing* begins by implying, as John's science friend Phil (Ben Mendelsohn) points out when confronted with the prophetic list of numbers, that people see what they want to see, it ultimately discards the possibility of the randomness of disaster. The film, perhaps then, represents the desire to give meaning to catastrophe, but whether it succeeds or not in this instance is open to debate since, whilst randomness is disproved, the Earth is nonetheless destroyed.

The film explicitly recalls 9/11 as a point of reference in a number of instances. The most overt of these is that it is that date which John first notices on the sheet of paper and which gives him the idea that the numbers are not simply random. The first major disaster John encounters involves a passenger jet which crashes into the ground. The second is a train crash in the subway after which people walk out dazed and covered in dust reminiscent of the 9/11 dust cloud. The film recycles these images of 9/11 paranoia and along with Cage's own involvement in *World Trade Center* further marks this out as a response to the attacks. The ultimate hopelessness of the situation, focusing as *Knowing* does on a scientist who is given a map of the end of the world and yet is utterly powerless to prevent the destruction, mirrors the hopelessness of those who responded to the disaster from which the film's string of disastrous predictions originates: 9/11.

In *Knowing* we see very little of how the rest of the world prepares for the end, focused as we are on John, Dianna (Rose Byrne) and their two children. To this extent it follows a more generalised trend in which post 9/11 apocalyptic films

reconfigure disaster as both global but, more fundamentally for the purpose of the film, also personal. The worldwide apocalypse which is only glimpsed towards the end of the film is presented on the much smaller scale of the individual. *Signs* performs its drama in a similar way, inviting us to connect directly with the emotions of the Hess family almost solely. In this respect, it mirrors the apocalyptic nature of the 9/11 attacks themselves and the subsequent media and cultural coverage of the event. After 9/11 what was seen was a proliferation of individual narrative threads, from individuals' accounts of their experiences in the towers, to the faces of the missing which sprung up on posters all over the city, and to the "Portraits of Grief" printed in the *New York Times*.[278] This was a national trauma reconfigured on a personal level. In *Signs* no tanks roll in and, rather than fight, it seems that the Hess family, representing the actions of many scared households throughout the world, decide to board themselves up in their house and hope. In fact, the absence of any talk whatsoever about the involvement of the military in helping to stop the invasion is notable. Just like in Spielberg's 2005 version of *War of the Worlds*, there is a distinct lack of human agency, placing humankind at the mercy of either chance, or Godly intervention. Whilst the signs help Graham to defeat the one alien left in his own house, very little is explained about the way in which the rest of the aliens outside of the small confines of the family farm are dealt with.[279] Again this seems to correlate particularly well with the ending of *War of the Worlds* in which the aliens mysteriously start dying, only for the audience to discover that it is a result of their contraction of the simple human cold.

[278] These were obituaries to the dead of 9/11 published over a number of weeks after the attacks and included over 1,800 entries.

[279] When the family emerge from their hideout in the basement, a television report we hear in the background gives us this vague explanation: "We know the battle turned around in the Middle East. Three small cities there found a primitive method to defeat them. We have no further details at this time."

The overtly Christian references in *Signs*, notably Graham Hess' own connection with the church, and in *Knowing*, paper over the cracks of what implications developments such as the discovery of an alien race would have for the credibility of the Christian faith. Miraculously, through an invasion narrative (a narrative that by its very nature must question many of the beliefs of the Christian faith), Hess rediscovers that faith. Or, perhaps rather than be surprised at this, we should regard this as the film's attempt to display the ultimate test of faith itself. Returning to Graham Hess' division of humanity, it must be noted that it is not faith specific. Whilst the particular religious connotations of Hess being referred to as Father and the dog collar which we see him wearing at the end of the film mark him out as Christian (and not ignoring Mel Gibson's own widely known Catholicism), the key speech could easily be applied to any form of faith whatsoever, let alone any mainstream religion. This conforms to what Conrad Ostwalt has termed the,

> "desacralization of the apocalypse" within contemporary film. [as explained by John Walliss] Taking as his initial starting point the notion that contemporary culture has undergone some degree of secularization, Ostwalt (1998) argues that this has led not to the decline of religion (the position of, for example, Steve Bruce, 2002), but rather to a blurring of the boundary between the sacred and the secular wherein, for example "cultural forms perceived to be secular might very well address religious questions and tap the religious sensibilities outside of recognizable religious institutions".[280]

Despite this apparent conformity, it would seem that post 9/11 apocalyptic films, such as *Signs*, treat religion in a quite different way to those described by Ostwalt's theory of desacralization. Ostwalt is correct in identifying a trend not explicitly towards secularisation in apocalyptic culture immediately preceding the millennium, but towards a kind of merger between secular and sacred beliefs which infused American thinking at the time. The difference is not necessarily that apocalyptic

[280] John Walliss, 'Apocalypse at the Millennium', in *Millennialism and Society: End All Around Us*, ed. Kenneth Newport and John Walliss, (London: Equinox Publishing, 2009), p. 74

films prior to 9/11 do not attempt to present a religious angle, as references can be found in films like *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon*. Nor is it that films post 9/11 have represented a specifically Christian backlash to an event which many have claimed to be a religiously motivated attack on Christian America (if anything, Christian messages are often more subtly presented in films post 9/11 than they were prior to it).[281] The difference is in the willingness to analyse and debate the meaning and purpose of faith in a world that has been turned upside down. Films such as *Signs*, and as will be later discussed, *The Book of Eli*, and *The Road*, challenge the value of faith and religion in a world which is either threatened with annihilation or which has already experienced a global catastrophe. They open up a space to debate the usefulness of faith, but do so in a way which tends to reinforce, rather than criticise, it. Issues of faith are the *heart* of these films, rather than a peripheral and passing concern as they seem to be in the period leading up to 9/11.

Millenarianism versus Nihilism

In attempting to account for the tonal differences between apocalyptic films of the 90s and those post 9/11 with regards to their religious content, it is easy to overlook something fundamental about the films. Seeking to uncover what it is that films after 2001 have done to respond to the events of 9/11, we should not forget that the 90s

[281] In *Deep Impact* the president offers up this religious message in a televised address: 'I believe in God. I know a lot of you don't, but I still want to offer a prayer for our survival. Mine included. Because I believe that God, whomever you hold that to be, hears all prayers, even if sometimes the answer is no. So may the Lord bless you. May the Lord keep you. May the Lord lift up his divine countenance upon you and give you peace.'

films themselves also respond to a specific cultural landscape. These cultural circumstances relate to fears surrounding the millennium, yet, just as we have already seen the diversity of the ways in which those films post 9/11 responded to the manifestation of disaster on *that* date, we see too that 90s films do not respond in any simple way to the millennium as an impending event.

A strand of millennialism, the Christian belief that the second coming of Christ coincides with the end of a thousand year cycle, within popular culture, would certainly account for an added interest in the end of the world itself. However, it explains little about the tone of 90s apocalyptic films. It could be assumed, for example, that millennial *fears* abound in the late 90s wave of apocalyptic films. But, by and large, humanity in these films finds resistance to apocalyptic change through the heroism of, most commonly, Americans. When we look at late 90s apocalyptic film we find the assertion of moral values:

> They exhibit a return to more traditional generic conventions and depict a society in crisis attempting to solve its social and cultural problems through the ritualized legitimation of strong male leadership, the renewal of traditional moral values, and the regeneration of institutions like the patriarchal family.[282]

Whilst far from carrying explicitly atheist messages, many of these films depict the *individual* as a Godlike figure. The heroes of the 90s rely not on the intervention of a God but on their own pro-activity and sacrifice. So, when Harry Stamper dies at the end of *Armageddon* it is as the ultimate act of heroism. Religion is rarely a central concern in these films and tends only to be alluded to. Stamper himself could be seen as a messianic figure but *Armageddon* is a film about Americans saving the world, not faith.

Max Page connects the tone of 90s New York disaster movies rather to the upturn, or revival, in the city's own prosperity during this time:

[282] Stephen Keane, *Disaster Movies*, p. 27.

> Clearly, the fortunes of New York had shifted, and consequently, so had the tone of its disaster movies. From dark portraits of urban crisis in the not-so-distant future, American culture began offering in the 1980s and 1990s a new generation of disaster narratives, dedicated more to humor and entertainment than to warning.[283]

But this was not just a phenomenon confined to New York City. New York may have been the location of choice for many, if not most, of the major disaster movies at this time, but Hollywood was undoubtedly conscious that the city itself was representative of the great American ideals of freedom and capitalism. These are the two things that an audience realises is under threat whenever they sit down to watch a film in which New York is the subject of disaster.

The humour and entertainment factor mentioned by Page is not the only way in which 90s disaster films 'laughed off' the idea of apocalypse. In those films in which substantial parts of the city were destroyed, the idea of urban renewal and rebuilding was not far away: 'at the end of the twentieth century, […] disaster fantasies usually ended with a coda of renewal.'[284] A good example of this can be seen in *Deep Impact* which 'ends with the clear sense that New York (and Washington) will be rebuilt by a new generation.'[285] *Deep Impact* is another fitting example of a 90s apocalyptic film in that its destruction, the money shots of New York (the WTC and the Statue of Liberty featuring prominently) being devastated by a huge tidal wave aside, is tempered with the promise of a return to normality after the world has been saved by the sacrifice of those aboard the spaceship sent out to destroy the meteor headed for Earth (unsubtly named 'the Messiah'). In the finale, a defiant President Beck (Morgan Freeman) delivers a rousing speech in front of the White House that is being completely reconstructed. Although he speaks of the

[283] Max Page, *The City's End: Two Centuries of Fantasies, Fears, and Premonitions of New York's Destruction*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 171.
[284] Max Page, p. 178.
[285] Max Page, p. 178.

millions that have been lost, the core of the speech is that life goes on, and that the rebuilding process has already begun: 'But the waters receded. Cities fall, but they are rebuilt, and heroes die, but they are remembered.'

Not only does religion seldom take centre stage in 90s apocalyptic film, when it does, as in Peter Hyams' 1999 film *End of Days*, it is a kind of schlock religion. In *End of Days* the indestructible Arnold Schwarzenegger plays Jericho Cane, an ex-cop who turned his back on God after his wife and daughter were murdered. When Lucifer (Gabriel Byrne) comes to New York in order to bring about "the end of days," Jericho finds himself with the Herculean task of protecting Christine York (Robin Tunney), a young woman who has been unwittingly chosen to carry Lucifer's child. This is a film filled with millennial paranoia. Much of the action takes place on New Year's Eve 1999 and we are told by a priest that this date is particularly significant:

> "Every thousand years, on the eve of the millennium, the Dark Angel comes and takes a body, and then he walks the Earth, looking for a woman who will bear his child. It all has to happen in that unholy hour before midnight on New Year's Eve. If he consummates your flesh with this human body then he unlocks the gate of hell and everything as we know it ceases to exist."

Jericho, in response, is understandably cynical asking: "So the Prince of Darkness wants to conquer the Earth but has to wait until an hour before midnight on New Year's Eve? Is this Eastern time?" Clearly, *End of Days* is a film with a confused religious message. Jericho, the atheist, is eventually converted and makes the supreme sacrifice, laying down his weapon before taking the devil into his own body and through sheer force of will impaling himself and thus vanquishing the unstoppable evil. But this is most certainly a film more about action than it is about faith; the attitude of 90s apocalyptic films summed up through this exchange:

JERICHO: If the devil does exist, why doesn't your God do anything?

> PRIEST: It's not *my* God. It's *our* God, and He doesn't say that He will save us. He says that we will save ourselves.
> CHRISTINE: Save myself? What am I supposed to do? Get a restraining order?
> PRIEST: We have to have faith. […]
> JERICHO: Between your faith and my Glock nine-millimetre, I take my Glock.

And so it is the gun that takes priority over faith. A further example occurs when, searching for Christine, Lucifer enters the church. Despite having already been assured that it is impossible for Lucifer to enter the House of God, he breaks the rules and no amount of faith can prevent the carnage he is to cause as he dispatches priests and cardinals in brutal fashion. Jericho, however, is not fooled by their talk, claiming that at least he can fight Lucifer with something "real." He is impatient with the priest, demanding: "Why don't you just stop all this church talk and tell us what the hell is going on."

Jericho's conversion and subsequent sacrifice at the climax of *End of Days* attempts to deliver the far more schlocky sentimental message that, it is not just the size of your 'guns', but the size of your heart that really matters. And this is a staple of the action film genre, but it is a message that more often than not gets lost in between the explosions. What we really feel having watched *End of Days* is not that the priest was right in the first place, but that the film would have been pretty boring had Jericho simply laid down his gun and started praying from the off. As John Walliss determines:

> […] for all its supernatural elements, the film [*End of Days*] ultimately conforms to the standard narrative of the apocalypse film genre whereby human agency— albeit with spiritual strength— is able to triumph over the forces that seek to wreak destruction on humanity.[286]

[286] John Walliss, 'Apocalypse at the Millennium', in *Millennialism and Society : End All Around Us : The Apocalypse and Popular Culture*, ed. Kenneth Newport & John Walliss, (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2009), p. 79.

The spiritual strength mentioned here by Walliss is therefore frequently a component, but not usually the determining factor in humankind's salvation in these films. Ultimately, as Satan demonstrates during the scene in which he wreaks havoc in the church, the power of faith alone would not have saved Christine and thus prevented the end of days. Furthermore, the 90s apocalyptic narratives tend to value contemporary society in a surprising way. Rarely is humanity the architect of its own destruction. Instead we see pictures of heroes who must defend their way of life against an external threat. However lax the US may have been on issues of climate change they cannot be blamed for an alien invasion, a rogue meteor, a volcano, French nuclear testing, or even Satan's return (after all the priest tells us that even this happens "every thousand years" regardless). As Walliss notes, this seems to run contrary to the nature of the apocalyptic text as a mode of social critique:

> Whereas, apocalyptic texts are inherently critical of the contemporary social order and look towards a time in the not to-distant future where it will be replaced with a divine order ("a new heaven and a new earth" to quote Rev. 21:1), these films are in contrast characterized by an explicit valorization of the contemporary social order. [287]

In *End of Days* the threat of a biblical apocalypse and its subsequent avoidance does not beg the question, as perhaps it would be natural to, why *should* we be saved? Whilst we are relieved by the triumph of Jericho over the ultimate evil, the film glosses over an essential point: nothing has changed. As Max Page concludes of these films: 'New York disaster fantasies suggested […] If the city survives, the best we can hope for is a utopia of the normal.'[288]

Fundamentally these films only seem to desire a return of the 'normal' after the *threat* of destruction: as Walliss observes, 'Jericho's death *restores* normal

[287] John Walliss, p. 85.
[288] Max Page, p. 147.

life.'[289] To this extent they were perhaps the product of a period of relative optimism about the direction and spread of globalisation. At the end of the 90s many people entered the new millennium not with a sense of fear but of unbridled optimism. What would the new millennium bring? Most people did not anticipate the end of the world. In fact the worst thing that most could imagine was a mythical millennium bug that would strike down all the world's computers. Whilst Conrad Ostwalt is correct in observing a 'fin de siècle society' that arose in this moment, the kitsch nature of these cultural productions about the end of the world imply a largely playful use of apocalyptic thinking.[290] It seems perhaps too rash to suggest, as he does that:

> A decade ago, people around the world anxiously watched Y2K approach, arrive and exit largely without incident. While the event itself was a nonevent, the anticipation surrounding it created uncertainty and sometimes fear. From the mundane (how will my computer react?), to the dangerous (will airplanes fall from the sky?), to the catastrophic (will a worldwide depression ensue?), to the horrific (will the year 2000 usher in the 'End of Days?'), people awaited the date with a mixture of curiosity, anxiety, and, sometimes, religious expectation.[291]

The new millennium may have represented another fantastic opportunity for the minority of doom merchants to spread their message, but it was little to no different from any other date of destruction supposedly prophesied by an ancient text, an ancient civilisation, a religion, a prophet, a scholar, or simply a madman. The apocalyptic films of the late 90s are a celebration of the end of the world not because Hollywood studio executives thought that people wanted the world to end, but rather because of its implausibility; there was no way the world could end, not with men like Bruce Willis around to save the day.

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[289] John Walliss, p. 85 [emphasis added].
[290] Conrad E. Ostwalt, 'The End of Days', in *Continuum Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. William L. Blizek, (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2009). p 290.
[291] Ostwalt, p. 290.

As discussed in the previous chapter, films like *Mars Attacks* and *Independence Day* take a fun and playful attitude towards the destruction of major landmarks such as the White House. Whilst *Mars Attacks* may parody the 1950s B-movie, in doing so it highlights the similarities in outrageous scenes of destruction and camp humour that are also evident in other apocalyptic films arriving on screens at the same time. The reliance on hero figures during the 90s films, and their representation of the strong American father figure, notably in Captain Hillier (*Independence Day*) and Harry Stamper (*Armageddon*), follows an action-movie trend which responded to changing gender roles in a new type of American society. To this extent the films tended to be insular in their focus, concerned far more with domestic conditions than they were the wider and more serious subject matter of conflict and the end of the world.

So how did all of this change after 9/11? After September 11 2001, apocalyptic films simply had to take the end of the world a bit more seriously. Max Page seems sceptical that apocalyptic films (featuring New York at least) have changed much at all in the wake of 9/11, stating that; 'In many ways American culture returned very rapidly after 9/11 to "normal," which is defined in part by a return to the popular fun of New York disaster movies.'[292] Seeing the difference rather in an underlying sense of unease which is brought to bear not in disaster films but in 'works that confronted 9/11 directly', Page seeks to disagree with the way in which the disaster movie was demonised following 9/11.[293] He says that,

> In the wake of 9/11, journalists and theorists, news commentators and politicians realized that the language of the disaster movie had shaped the initial, unscripted response to 9/11, and they were appalled. "This is not a movie," argued Anthony Lane, a film critic for the *New Yorker*, in an impassioned essay just two weeks after 9/11. "What happened on the morning

[292] Max Page, p. 201.
[293] Max Page, p. 201.

> of September 11th," Lane argued, "was that imaginations that had been schooled in the comedy of apocalypse were forced to reconsider the same evidence as tragic." Perhaps, he suggested, "the disaster movie is indeed to be shamed by disaster." [294]

But for Page, the rapid re-emergence of disaster related films post 9/11 proves the resilience of the genre, and that 9/11 did not quench our thirst for disaster. Rather, the bleakness of the subsequent films suggests that 9/11 may have whetted that thirst, or at least created a thirst for disaster films which attempt to represent the pain and suffering created by real disasters. This is a fundamental shift, not just that directors have gone on to produce a much more grim and bleak picture of future possible apocalypses, but that even those which seem light-hearted are tempered with serious themes which seek to both blame humanity and also present the apocalypse as now unavoidable. Perhaps in his eagerness to proclaim our passion for destruction unaltered by 9/11, Page overlooks what are, in effect, quite subtle changes to films which still go on to show vast set-pieces of destruction. As has been demonstrated over the last two chapters, 9/11 *has* had an impact on the apocalyptic film. Not in that these films have stopped being made, or that they have lost popularity, but in the style and tone of the films which have been produced.

The differences in style between those apocalyptic films made before 9/11 and those that come after can even be seen in the work of an individual director. Looking at Roland Emmerich's mass-market apocalyptic spectaculars, he has destroyed significant chunks of the planet on four notable occasions (in 1996 with *Independence Day*, 1998 with *Godzilla*, 2004 with *The Day After Tomorrow*, and in 2010 with *2012*) and in his own inimitable style. But, despite the similarities evident within these four films, there persists a fundamental difference which coincides with the cultural shift which took place after 9/11. This difference can be seen in the

[294] Max Page, p. 207.

attitude of those behind the films' productions. In summarising the style of *Independence Day*, Michele Pierson states that,

> *Independence Day* (ID4) fused the make-do aesthetic of B-grade SF to the scale and scope of the 1970s' disaster film to produce a cornball pastiche of science fiction cinema in all its many phases of wonder. According to Dean Devlin, the film's producer and cowriter, he and director Roland Emmerich "wanted to have fun and play with the notion of science-fiction in general."[295]

This having fun is evident throughout the film in its light-hearted scripting, its comedy set-pieces, its likable characters, and its over-the-top spectacular destruction sequences. Although the epic nature of the film, as well as moments of human warmth (in an otherwise frozen America), are also present in Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow*, this film takes an altogether more serious approach to issues such as climate change and survival. This is something Emmerich himself has admitted:

> Reviewing the recent entries in the New York disaster film competition, Emmerich told [journalist Tad] Friend: "You don't want to repeat the same images. And you want to avoid the mistakes they made, the parts that don't look convincing. …We didn't want to go over the edge and have people laughing."[296]

The difference here is clear; one film in which the intention is to have fun and the other in which laughing off destruction is certainly not the intention.

Emmerich's *2012* also has a religious concept behind its finale. When Dr. Adrian Helmsley (Chiwetel Ejiofor) discovers that the Earth's core is heating up at a rapid rate, there begins a race against time to ensure the survival of at least a select few. There is an explosion and near-death a minute as the Earth quakes and volcanoes erupt, but when the icecaps melt causing sea levels to rise dramatically we discover that the world's leaders have constructed huge metallic arks on which to carry the seeds of humankind. The film ends with the moral dilemma of who they can afford to let aboard the arks since tickets have already been sold to the richest in

[295] Michele Pierson, *Special Effects: Still in Search of Wonder*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 146.
[296] Max Page, p. 223.

order to fund their building. As people discover the existence of the arks they flood to them and desperately seek entry. Finally, after a rousing speech and with time running out, it is decided that they must let everyone on, or else they will be restarting humanity with the most abject and immoral of acts, consigning these people to death. However crude *2012*'s plot is, it is interesting to see that religion plays a part here on both the symbolic and the moral level. The film implicitly connects the moral obligations of those through which humanity will continue to the religious symbolism of ark building and suggests that the two are somehow interlinked: to build and populate the arks one must assume the moral fortitude that is in accordance with such a religious act.

2012 is a film that, despite its attention to the date itself, remains, essentially, a post 9/11 destruction film. This is just another in a long list of dates which have been labelled as the end, and once it has passed we can all rest easily knowing that the next apocalypse will be just around the corner:

> The great majority of interpretations of Apocalypse assume that the End is pretty near. Consequently historical allegory is always having to be revised; time discredits it. And this is important. Apocalypse can be disconfirmed without being discredited.[297]

By the time this work is being read this date will have come and passed without any real apocalyptic change having taken place (and if this is not the case then it will all matter very little!). But there is no doubt that by then there will be a new prophecy, a new date of destruction to look towards. Despite most Mayan scholars having discredited it, 2012 was seized by culture as the next in line for an apocalyptic juncture as it is said to represent the end of a cycle in the Mayan calendar. A big budget Hollywood film like Emmerich's *2012* is only further fuel to the apocalyptic culture machine. The problem with doomsday scenarios like 2012 is that they can be

[297] Frank Kermode, p. 8.

used to avoid the reality of present predicaments which need to be addressed. So issues surrounding the climate, surrounding consumption and poverty, surrounding effective government and financial stability, and surrounding the future are dropped in favour of immediate but inadequate fixes. This is the *abuse* of apocalypse in society.

Although much more sensitive, it is the post 9/11 apocalyptic films which send the most pessimistic of messages. However defeatist it may seem to have Bruce Willis or Arnold Schwarzenegger save the world again in the 90s at least someone *did* something. The story of the post 9/11 apocalypse is one of inevitability and passivity. In *The Road* the central characters lack a purpose. They travel towards the coast out of blind hope and a sense of motivation to carry on living. The gun that Mortensen's character carries is not so much for protection as for the act of suicide should he and his son be captured by cannibals. These are characters who want to die: during one sombre moment the boy tells his father he wishes he were dead, and when the man finally dies at the end of the film he says to his son, "this has been a long time coming." For the man it is about hope and his faith hangs by a slender thread: "All I know is the child is my warrant, and if he is not the word of God, then God never spoke." While it may not carry an explicit religious message, it seems evident that in this most bleak of worlds that *The Road* presents to us, hope, or faith, is the only thing left to the survivor.

In *The Book of Eli*, a film with much more action, Eli, played by Denzel Washington, has embarked on an epic journey toward an unknown destination. He traverses the hostile sun-bleached lands carrying with him a book. Eli may well be a formidable fighter, and the film is based around its many impressive action sequences, but it also promotes a heavily Christian message. God has spoken to Eli,

telling him the whereabouts of the last King James Bible, and has also told him that he will be protected on his path to take the book to safety. We see this in evidence throughout the film, in particular during a showdown in which Eli is being fired at by a group of mercenaries whose job it is to find the book. Their shots miraculously miss him and when Eli is finally captured and shot at point blank range, he is still found minutes later wounded, but walking along the same path. The message in *The Book of Eli* is that the book can also be used to do harm. Referring to his copy of the Bible, the last because after the war all other copies were burnt, Eli says, "some people said this was the reason for the war in the first place." Not only this, but, Carnegie, a warlord played by Gary Oldman, is desperately in search of the same copy of the book, believing in its power as a weapon to control the masses.

Despite the many lives Eli takes in order to protect the book he is essentially a passive character. He will not get involved if the book itself is not under threat, and he relies upon the power of faith to shield him from his enemies. The final punch-line of the film comes when we discover that Eli is in fact blind, something seemingly remarkable considering the ease with which he defeats Carnegie's ruthless mercenaries. The Bible he was carrying was written in Braille and so is useless to Carnegie. Not only this but Eli has spent his years walking with the book, reading and memorising every line, and when he reaches the sanctuary of a group of people with a printing press who want to try and restart society, he is able to dictate the entirety of the book to them and die in happiness knowing he has completed his mission. The film leaves us with a summary of his actions as Eli says: "I kept the faith." In these stubborn wastelands, faith is the only option for the characters.

The prominence of religion in *The Book of Eli* seems an unusual addition to this type of film. It appears to defend the Christian faith and faith in general, at a

time in which religion has been targeted as the cause of many modern atrocities. There is no doubt that, in *The Book of Eli*, we are confronted by a godless world. Like in *The Road*, many of the inhabitants have turned to cannibalism, but there is a suggestion that this is at least in part due to the breakdown of a moral code between the survivors, and this is a code that Eli believes the Bible can restore. Even if not all post 9/11 apocalyptic films deal explicitly with the issue of faith, as *The Book of Eli* does, many at least seem to reference it. In *I Am Legend* Robert Neville at first renounces God when confronted by his saviour Anna:

> NEVILLE: How could you know?
> ANNA: God told me. He has a plan.
> NEVILLE: God told you?
> ANNA: Yes.
> NEVILLE: *The* God?
> ANNA: Yes.
> […]
> NEVILLE: All right. Let me tell you about your God's plan. There were six billion people on Earth when the infection hit. KV had a ninety percent kill rate. That's 5.4 billion people dead. […] Every single person that you or I have ever known is dead! Dead! There is no God. There is no God.

But when faced by his own death and with it the eradication of his work on the virus, Neville hears, in voiceover, his lost daughter talking about a beautiful butterfly. On Anna's neck he sees a butterfly tattooed and takes this as a sign from God. His final act is to sacrifice himself in order to save both Anna and the cure.

If in these films God has the ultimate act of mercy, in Scott Charles Stewart's 2010 film *Legion* we are confronted by a God that himself is ruthlessly pursuing the apocalypse. The film opens with a quote we are told is psalm 34 verse 11: 'Come, ye children, listen to me. I will teach you the fear of the Lord.' In *Legion* humankind is threatened by a biblical apocalypse. With God finally turning his back on humanity, he sends his legions of angels, who resemble demons, to a remote diner in the Mojave Desert in order to ensure that the messiah, apparently being carried by

Charlie (Adrianne Palicki), an unmarried young woman working as a waitress at the diner, is not born. The plot is immediately ridiculous, as Michael (Paul Bettany), an angel who has fallen from Heaven because of his refusal to comply with God's orders to destroy humankind, arrives at the diner to help protect Charlie and in so doing, stave off the apocalypse and convince God to renew his faith in humanity. Michael brings with him a whole arsenal of weaponry with which to battle the angels until the child's birth and it is almost impossible to ignore the parallel with the kind of kitschy religion presented in *End of Days*. Perhaps the difference here is that *Legion* appears to take itself seriously. There are no intentionally comedic lines here and the film seems indebted to the serious notion that humanity deserves saving, even as it struggles to offer a reason why (other than the faith of one angel).

It is tempting to see the reappearance of religion in recent apocalyptic films as a kind of backlash against the events of 9/11, a reaffirmation of a Christian faith that in some parts of the world is seen as greedy and decadent. However, it would seem that, through an analysis of religious representation in these films, something more complex has been revealed. Religious themes are certainly present in apocalyptic films post 9/11, and more frequently so than in those in the 90s, but Christianity is not all that inspires these films. Instead it is the issues surrounding faith more generally that are important and keeping that faith in the face of disaster.

It is also important to remember that the apocalypse has *always* been associated with religion. Furthermore, religion has always helped to shape US policy and culture and the interrelationship between politics and religion has certainly played an important role in the construction of a specifically post 9/11 culture of apocalypse. John Gray notes that,

> Isolation and global intervention are phases in an American engagement with the world that has always been in some degree faith-based. This faith has

> altered its shape, at times becoming militant and proselytizing, at others being expressed in an inward-looking nationalism that fears being entangled in the corrupt machinations of the Old World. For much of American history it has been the latter that prevailed.[298]

Whilst non-involvement became an untenable stance post 9/11, the same fear which promoted a happy isolation immediately prior to the attacks inflects the subsequent militarised cultural adjustment. Culture has incorporated this fear and a desire to return to isolation by taking the apocalypse and reading it as applicable to the individual.

Throughout this chapter the word faith has been used almost interchangeably with religion, and religion in these films has been identified as almost exclusively a Christian religion. But, of course, faith and religion are by no means the same, just as these films' representations of religion are not the same. For the US, Christianity and capitalism are so bound together in politics that differences between the two are often overlooked. Does having faith in God, equate to having faith in capitalism, equate to having faith in America? To some extent it did not matter that the targets chosen by the terrorists on 9/11 were not of a religious nature since Christianity and capitalism are so interlinked in US culture:

> The standard ideologico-critical view of religious faith, that today it has more to do with capitalist business (the organized selling of faith), should also be turned around: not only is religious faith part of capitalism, capitalism is itself also a religion, and it too relies on faith (in the institution of money, among other things).[299]

Perhaps this is why these films focus more on aspects of faith rather than specifically Christian doctrine. In the 90s, apocalyptic films were waking up to a more secular America and a more secular world, but after 9/11 religious faith was brought more sharply into focus. If, after September 11th, you could not have faith in a Christian

[298] John Gray, p. 159.
[299] Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, (London: Verso, 2011), p. 130.

God then perhaps you could in some other form of religion, or perhaps you could have faith in America, or perhaps in freedom and justice. Post 9/11 films have tended to appeal to all types of faith, because ultimately the issues which arose from 9/11 were not merely Christian issues but issues surrounding a faith in the future. It is fair to say that, without the faith demonstrated in many of these films they would, in essence, be fairly soulless pictures. The hope that faith offers prevents a total lapse into despair. This may be as much about the way in which these films use faith-based narratives as it is about maintaining popular appeal. Whilst these films largely deal in the currency of despair, a kind of anti-Hollywoodisation of the apocalyptic film, the hope which faith provides keeps these films at least partially in the mainstream, something necessitated by their often inflated effects budgets.

The word faith has been used because, regardless of these films' attitude toward religion, it tells us something about heroism in post 9/11 apocalyptic film. When Harry Stamper gives up his life in *Armageddon* to save the world he does so not in the name of faith but in the name of love. It is his love for his daughter, Grace (Liv Tyler), that spurs him to stay behind and detonate the bomb and in doing so spare the life of AJ (Ben Affleck) with whom his daughter is in love. In the 90s films it is often love that drives a character's heroism: that could be a love for family, a love for a partner, or even just a love for one's country. But as we have seen in many of the films post 9/11 love is little but a distant and painful memory. It is faith in something higher, faith in something good that drives these central characters in their battle for survival. This need for faith is an emasculating process; it is a process which leads to passivity. It tells us that the individual is not all powerful; that no hero can save the world. In *Millennium Movies* Kim Newman writes that,

> among the perceived box-office losers of the late nineties wave of apocalypse movies are those which dare to imagine a credible end of civilisation (*The*

> *Postman*), be the most cynical about the American way of life (*Mars Attacks!*), confront a future that will be here by the time the film gets its second network television run (*Strange Days*) or even touch on the nuclear angle (*Godzilla*). The hits in the group imagine the most fantastical threats (an alien armada, meteorites, the Devil, gen-engineered [sic.] velociraptors) and then have these paper tigers blown away by traditional American movie heroism and know-how.[300]

But it is fair to say that saving the world has become an altogether more difficult task post 9/11, and that this is reflected in films in which heroism has become a matter of faith. Not only this, but it is seen in films which represent the world as beyond redemption, where even faith is redundant (*The Road*). It is a world where we are told that: you have to have faith, but only because faith is the only thing left to have.

[300] Kim Newman, p. 258.

Conclusion: Utopia – Moving Forward

I began this thesis by asserting that there are two very different, but not always mutually exclusive, ways of looking to the future: namely apocalypse and utopia. Furthermore, I claimed that one is popular today and that the other is not. Throughout this work I have tried to demonstrate that the apocalyptic, even when it results in a kind of utopian resolution, is the least progressive mode.

Despite claiming that the popularity of the utopian narrative appears to have diminished in recent times, it is interesting to note that the now highest grossing film of all time, James Cameron's 2009 science fiction blockbuster *Avatar*, certainly has a utopian horizon, albeit achieved through the threat of apocalyptic annihilation. Cameron's epic has been both acclaimed for its eco-friendly message, and also lambasted for the crudeness with which it wears its colours. Its popularity, however, cannot be understated. That this popularity can be partially attributed to Cameron's pioneering use of 3D and *Avatar*'s stunning visuals, as well as his own status as the popular and contemporary auteur, still does not explain how such a film, the obvious eco-utopianism of which is at odds with the popular bent on destruction, was able to smash box office records.

Avatar seems to present the audience with the very battleground between utopia and apocalypse. By portraying humanity as the villainous race, contemptible, imperialistic, greedy by nature, and with a thirst for destruction, Cameron demands that the spectator empathise instead with his quite literal tree-hugging aliens, the Na'vi. The humans ride in, with their hulking mechanical killing machines, as literal genocidal horsemen of the apocalypse. In doing so, they disturb the delicate balance of a race which appears to be in perfect harmony with its environment. To this

extent, *Avatar* asks its audience to do little other than identify with animals. Indeed the Na'vi themselves resemble human-like panthers.[301]

When protagonist Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) is first introduced to the audience his disability is immediately evident. The wheelchair bound Jake, when given the freedom of his athletic Na'vi avatar's body, exhibits a clear sense of liberation. In this way, he is able to transcend both the human limitations of his body and also the presented cruel nature of the human form. His romantic interest in the Na'vi Neytiri (Zoe Saldana) further complicates his relationship with his own avatar. It is Jake's seamless transition between the world of the humans and that of the Na'vi that demarcates their differences as primarily physical. They are similar in many ways to their human counterparts. Not only do they share a recognisable appearance, they also have similar mannerisms and even speak English, having been taught by Grace (Sigourney Weaver), another avatar inhabiting human sent to find a diplomatic solution to the current conflict between the tribal Na'vi and the invading imperialist humans. To an extent then, the film asks its audience to undergo the same journey as its protagonist, following him as he goes from human soldier to Na'vi saviour. *Avatar* is, in effect, a text which attempts to locate utopianism in anti-colonial sentiment. However, the result is really a failed utopianism or, rather, a kind of faux utopian impulse.

In utopian terms, the Na'vi's harmonious interaction with their own environment is, at least partially, a product of their genetic design, since they are literally able to connect to other living organisms in their environment with tendrils

[301] Slavoj Žižek highlights the popularity of animal documentaries and talks of their inherent utopian qualities and functioning in *Living in the End Times*, p. 83: 'we can also explain why we obviously find it so pleasurable to watch endless animal documentaries on specialized channels (*Nature*, *Animal Kingdom*, *National Geographic*): they provide a glimpse into a utopian world where no language or training are needed, in other words, into a "harmonious society" (as they put it today in China) in which everyone spontaneously knows his or her role'.

protruding from their hair. It is only through the tripartite coincidence that Jake is firstly disabled, secondly falls in love with Neytiri, and thirdly has access to an avatar, a technology far in advance of anything humanity currently possesses, that he is able to transcend and enter into the utopian community represented by the Na'vi. Furthermore, this utopian community is only in itself possible because of the Na'vi's own genetic evolution, which is not mirrored in the human form in the first place. Through it, they exhibit a command over nature which in turn allows a kind of symbiotic relationship between the two. For this reason, *Avatar* walks the line between science fiction and fantasy, in an escapist mode which seems to undermine its utopian intent. Utopia is offered as a solution only in so far as the viewer can never hope to achieve it and so cannot feel responsible for its coming about.

Peter Paik, in his book *From Utopia to Apocalypse*, asks this fundamental question about contemporary utopian fiction:

> For what if the main blind spot of utopian thought in the present postpolitical era lay not in its complicity with mass ideological movements but rather in a lack of determination in imagining the irresistible pressures unleashed by political upheaval, a loss of nerve in confronting the intractable forces of social equilibrium that make genuine change impossible without a "catastrophe" befalling the entire society?[302]

It is this very threat, or sense, of the oncoming apocalypse which drives *Avatar*'s narrative, and so even a film with clear utopian ambitions cannot envisage a future utopia without at least the threat of mass destruction. Mel Gibson's 2006 film *Apocalypto* offers us a similar narrative. Here again we are presented with a tribal kingdom, in the historical guise of the Mayans, subsisting in a harmonious way with its environment. Although not really offering us a vision of utopia, *Apocalypto*, as the title indicates, presents us with an ancient civilisation in decline and on the brink

[302] Peter Y. Paik, *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 7.

of apocalypse. Whilst we have signs of a cataclysmic event presented throughout the film, such as an eclipse which, in actual fact, spares our protagonist from sacrifice but is also a foreshadowing of a dark event on the horizon, the ending of the film, in which we see Spanish ships just off the coast offers a new interpretation of this apocalypse.

The film's ending can be interpreted in one of two ways: either modern civilisation *is* the apocalypse, or out of this supposed apocalypse will in fact come the modern utopia of today. Even if we read the film's ending in this second light, we are still forced to admit that this modern utopia is born out of an apocalyptic event for the Mayans which will undoubtedly entail the death and enslavement of nearly everyone who we have spent the last two hours watching. The point here is that, whenever utopian thoughts are presented in mainstream post 9/11 films, the concept of apocalypse is both necessary and never far behind.

It is hardly surprising that utopian ideals are nearly always inflected with the threat of apocalypse in a post 9/11 environment. Nor is it a surprise that in *Avatar* we find it so easy to accept humanity as enslaving and imperialistic. After 9/11 the relationship between utopian religious thinking, apocalyptic religious thinking, politics, and culture changed. 9/11 was an event which simultaneously fused all four. The suicidal terrorists who died thinking they would go to paradise, the apocalyptic dramatisation of destruction, the political backlash and the beginning of an endless war, all were fused under the metaphor of the image, an image of two towers collapsing that was burned into the minds of spectators. What this image was really reminiscent of was a scene from an apocalyptic movie come to life. But this was a one-way window into destruction, not a way into escapism but an eruption of destructive energy from out of culture itself:

> Then came 11 September 2001. This may be a cultural as well as a political watershed. In *The Matrix*, what is needed to break out of the dystopian fiction is simply the recovery of the real.[303] However, the translation of images from disaster movies into grim reality does not provide the conditions for breaking out of dystopia into Utopia. Rather, […] utopian energies have been harnessed to conflicting forces of destruction and annihilation.[304]

In *Apocalypto* the threat of apocalypse itself comes from the advancement of civilisation, a clear connection between 'progress' and destruction. In the midst of a struggle between two competing, and false, utopias each bent on the other's destruction, it is easy to be lured into a kind of anti-utopianism. But Ruth Levitas gives a timely reminder that it should not all be utopia's fault:

> All political movements have utopian elements, insofar as they encompass views of what a good society might be like. Some of these political movements are dangerous and genocidal. *But it is not "utopianism" that makes them so. The problem about totalitarianism is not its utopianism, but its totalitarianism*.[305]

Throughout this work I have endeavoured to talk about the politics behind aesthetics, the way in which culture bore witness to 9/11 both glossing over the crude political rhetoric which it produced but in doing so also exposing it. The disappearance of utopian forms and discourse, or even of a hopeful human agency in the face of annihilation, in favour of utter despair and destruction returns me once again to the moment that this work began. Encapsulated in this one idea, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, lies the nihilistic end point of culture itself as any force for societal change in the world. How true then, is this statement? There is certainly an element of truth to it, seeing as apocalyptic culture seems to weigh far in excess of culture which looks beyond

[303] Can it really be called a dystopian fiction in *The Matrix*? Surely the real world is the dystopia and the matrix itself is the replication of a better world, which is admittedly not a utopia since Agent Smith admits that human beings rejected the idea of a perfect world, but is nevertheless preferable to the 'recovery of the real' in this instance.
[304] Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson, 'Utopia in Dark Times', p. 24.
[305] Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson, 'Utopia in Dark Times', p. 26.

capitalism, or even so much as critiques it. But perhaps there is more to Jameson's statement then there at first seemed.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, to imagine the end of the world is also to imagine the end of capitalism. This is only logical, but it seems that we can now go a step further and suggest that, as has been demonstrated in this thesis, it is just as true that to imagine the end of *capitalism* is to imagine the end of the world. Popular culture has naturalised capitalism to such an extent that thinking beyond it is to think only of the unthinkable. The end of capitalism *requires* the apocalypse.

Capitalism and apocalypse have both an inexorable link and also a startling inevitability revealed through popular culture. Throughout the 90s, capitalism was largely seen in utopian terms, as a force that was gradually bringing freedom and greater prosperity to the world, connecting people around the globe. As we have seen in films such as *End of Days*, *Independence Day*, and *Armageddon*, the apocalypse was never a mode which was being exploited in order to bring about a kind of utopia. Quite the reverse was true in fact; the apocalypse was to be avoided at all costs because the characters already lived in a form of utopia. Globalisation may have clear losers, but in US popular culture, with the Hollywood film industry at its head, capitalism had tended to be looked upon favourably. After 9/11, however, it became more difficult to ignore the obvious fact that not everyone around the world shared the American dream of capitalism. In turn, capitalism's utopian inclusion was brought into question.

To admit that the cultural imagination is as much responsible for the nihilistic dominance of apocalyptic thinking post 9/11 is to admit that it is also bound within the restrictions of global capitalism. That 9/11 was marked as the moment

"everything changed" did not mean any seismic shift in terms of US policy, only a rehash of imperialistic notions which have fuelled US hegemony over the last century. The statement, "everything changed", itself has been used rather to stifle public and academic discourse. When we think back to the example of Karlheinz Stockhausen's controversial comparison of the September 11 attacks to a great work of art, what is most noticeable is that his attempt to analyse the event from outside of the prescribed channels was met with a ferocious backlash by the "everything changed" band of media and political rhetoric. Described by Anthony Tommasini, in the *New York Times*, as an 'egomaniac', Stockhausen paid the price for his indiscretion with the cancellation of his shows.[306] Tommasini's words here are interesting in themselves:

> Perhaps the most disturbing element of Mr. Stockhausen's muddled comments is the touch of envy that comes through in his awe over this crazed satanic attack. Mr. Stockhausen has long been fired by the idea that art should transform us "out of life" itself, as he said at the press conference; otherwise "it's nothing."
>
> Obviously, any artwork, from a short Schubert song to a long Dostoyevsky novel, can have a transforming effect. But Mr. Stockhausen has dangerously overblown ambitions for art. Even Wagner, another egomaniac who controlled every aspect of his opera productions, was mostly trying to provide audiences with an absorbing evening in the theater. He did not necessarily expect you to walk out a better person.[307]

To attack an artist for being over ambitious about the impact that art can have on people and the world seems to miss the point of art entirely.

As Tommasini demonstrates aptly in his article, there was one thing that *did* seem to change on 9/11, and that was freedom of speech, or the freedom to express an opinion other than that of the dominant mainstream line of 9/11 at least. After

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[306] Anthony Tommasini, 'Music; The Devil Made Him Do It', http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/30/arts/music-the-devil-made-him-do-it.html?scp=3&sq=Anthony%20Tommasini%20Karlheinz%20Stockhausen&st=cse [accessed 12/04/2012].

[307] Anthony Tommasini, http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/30/arts/music-the-devil-made-him-do-it.html?scp=3&sq=Anthony%20Tommasini%20Karlheinz%20Stockhausen&st=cse.

9/11, those who criticised the nation's response were branded unpatriotic; those who opposed the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were not just anti-war, but not supportive of the brave efforts of US soldiers risking their lives so that these very same people could live in freedom, security, and prosperity back home. In this way the event was used to close off discourse and political debate.

As time passes following a major national trauma, discourse reopens. Clearly, immediately after 9/11 there was no shortage of those wanting to speak about the impact of the attacks, but much of the discussion skirted controversy by aligning itself with the dominant ideological backlash that was the War on Terror. Even Don DeLillo fell into the "everything has changed" trap. In his essay *In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September*, published only three months after the attacks, DeLillo speaks of a change in 'world narrative' precipitated by 9/11:

> In the past decade the surge of capital markets has dominated discourse and shaped global consciousness. Multinational corporations have come to seem more vital and influential than governments. The dramatic climb of the Dow and the speed of the Internet summoned us all to live permanently in the future, in the utopian glow of cyber-capital, because there is no memory there and this is where markets are uncontrolled and investment potential has no limit. All this changed on September 11.
> Today, again, the world narrative belongs to terrorists.[308]

It is somewhat ironic in the light of these words, that his next novel would be *Cosmopolis*.[309]

Cosmopolis is a short novel which depicts exactly this world in a state of global capital flux as DeLillo referred to in the wake of 9/11. If ever there was a novel obsessed with the 'glow of cyber-capital' it is surely this. *Cosmopolis* is

[308] Don DeLillo, 'In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September', (*Harper's Magazine*, December 2001), p. 33. http://dumpendebat.net/static-content/delillo/DeLillo-Ruins_of_Future-Dec2001.pdf [accessed 1/05/2012].
[309] Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, (London: Picador, 2003).

interesting in that it presents us with a world in a state of economic Armageddon. It is a novel very much occupying the space between 9/11 and the 2008 global financial crisis, speaking to both events which in themselves carried that charge of apocalyptic sentiment. Although written in 2003, some five years before the crash, the novel both pre-empts the financial turmoil to follow and also responds to the tremors and cracks in the markets that 9/11 itself threatened to bring to the surface. DeLillo's novel also seems to make light of his own initial reaction to 9/11, the suggestion of a shift in world narrative, by reaffirming the economic aspect present in both the attacks of 9/11 itself and its aftermath. It is all too easy to get distracted by the symbolism of the event, to forget the long and lasting financial implications not just of market fluctuations that occurred directly as a result, but also the expensive wars fought by the US in Afghanistan and Iraq. When examining *Cosmopolis* we see an economic face to apocalypse which rarely shows itself in filmic interpretations of the end of the world. The economic apocalypse it presents is vital to the re-contextualisation of texts which, almost certainly for reasons of entertainment value, have distanced themselves from the idea of apocalypse as financially motivated or predestined.

Described in its trailer as "the first film about our new millennium", the 2012 film version of DeLillo's novel, starring Robert Pattinson as Eric Packer and directed by David Cronenberg, is clearly attempting to identify itself as offering something different; a narrative that speaks to our current time. To this extent it is hard to disagree with it, since DeLillo's narrative offers us a vision of economic apocalypse, the culmination of the current wave of fear which grips both Europe and the US. It is not new, in that DeLillo's novel was written almost a decade ago, but it is one of the rare cases in which this kind of economic subject matter has been deemed

entertainment worthy enough to bring it to screen, and Pattinson himself seems an unlikely choice to play Packer. *Cosmopolis* is perhaps quintessential as the post 9/11 novel which seems to crackle with fear, and yet refuses to look the event itself squarely in the face. Perhaps what the 2012 film version represents is a new movement away from the simple apocalyptic devices we have seen over the last decade and towards something which will incorporate this new financial element to US anxiety. In many ways, however, Cronenberg's *Cosmopolis* fails to deliver the telling narrative, not because it does not stay faithful to the novel, but precisely because it does. If anything, the film aptly demonstrates why this subject matter works so much better in literature, delivering a niche film which was never likely or even designed to be popular with a mass audience, suggesting that this film version could be more of singularity, unlikely to be repeated in a similar fashion. For this reason, when it comes to a discussion of the economic apocalypse, it is still the novel which displays it in its most mature and impacting form.

Cosmopolis and the Economic Apocalypse

Cosmopolis' Eric Packer is a multi-billionaire sitting in his limousine travelling through Manhattan on his way to get a haircut. Since the actions of the novel span only a day, a day during which it appears as though Eric's sanity is gradually deteriorating, we know very little about Eric's life up to the point at which the novel begins. The unhinged character we encounter, it has to be assumed, is radically different from the character who has successfully managed to accumulate

such a large monopoly of wealth. Eric is a businessman, unlike his wife Elise whose wealth is inherited. When we are first introduced to her, we immediately understand that the marriage is a sham:

> He glanced out the one-way window to his left. It took him a moment to understand that he knew the woman in the rear seat of the taxi that lay adjacent. She was his wife of twenty-two days, Elise Shifrin, a poet who had right of blood to the fabulous Shifrin banking fortune of Europe and the world.[310]

Not only does Eric not even recognise his wife at first, we are then instantly informed of her 'fabulous' inheritance. She is described neither in terms of appearance nor in terms of personality, instead we are told only her profession and that she is a rich heiress.

Throughout the novel Eric and Elise run into each other a number of times, during which Eric attempts to persuade her to consummate their marriage whilst pondering her beauty. For Eric it would seem that the marriage *is* more than just financial convenience. Whether he is in love with Elise, or even whether he finds her particularly attractive is debatable, but certainly we see that her wealth pales in comparison to his own:

> How much was she worth?
> The number surprised him. The total in U.S. dollars was seven hundred and thirty-five million. The number seemed puny, a lottery jackpot shared by seventeen postal workers. The words sounded puny and tinny and he tried to be ashamed on her behalf. But it was all air anyway. It was air that flows from the mouth when words are spoken. It was lines of code that interact in simulated space.[311]

In fact, the novel never really gives a clear indication as to the purpose of their marriage, nor do we get the impression that the two were even acquaintances before it. This passage is also one of many indicators throughout the novel as to the grotesque size of Eric Packer's fortune, and another example of the way in which

[310] Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 15.
[311] Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 124.

money appears to have become intangible: here Eric describes it as 'air' and 'lines of code that interact' not even in real space but in 'simulated space'. That Eric considers seven hundred and thirty-five million dollars to be a 'puny' amount certainly serves to alienate him from the reader. Eric, like the majority of DeLillo's characters, is not someone the reader can feel empathy with. He is, in many ways, free from the financial pressures and limitations of the modern world. And yet at the same time, Eric is more bound and constrained by economic forces than most.

Vija Kinski is Eric's 'chief of theory'.[312] An intellectual, she recognises in Eric this destructive detachment from the true meaning or value of his money. Not only this, she also couches it in a way that makes it applicable to everyone. Her philosophical explanation of Eric's condition opens with a general comment about the nature of 'property' itself:

> "Property is no longer about power, personality and command. It's not about vulgar display, or tasteful display. Because it no longer has weight or shape. The only thing that matters is the price you pay. Yourself, Eric, think. What did you buy for your one hundred and four million dollars? Not dozens of rooms, incomparable views, private elevators. Not the swimming pool or the shark. Was it air rights? The regulating sensors and software? Not the mirrors that tell you how you feel when you look at yourself in the morning. You paid the money for the number itself. One hundred and four million. This is what you bought. And it's worth it. The number justifies itself."[313]

In Kinski's eyes, the value of money has become disproportionate to what you can really buy with that money. It has ceased to become a functional commodity for Eric because, put simply, there is nothing left that he cannot afford and so he has resorted to buying the number itself. This is also demonstrated in another vulgar outburst during which Eric argues with a lover about both the power and the ethics of what his money can buy:

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[312] Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 77.
[313] Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 78.

"There's a Rothko in private hands that I have privileged knowledge of. It is about to become available."
"You've seen it."
"Three or four years ago. Yes. And it is luminous."
"He said, "What about the chapel?"
"What about it?"
"I've been thinking about the chapel."
"You can't buy the goddamn chapel."
"How do you know? Contact the principles."
"I thought you'd be thrilled about the painting. One painting. You don't have an important Rothko. You've always wanted one. We've talked about this."
"How many paintings in this chapel?"
"I don't know. Fourteen, fifteen."
"If they sell me the chapel, I'll keep it intact. Tell them."
"Keep it intact where?"
"In my apartment. There's sufficient space. I can make more space."
"But people need to see it."
"Let them buy it. Let them outbid me."
"Forgive the pissy way I say this. But the Rothko chapel belongs to the world."
"It's mine if I buy it."[314]

Eric never gives the impression here that he is actually serious about buying the chapel, he is more interested in teasing her with the idea, and yet his attitude that everything has a price remains untouchable: she knows that he could buy the chapel if he wanted to. It is unclear as to Eric's true appreciation of art but his desire for the Rothko chapel is presented more as a desire for ownership than a desire to appreciate. It is the suggestion that he cannot buy the chapel that spurs his desire for it. This is evidential of the Marxist criticism that; 'What defines bourgeois society is not needs, but wants. Wants are psychological, not biological, and are by their nature unlimited.'[315] That Eric will never be satisfied no matter how much money he has, or how much he owns, is, according to this philosophy, symptomatic of a capitalist society which has replaced needs with wants, for the rich at least. This kind of decadence cannot help but recall images of civilisations in decline,

[314] Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, pp. 27-28.
[315] Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, (London: Cox & Wyman Ltd., 1979), p. 22.

Apocalypto again comes to mind. But why is it that *Cosmopolis* chooses to analyse an economic apocalypse from the point of view of the wealthy rather than the poor?

Cosmopolis is a novel about the struggle for power between money and the individual. Through Eric's grotesque wealth DeLillo is able to present the reader with this power/powerlessness dichotomy which is the basis of the novel. The question it begs is not, 'who has the power?', but 'does anyone have the power?' Kinski sees the control that money has over people but for her it is this which makes an apocalyptic event inevitable, at least in financial terms:

> "Money makes time. It used to be the other way around. Clock time accelerated the rise of capitalism. People stopped thinking about eternity. They began to concentrate on hours, measurable hours, man-hours, using labour more efficiently. […] Because time is a corporate asset now. It belongs to the free market system. The present is harder to find. It is being sucked out of the world to make way for the future of uncontrolled markets and huge investment potential. The future becomes insistent. This is why something will happen soon, maybe today," she said, looking slyly into her hands. "To correct the acceleration of time. Bring nature back to normal, more or less."[316]

Kinski mentions an event that will 'bring nature back to normal' and by her suggestion that it could be 'today' we assume that she is referring to the anti-globalisation protest which is taking place in the city at that very moment. Her comment is rather open however and could be interpreted either as a Marxist cry for revolution that will topple capitalism and bring a return to nature, or as nature reasserting itself in the form of a global catastrophe. Either this or Kinski could be referring to the chain of events which Eric himself is about to set in motion.

Kinski places aggressive capitalism in opposition to both nature and human nature, but in contrast Eric takes a different view by claiming, "a common surface, an affinity between market movements and the natural world."[317] Whatever balance or harmony Eric appears to see in the movements of money and stocks is challenged by

[316] Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 79.
[317] Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 86.

his inability to predict the rise of the yen, which becomes the focal point of his demise. The numbers discussed in *Cosmopolis* are so inflated that they themselves become the source of catastrophe. It is not until Eric sees the protest that he begins to understand that there are forces at work which are both out of his control and also thoroughly *un*-predictable:

> Now look. A man in flames. Behind Eric all the screens were pulsing with it. And all action was at a pause, the protesters and riot police milling about and only the cameras jostling. What did this change? Everything, he thought. Kinski had been wrong. The market was not total. It could not claim this man or assimilate his act. Not such starkness and horror. This was a thing outside its reach.[318]

The effect that the act of self-immolation perpetrated by the protestor has on Eric is not too dissimilar from the kind of reaction one might have to the suicide bomber. The bomber, left with no other way in which he can participate in such a corrupt system, resorts to the destruction of his own body as a protest against it.[319] Although the protestor in this case chooses not to murder anyone other than himself, the effect is the same; it has shown Eric that there are some things beyond the control of the market and that one of these things is humanity itself: not everyone sees money in the same way as Eric Packer. This appears to be a kind of turning point in the narrative as Eric's relentless borrowing of the yen becomes not about attempting to recover losses or make money, but, instead, about attempting to lose everything he has; by shedding his money he feels as if he is shedding his skin. However, Eric's response is no denial of the power the system still holds over him. After all, by believing that in order to be free he must rid himself of his money he is confirming the power that such money has. Eric's identification with the protesters is fraudulent

[318] Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, pp. 99-100.
[319] There is an almost unavoidable comparison here between the terrorist, or suicide bomber, and Gayatri Spivak's use of the term 'subaltern' in her famous essay: "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Without a voice, and operating outside the system, as the subaltern does, there is only one means left by which he can make himself heard, and that is in a form of bodily destruction.

as even his financial suicide cannot make him like them. His response to the protest itself is a good example:

> It was exhilarating, his head in the fumes, to see the struggle and ruin around him, the gassed men and women in their defiance, waving looted Nasdaq T-shirts, and to realize they'd been reading the same poetry he'd been reading.
> He sat down long enough to take a web phone out of a slot and execute an order for more yen. He borrowed yen in dumbfounding amounts. He wanted all the yen there was.[320]

On some level it seems as if Eric has been swept away by the drama of the whole event. He is not just content with losing his own money either as he proceeds to rid Elise of hers too hoping to, 'let them see each other clean, in killing light.'[321] Like the impact of the images of 9/11, this image causes Eric to question his participation in the system of global capital. However, his response is to answer those questions only by embroiling himself deeper into the financial system.

The ending of *Cosmopolis* is driven by this desire to be like the protesters, to give away everything. If the sacrificing of his wealth is an empty gesture, then giving up his life is a further attempt to mimic the immolated protestor. Eric decides to seek out the man who has made a threat against his life, and whilst his motives are unclear (does he mean to kill the man, or to be killed himself?) he takes on the risk as a kind of personal apocalyptic moment. The man he seeks out, Richard Sheets, who was driven mad when he lost his job at Eric's company and has taken to squatting and stealing electricity, is clearly a victim of capitalist society. Despite his poverty he is still strangely compelled by his bank balance:

> I still have my bank that I visit systematically to look at the last literal dollars remaining in my account. I do this for the ongoing psychology of it, to know I have money in an institution. And because cash machines have a charisma that still speaks to me.[322]

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[320] Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, pp. 96-97.
[321] Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 124.
[322] Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 60.

Whereas Eric's money is meaningless to him because he has so much of it, Richard's is meaningless because he has removed himself from the system. Yet, even in an environment in which his money no longer has a use value, he still clings on to the vestiges of financial inclusion, refusing to give up his bank account. It is as if, for Richard, the money has an even greater significance than mere purchasing power, it is linked to his very identity.

When Eric confronts Richard at the end of *Cosmopolis* he uncovers a paradoxical thinking behind Richard's desire to murder him:

> "No your crime has no conscience. You haven't been driven to it by some oppressive social force. How I hate to be reasonable. You're not against the rich. Nobody's against the rich. Everybody's ten seconds from being rich. Or so everybody thought. No. Your crime is in your head. Another fool shooting up a diner because because."[323]

What is exposed by Eric here, though, is the mentality of those brought up to believe that they are 'ten seconds from being rich'. It has driven Sheets mad, and yet Eric's own wealth has driven him to the same ends, having already thrown away his fortune, shot his bodyguard Torval, and sought out his own killer.

Whilst Eric is dealing with his own personal apocalypse, around him the financial walls of civilisation are tumbling down. Although it is not made explicitly clear, the implication in *Cosmopolis* is that it is Eric himself who has triggered a global financial panic. His own wealth is so vast, and his borrowing patterns so extreme, that he himself is causing the Yen's fluctuations in value:

> He watched the president of the World Bank address a chamber of tense economists. […] He knew they would figure it out eventually, how he'd made it happen, one man, bereaved and tired now.[324]

To this extent, the chaos Eric causes in the markets both follows from turbulence seen immediately after 9/11 which saw the Dow Jones shed more than 7% in one

[323] Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p.196.
[324] Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 140.

day, and also predicts the global financial crisis that would follow in 2008. Indeed, DeLillo's novel shows a financial system which is distinctly out of control:

> "There's a rumour it seems involving the finance minister. He's supposed to resign any time now," she said. "Some kind of scandal about a misconstrued comment. He made a comment about the economy that may have been misconstrued. The whole country is analyzing the grammar and syntax of this comment. Or it wasn't even what he said. It was when he paused. They are trying to construe the meaning of this pause. […] So the whole economy convulses, she said, "because the man took a breath."[325]

One could be forgiven for thinking that the finance minister mentioned here appears to hold the power. After all it is his pause, or breath, which has caused an economic panic. But these words are, in fact, a testament to the power held by the economy itself. The people are so concerned about the economy that they pour over the minister's comment, looking deeper than even the wording to what was not said.

As Vija Kinski suggests in *Cosmopolis*, capitalism and apocalypse go hand in hand; to her the capitalist is no different from the anarchist,

> "You know what anarchists have always believed."
> "Yes."
> "Tell me," she said.
> "The urge to destroy is a creative urge."
> "This is also the hallmark of capitalist thought. Enforced destruction. Old industries have to be harshly eliminated. New markets have to be forcibly claimed. Old markets have to be re-exploited. Destroy the past, make the future."[326]

But by assimilating the past and destroying the future, what is created is a near perpetual present. The financial crisis is just another example of this, as since the global economy crashed people have been encouraged not to save for the future but to spend now. Many economists have been advising that, in order to avoid further recessions, we must spend our way out of trouble; lower interest rates, increase consumer spending, we are not destroying enough! As Michael Chin, Eric's

[325] Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, pp. 47-48.
[326] Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, pp. 92-93.

currency analyst, tries to warn him, "Eric, come on. We are speculating into the void."[327] But for Eric, the archetypal capitalist, the urge to plunge into the abyss is impossible to resist:

> With the currency ticker restored to normal function, the yen showed renewed strength, advancing against the dollar in microdecimal increments every sextillionth of a second. This was good. This was fine and right. It thrilled him to think in zeptoseconds and to watch the numbers in their unrelenting run. The stock ticker was also good. He watched the major issues breeze by and felt purified in nameless ways to see prices spiral into lubricious plunge. Yes, the effect on him was sexual, cunnilingual in particular, and he let his head fall back and opened his mouth to the sky and rain.[328]

Cosmopolis applies the apocalyptic mentality which has remained popular throughout the last decade to a financial system stressing and straining at the seams. Daniel Bell asks, importantly, 'without a commitment to economic growth, what is the *raison d'être* of capitalism?'[329] But not only is growth responsible for some of the natural disasters occurring and predicted to occur around the world through the obsessive use of fossil fuels, it is also, at least partially, responsible for the increasing gap between the rich and the poor which is clear for all to see in *Cosmopolis*. This is a gap which is slowly transforming cities into the urban dystopias of science-fiction film.

The 2008 financial crisis goes at least some way to proving the constant growth economy as a fallacy. It seems strange then, that even in the light of this knowledge, no real alternatives are offered, or even largely sought. Žižek might claim that this is due to the 'ideological naturalization' of capitalism, and he makes an important point in arguing that,

> Far from proving that the era of ideological utopias is behind us, this uncontested hegemony of capitalism is sustained by the properly utopian core

[327] Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 21.
[328] Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 106.
[329] Daniel Bell, p.80.

> of capitalist ideology. Utopias of alternative worlds have been exorcized by the utopia in power, masking itself as pragmatic realism.[330]

Žižek, in fact, suggests that capitalism still functions as if it were a utopia. But what this ultimately fails to explain, however, is how a system which has been so brutally exposed both ideologically by 9/11, and fundamentally by the global financial crisis, seems completely unchanged in its march towards disaster.

DeLillo's novel may present a world in which capitalism is completely unaltered by 9/11, continuing its terrifying expansion towards eventual meltdown, but ultimately, in presenting us with an economic apocalypse, *Cosmopolis* presents a more accurate reflection of the fears which have multiplied since the attacks. Clearly the 2008 financial crisis had its connections with 9/11, those attacks precipitating their own smaller stock market collapse and expensive wars. But they have also been taken as the first signs of the end of the US period of hegemony. To many cultural theorists, like Žižek, the financial crisis is just the next stage in the decline of US power. It is no surprise then that US culture has reinterpreted this threat of decline as apocalyptic, that a cultural pessimism towards the future has predominated in the period since 9/11. As is demonstrated by these texts, the end of America is the end of capitalism, and the end of capitalism *is* the end of the world.

Melancholia – the Reel End of the World?

I have tried to conclude this discussion of the apocalyptic cultural legacy of 9/11, by looking beyond 9/11 itself. It is always important to reflect a consciousness of

[330] Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, then as Farce*, p. 77.

context in any piece of work. It can be all too easy, when focused so closely on one small area of culture, to overlook the bigger picture. While I have labelled nearly every text discussed here as post 9/11 (and of course in at least one way they are), this does not mean that they are a product of 9/11 alone. These texts are of course products of the decade just passed since 9/11, a decade that has seen the advent of new kinds of war and that has been plagued by financial collapse, economic and global strife, and concerns about the future sustainability of the planet and of our way of life. While 9/11 may appear to be the defining moment in US culture over the past decade, there is no doubting the influence of these other forms of social disaster.

What defines the post 9/11 apocalyptic film, as has been discussed, is a concern with the inevitability of destruction, and the presentation of a future in which all that is left is faith. These are films that are systematically characterised by a loss of belief in change. This is 'change we cannot believe in.' Human agency has been lost and in these bleak depictions of the future there is no room left for the utopian impulse, only the desperate need to survive in a world that has been destroyed not by one specific threat as such, but by any one of a number of end-game scenarios. These are certainly not films which celebrate the end, rather their purpose appears to be to mourn the loss of the future. And why are they so popular? Maybe because Jameson's assertion, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, is the resulting reality of a catastrophic loss of faith in change. Or maybe it is in order to remind ourselves of the bleakness of the future, like trying to pinch oneself in order to wake-up as if from a nightmare unfolding.

What then, should this new wave of apocalyptic cinema be called? In some ways many of the films that have been examined in this thesis are true eschatological

films, but eschatology is concerned not only with the end of the world, but also with what comes after, with judgement and the afterlife. One of the defining characteristics of these films is that, in fact, they tend to believe, rather hopelessly, that there is nothing beyond the end of the world, nothing other than the struggle against the environment and the struggle to maintain faith in the face of catastrophe. These films tend to refute both Christian and Islamic claims that the end of days will usher forth a new and brighter kingdom, instead looking towards the end of the world with dread. And yet, unlike the 90s apocalyptic films, there is no utopia of the normal to protect. Perhaps, then, the post 9/11 apocalyptic film has only one term with which it can be described. The powerlessness which characters exhibit in the face of the end of the world conjures to mind the same term that was also used for the destruction of the World Trade Center and for dramatic and spectacular cinematic special effects. It is a term which also encompasses the lofty philosophical nature of the way in which these films deal with the concepts of religion, faith, and fate. This wave is surely the *sublime* apocalyptic film.

The post 9/11 apocalyptic film fills the screen with sublime spectacle in a wholly different way to the empty scenes of destruction witnessed in films like *Independence Day*, *Armageddon*, and *Godzilla*. The purpose of these scenes, which are accompanied by attempts to rationalise the end of the world, is to impress upon the spectator his or her own smallness in the face of the machinations of both nature and the world at large. They attempt to evoke the same feelings of helplessness that those who watched the World Trade Center buildings collapse would have felt; the same terror and the same sense of horror experienced by those who watched those tiny bodies plummeting down the sheer face of the towers. The sublime apocalyptic film overwhelms the spectator with the sheer enormity of their environment and the

odds stacked against survival. It also questions the reliance on faith in a world in which butchery and savagery is preferred to teamwork and camaraderie.

One recent film in particular appears to represent the logical conclusion of the kind of sublime end-of-worldism that has been prevalent over the last decade. Lars Von Trier's late 2011 film *Melancholia* is an example of just how far the inevitability of destruction has come in post 9/11 film. *Melancholia* is one of those rare examples of a film in which the world does actually end, and, as the filmmaker would have it, for good. Given that the main protagonist, Justine (Kirsten Dunst), is battling against depression, there is certainly nothing light-hearted about this apocalypse, a cosmic one portrayed as the collision of the Earth with another planet (mirrored in a sublime preparatory opening scene). No science can prevent the world from ending, and it is entirely beyond the control of the characters. This is a fact made overt through Justine's brother-in-law John, played by Kiefer Sutherland – normally renowned for his almost omnipotent powers in fighting terrorist apocalypses in the popular TV show *24*. John is an astronomer, a man of science, convinced that the two planets will pass harmlessly by each other. But, by the end of the film, it has become obvious that science will not win the day and that, in fact, the world will end. John promptly commits suicide.

Writing in 2012, we have reached yet another end point with another predicted apocalypse upon us. As fascinated as culture has always been by ends, perhaps in our current state it would be far better to think about beginnings and re-imaginings than, what is perhaps the easiest of ways out, the end of all. While post 9/11 apocalyptic films may often have more to say about society and the future of the planet than those 1990s Hollywood spectaculars, surely their message of hopelessness leaves no room for building a better future. On some level, those crass

and populist blockbusters at least sent the message that something could be done to change the world, that yes, humanity could save the planet. In today's sublime end of the world films, all that we have to look forward to is just that: the end.

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