

IN FOCUS: Fifteen Years after 9/11

What Keeps Me Up at Night: Media Studies Fifteen Years after 9/11

by ANNA FROULA

We will stay At War with that mysterious Enemy for the rest of our lives. —Hunter S. Thompson, September 12, 2001¹

As the United States' long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq wind down (or have they?), only three-quarters of 1 percent of Americans have served in combat, leaving the vast majority of the population untouched by the effects of war and subject to cable news' often distorted and always censored portrayals of soldiers' experiences. Andrew Bacevich, a former US Army colonel and current Boston University professor—whose son was killed in Iraq in 2007—argues that the widening gap between citizen and military personnel “has created a nation that has an abiding appetite for war waged by an Army that’s not capable of achieving victory.”² Bacevich is hardly alone in his criticism of this soldier-civilian gap. As James Fallows bluntly put it in 2015, “As a country, America has been at war nonstop for the past thirteen years. As a public, it has not.”³ Lacking direct experience, many Americans have turned to film and television representations to try to understand these events as they continue to unfold, as new forms of warfare, including secret surveillance and

1 Hunter S. Thompson “Fear & Loathing in America,” *ESPN Page 2*, September 12, 2001, <http://proxy.espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?id=1250751>.

2 “A Push to Bridge the Gap between Soldiers and Citizens,” *Here & Now*, September 2013, <http://hereandnow.wbur.org/2013/09/02/bacevich-soldiers-citizens>.

3 James Fallows, “The Tragedy of the American Military,” *Atlantic*, January–February 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/01/the-tragedy-of-the-american-military/383516/>.

drone assassinations, have increased under President Obama's tenure as commander in chief.

No longer linguistically the War on Terror or even adequately captured by the euphemism "overseas contingency operations," the United States' global military interventions have become, to borrow W. J. T. Mitchell's words, "an inscrutable, shadowy structure, not a clear legible figure or space. [They are] about invincibility, secrecy, and [horror] *without spectacle*."⁴ Is it any wonder that, amid American drone-warfare expansion in the Middle East, the current iteration of "terror TV" narratives, as Stacy Takacs argues in her essay in this section, have replaced celebratory stories about securing democracy through national strength with suspicion about government-backed terrorism and insidious surveillance?⁵ Or that ongoing talks about *Top Gun 2*, the sequel to a film that did much heavy lifting to "remasculinize" the United States and strengthen the image of American military might post-Vietnam, focus on 1980s fighter pilots Maverick (Tom Cruise) and Iceman (Val Kilmer) reuniting to confront a new era of drone warfare?⁶

Not surprisingly, then, media scholars have been analyzing the resulting discursive shifts, tropes, and representations of terrorism, war, and surveillance in popular culture since 9/11. *Cinema Journal* has featured some of this work in earlier In Focus sections—"Teaching 9/11" and "Science Fiction, Thrillers, and the War on Terror"—and in feature articles.⁷ The book reviews accompanying this section attest to new ways of reading both earlier post-9/11 texts and those emerging now. Because global military spending is on the rise for the first time since 2011, the range of topics and texts to consider are also increasing exponentially, which makes the field of "post-9/11 media studies" a problematically broad topic.⁸ Thus, as Jim Castonguay noted in the War and Media Studies SIG meeting during the SCMS conference of March 2016, now would be a useful time to establish more formal methodologies within the field, which will be challenging, given the range of papers and approaches at SCMS alone. Business is booming in war and media studies, which is in and of itself tragic, yet it

4 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 137. Here Mitchell is describing images of terrorism in works of art. Emphasis in original.

5 See Yvonne Tasker, "Television Crime Drama and Homeland Security: From *Law & Order* to 'Terror TV,'" *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 4 (2012): 44–65; Stacy Takacs, *Terrorism TV: Popular Entertainment in Post-9/11 America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012).

6 See Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), and *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994). See also Ben Child, "Top Gun Sequel to Feature Tom Cruise versus Drones Storyline," *The Guardian*, June 29, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jun/29/top-gun-sequel-to-feature-tom-cruise-versus-drones-storyline>.

7 See "In Focus: Teaching 9/11," ed. Louise Spence, *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 2 (2004): 90–126; "In Focus—In the Long Shadows of 9/11: Science Fiction, Thrillers, and the War on Terror," ed. Will Brooker, *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 1 (2011): 145–179. See also, e.g., "In Focus: The Media and the New Cold War," ed. Dennis Broe and Louise Spence, *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 4 (2004): 96–135; Jason Middleton, "The Subject of Torture: Regarding the Pain of Americans in *Hostel*," *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 4 (2010): 1–24; Lori Harrison-Kahan, "Inside *Inside Man*: Spike Lee and Post-9/11 Entertainment," *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 1 (2010): 39–58; Tasker, "Television Crime Drama; 'In Focus: *Homeland*,'" ed. Diane Negra and Jorie Lagerwey, *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 4 (2015): 126–158.

8 Jon Gambrell, "Global Military Spending Nearly \$1.7T amid Mideast Conflicts," *Associated Press*, April 4, 2016, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/d9a7ab6fb5f4430db369b80c696e2fb/global-military-spending-nearly-17t-amid-mideast-conflicts>.

means there is much work ahead for scholars to keep pace with the ways in which film and other media are attempting to grapple with the current terms of these wars in ways that public discourse, including recent presidential campaigns, has not.

While this *In Focus* does not define such a methodology, it does call attention to the shifts in the kinds of storytelling currently mediating what Takacs describes as today's military-industrial-surveillance complex and recognize exciting new work and approaches in the field. What follows here is an effort to sketch emerging and ongoing scholarship on the so-called War on Terror and its intersections in compounding global crises. In other words, this is an overview of the seemingly ever-impending disasters that have plagued the popular imagination in the wake of US and multinational responses to 9/11 and that continue to reengender fear in the collective unconscious. I include some of the excellent work presented at the SCMS conference of March 2016 because it is a snapshot of the directions in which the field is headed and it demonstrates how (mostly American) popular culture has largely moved beyond mediating the trauma of September 11, 2001, "an event," wrote Will Brooker five years ago, "so unique and unnameable that it lies beyond words and can only be gestured to through numbers."⁹ Yet the codification of "9/11" as the moment "when everything changed" and its subsequent commodification in political and popular culture has rendered it somewhat inert, its tragedies slowly untethering from the wars that the United States prosecuted in response.¹⁰

Mediating 9/11's national and personal trauma has shifted to remediating its geopolitical reverberations. The dynamics of a historical event and its cultural memory create a "transmedial phenomenon, which is realized, over and over, by means of those media technologies that a community has at its disposal and to which it ascribes the potential of creating ever greater immediacy and memorial truth."¹¹ The aftermaths of 9/11 have compounded chaos in warzones and increased national and international surveillance. They intersect with crises in climate change and infrastructure readiness (or lack of readiness), global hunger, increasingly hypertoxic environments, and "superbugs," such as the Zika virus. Such intersections suggest a wider scope of "post-9/11 texts." For example, Emily Satterwhite's reading of the "hillbilly horror" *Wrong Turn 2: Dead End* (Joe Lynch, 2007), in which the devastation of southern Appalachia by capitalist mountaintop coal removal casts the impoverished cannibals as "victims of a toxic post-industrial landscape," underscores the neglect—and abuse—of the domestic home front in the name of military spending.¹² The United States' dependence on fossilized energy sources to maintain—and motivate—its military-industrial complex maps a different kind of domestic conflict zone onto

9 Will Brooker, "Introduction," *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 1 (2011): 145–148, 146.

10 See Dana Heller, ed., *The Selling of 9/11: How a National Tragedy Became a Commodity* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

11 Astrid Eril and Ann Rigney, *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 9. See also J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Boston: MIT Press, 1999).

12 Emily Satterwhite, "Backwood Slashers and the Politics of White Masculinity," unpublished—a published version of this essay is forthcoming: "The Politics of Hillbilly Horror," in *Navigating Souths: Transdisciplinary Explorations of a US Region*, ed. Michele Coffey and Jodi Skipper (Athens: University of Georgia Press, forthcoming 2017).

mining communities in which energy companies commit slow murder.¹³ In this brutal nexus of global unrest and shrinking resources, noted Scott Birdwise at this past SCMS conference, the stories we tell ourselves no longer make sense in the ruthless simplification of complex global conflicts into simplified tales of good and evil.¹⁴

The attacks of September 11, 2001, were routinely described as “something out of a movie.”¹⁵ Likewise, the intersections of other global crises—current and predicted—are similarly being screened in what E. Ann Kaplan terms “future-tense trauma cinema,” including films such as *The Happening* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2008) and *Take Shelter* (Jeff Nichols, 2011) that imagine human-created natural and social collapse.¹⁶ Similarly, argues Selmin Kara, “while recent examples of eco-cinema often project the anxieties related to this new epoch on terminal landscapes ravaged by human activity, a small cluster of films evoke an Anthropocene imaginary at the metabolic level, showing the impact of ecological change on human bodies.”¹⁷ Kara illustrates this iteration of films that explore the epoch determined by human intervention in geological processes in terms of “terminal landscapes”: the ice age of *Snowpiercer* (Bong Joon-ho, 2013), the toxic storms of *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller, 2015), and the drought and famine of *Interstellar* (Christopher Nolan, 2014).¹⁸

It should be no surprise, then, that many post-9/11 films and media texts “in essence are documents of desperation, failure, and loss,” as Fabrizio Cilento notes in this section in his analysis of the revival of the “ultraprocedural subgenre.” Explicit efforts to narrate ongoing warfare have largely fallen flat, with few exceptions, especially in the first iterations of storytelling. *In the Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggis, 2007), based on real-life events, dramatized one family’s attempt to discover the truth about their son who was burned and dismembered by his fellow veterans after returning home; Robert Redford’s *Lions for Lambs* (2007) attempted to connect soldiers’ experiences in Afghanistan to US policy and press coverage; *Grace Is Gone* (James C. Strouse, 2007) depicted an army veteran’s struggle to communicate his wife’s death in combat in Iraq to his daughters; and *Stop-Loss* (Kimberly Peirce, 2008) narrated the plight of traumatized veterans sent back to war after they had fulfilled their duty. Years later, *Camp X-Ray* (Peter Sattler, 2014) staged the complex friendship between a guard and

13 See, for example, EarthTalk, “How Coal Kills,” *Scientific American*, February 17, 2015, <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-coal-kills/>; “Community Impacts of Mountaintop Removal,” *Appalachian Voices*, 2013, <http://appvoices.org/end-mountaintop-removal/community/>.

14 Scott Birdwise, “There Is Something Else Out There: Political Imagination in Adam Curtis’s *Bitter Lake*” (paper presented at the annual conference of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies [SCMS], March–April, 2016) (further references to papers presented at this conference are condensed to SCMS 2016). Birdwise is paraphrasing Adam Curtis on his 2015 film. See Adam Curtis, “Trailer Trash,” *BBC*, December 9, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/adamcurtis/entries/ae14be85-3104-3c74-a9da-85807434a38e?sortBy=LowestRating&sortOrder=Ascending&filter=none>.

15 See Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula, and Karen Randell, *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture, and the “War on Terror”* (New York: Continuum/Bloomsbury, 2010).

16 E. Ann Kaplan, *Climata Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

17 Selmin Kara, “The Anthropocene Breach,” SCMS 2016. See also her “Anthropocene Cinema” (lecture, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, October 9, 2015), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkdyBd9G_xE.

18 Ibid.

a prisoner in Guantánamo Bay. These examples are not exhaustive, but in trying to engage American audiences with critical questions about the wars, few have made significant impact at the box office, with exceptions like *Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008), *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012), and, as I discuss later, *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014).

These early examples illustrate Hollywood's tendency to depict war as something that happens to the United States and its military, which, as Shakti Jaising argues, "makes the war legible primarily as a traumatic experience for American soldiers. The perspectives of Iraqis are invariably erased or at best treated through stereotype," a perspective that "radical" documentaries made in 2006, such as *My Country, My Country* (Laura Poitras) and *Iraq in Fragments* (James Longley) can still counter.¹⁹ Dinah Holtzman's work on Muslim-produced commercial films that deal with the rise of Islamophobia after 9/11, and their receptions, is also a much-needed intervention.²⁰ Both *New York* (Kabir Khan, 2009) and *My Name Is Khan* (Karan Johar, 2010) focus on South Asian Muslim protagonists and align their experiences with bigotry "with other similarly oppressed racial/ethnic minorities—namely African-Americans[,] . . . particularly in the wake of Hurricane Katrina."²¹ The promotion of these films in the United States added a metatextual element to US Islamophobia. "In an odd case of life imitating art," writes Holtzman, "upon his arrival in the United States to promote *My Name Is Khan* in 2009, actor Shah Rukh Khan was detained for several hours by the NSA and released only after an embassy official intervened."²² When fictional representations of "Islamophobic detention" are remediated by press coverage of the literal persecution of their producers, the study of post-9/11 texts often paints a bleak picture.

Yet as the work of Maria Pramaggiore and Matt Thomas Payne elucidates, some forms of post-9/11 media afford an uncanny source of pleasure.²³ Pramaggiore reads the "cuteness" of mostly male military personnel on bases in Iraq and Afghanistan remaking the music videos of such female pop stars as Britney Spears, Kesha, Lady Gaga, and Beyoncé as rebranding US military masculinity for a global audience. These popular YouTube videos offer "'kinder and gentler' American soldiers [that] become a double-edged ideological weapon in the 'war on terror' because they can be deployed as both killers and cuddly. . . . Evoking the affects of cuteness modulates, masks, and softens the dangerous or threatening male warrior iconography, which is especially important for the US audience in a period [when] the problem of sexual assault in

19 Shakti Jaising, "Radical Documentary Perspectives on the Iraq War: The Work of James Longley and Laura Poitras," SCMS 2016.

20 Dinah Holtzman, "Sympathetic Bollywood Representations of Diasporic Muslim Indians in *New York* and *My Name Is Khan*," SCMS 2016.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid. Holtzman notes that Khan was detained again in 2012 and that the director and one actor in *New York* were detained as well.

23 Maria Pramaggiore, "'I'll Be Dancin': American Soldiers, Cute YouTube Performances, and the Deployment of Soft Power in the War on Terror," in *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, ed. Joshua Paul Dale, Joyce Goggin, Julia Leyda, Anthony P. McIntyre, and Diane Negra (New York: Routledge, forthcoming); Matthew Thomas Payne, *Playing War: Military Video Games after 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

the military has insistently come into the public domain.²⁴ The actual foreign war zone depicted as enjoyable finds its virtual counterpart in what Payne describes as the “ludic” soldier in post-9/11 first-person-shooter video games. Payne writes, “The military shooter is not only the quintessential post-9/11 video game genre, but [it is also] the apotheosis of contemporary militainment.”²⁵ “Militainment,” as Roger Stahl defines it, is “state violence translated into an object of pleasurable consumption” and can serve a “propaganda function,” in which “entertainment media have become subject to an invisible hand, a network of corporate and governmental interests that nudges cultural narratives to the profitably bellicose.”²⁶ Playing during war and playing at war find a further apotheosis in the ways in which entertainment media facilitate military training in the twenty-first century. Training films and combat simulation, of course, are nothing new; however, as Janina Schupp’s research demonstrates, the ways in which elements of the entertainment industry are inflecting virtual training modules has changed since the Department of Defense produced its first war games in the 1980s.²⁷ Both military training centers in Fort Irwin, California, and the Aisne region in France rely on movie special effects, including the screams of children and fake blood, and other technology gleaned from popular media to simulate urban combat for trainees.²⁸

Veterans of these wars, however, would hardly depict, or personify, combat as a game, and they should be central to post-9/11 media studies. As Joshua Vasquez notes, “War lingers within” them as “cinematic artifact[s] of the tangible now left over from an impossible then.”²⁹ Cast as figures in whom “the knowledge of loss” exists in bodily form, mediated veterans can serve as “memorial substitutes,” given the difficulty of memorializing war without the closure of war’s end.³⁰ Media texts about veterans have historically accomplished powerful work in terms of coaching US society in best practices to welcome back and help reassimilate veterans during peacetime, yet post-9/11 films about veterans often end with the characters returning to combat. The only post-9/11 Hollywood blockbuster to date—the one film that

24 Pramaggiore, “‘I’ll Be Dancin.’”

25 Payne, *Playing War*, 34.

26 Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 6, 15.

27 Janina Schupp, “Doppelgänger Town: Artificial Urban Conflict Zones for Military Training,” *Scoop: The Cambridge Architecture Journal* 25 (forthcoming).

28 Ibid. See also Mark Harris, “Fighting Insurgents in Baghdad, USA,” *Sunday Times*, October 5, 2008, http://www.meharris.com/ST_Iraq.pdf; Juliette Demey, “When the Army Plays War,” *Gratiene de Moustier* (Winter 2011, Spring 2011, Winter 2012), <http://gratienedemoustier.com/stories/when-the-army-plays-war/>. For further reading, see Stacy Takacs, “Real War News, Real War Games: The Hekmati Case & the Problems of Soft Power,” *American Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2013): 177–184.

29 Joshua Vasquez, “Melancholy Men, Elegiac Battlefields: Representations of the Veteran in American Film as a Cultural Context for the Disquieted Masculine,” SCMS 2016.

30 Ibid. The term “knowledge of loss” comes from Linda Williams on melodrama: “Melodrama Revised,” in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 42–89, 70. On the vexed nature of homecoming films released before war’s end, see Anna Froula, “Recasting *The Best Years of Our Lives*: Gender, Revision, and Military Women in the Veteran’s Homecoming Film,” in *Future Texts*, ed. Vicki Callahan and Virginia Kuhn (Anderson, SC: Parlor Press, 2016), 110–127.

elevated Hollywood Iraq War fare from “a non-marketable genre”—is *American Sniper*.³¹ Tony Grajeda argues that the film about famed sniper Chris Kyle has become “an American social text, in which the very future of how the Iraq war will be remembered [is] at stake.”³² Unlike Kyle’s memoir, on which it is based, the film injects scenes of him experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder, effectively “re-writing . . . [the] warrior-hero to traumatized victim suffering from PTSD.”³³ This revision redeems the memoirist, who unapologetically wishes he had “killed more” Iraqis, a redemption that has the effect of “reattaching” the film to 9/11.³⁴ “What is at stake in this project of cultural memory,” explains Grajeda, “is not only the attempt to re-write the Iraq war as indeed a war worth waging, as anything but a mistake, but also the ideological aim to restore meaning to 9/11.”³⁵ Perhaps this mythic cultural work explains why, as Daniel Grinberg documents, the film is such a staple for military personnel at the Guantánamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba.³⁶

In *Cloning Terror*, Mitchell reminds us that every history is two histories: the events that happen and the stories circulating in popular texts afterward. As post-9/11 history continues to unfold, these essays demonstrate, storytelling about pre-9/11 anxieties overlaps with post-9/11 narratives of trauma, disillusionment, and shifting theaters of combat and crisis. The essays that follow reflect on these waves and remediations and sketch the various paths we have traveled via entertainment media to assess where we are now and where we might next find ourselves on our screens. Dahlia Schweitzer’s contribution demonstrates how film and television—such as *Covert One: The Hades Factor* (Mick Jackson, 2006), *Toxic Skies* (Andrew C. Erin, 2008), and *Blacklist* (NBC, 2013–present)—have mapped tropes and anxieties about AIDS onto post-9/11 cellular networks of terrorism. They depict domestic contagions as being as dangerous as external terrorist networks. Stacy Takacs analyzes popular conceptions of political violence and the security state in the third wave of “terror TV,” focusing on *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011–present) and *American Odyssey* (NBC, 2015–present). Shadowy networks involving corporate-sponsored terrorism, corrupt government officials, and “paranoid military personnel” raise complex questions about surveillance, democracy, and terrorism. In analyzing such films as *Standard Operating Procedure* (Errol Morris, 2008) and *Zero Dark Thirty*, Fabrizio Cilento’s essay explores the proceduralist tropes that render otherwise inflammatory and divisive methods harnessed in the name of security dry, analytical, and detached. In comparison, the affective hysteria and confusion of 9/11 have been rendered in what Karen Randell terms a “9/11 aesthetic.” Within the current superhero film cycle, she writes, Joss Whedon’s *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) displaces the traumatic and repetitive depictions of the World Trade Center attack—with its choking dust clouds, debris, and falling paper; its soundscape of panicked

31 Jaising, “Radical Documentary Perspectives.”

32 Tony Grajeda, “Remembering and Mis-remembering 9/11: *American Sniper* and Historical Trauma,” SCMS 2016.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Daniel Grinberg, “Some Restrictions Apply: The Exhibition Spaces of Guantánamo Bay,” SCMS 2016.

screaming and sirens; and its shocked, injured victims—into the *mise-en-scène* of battling superheroes.

As these contributors note, fifteen years of media production after 9/11 have neither allayed fears about international terrorism nor brought viewers much closer to understanding the preconditions and prognoses for it. It is precisely that paralysis that keeps me up at night. Maybe the War on Terror offers but a postmodern symptom of the same disease that humanity's powerful perpetually inflict on its helpless. But because there is no foreseeable end to it, its many casualties—of body, mind, and soul—become infinite by definition. Perhaps, then, what post-9/11 media illustrate is that we can envision a terminus to terror's endlessness only by way of a singular apocalyptic event: as if we were only one drone strike, one surveillance protocol, one invincible virus, one End Times toxin, one wrong turn, or even just a single ocean-temperature degree away from the self-annihilation that seems predestined to play and replay throughout our post-9/11 lives and on our postmodern screens. *

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When Terrorism Met the Plague: How 9/11 Affected the Outbreak Narrative

by DAHLIA SCHWEITZER

In many ways, for Americans, the traumas of AIDS and 9/11 would define the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Once war began in Afghanistan, the unknown Arab became the deadly contagious “other” threatening to infiltrate America’s borders, kept at bay by relentless patriotism. Initial American desire for vengeance translated into the popularity of narratives featuring “heroic saviors and violent redemption,” as well as “fantasies of national and subjective coherence.”¹ These thrillers, very much fueled by Bush’s War on Terror, shifted focus to include “the covert, small-scale, ‘low-intensity’ combat” that became increasingly

1 Stacy Takacs, *Terrorism TV: Popular Entertainment in Post-9/11 America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 61, 65.

common after 9/11.² This kind of small-scale combat appears in all of the texts I discuss, where conflict is between single individuals, involving hand-to-hand fighting and computer screens rather than battlefields. This structural shift echoes a similar shift that has taken place within al-Qaeda since 2001. This shift, into a “network with diffuse structure, indirect connections, and nontraditional modes of communication,” echoes many of today’s terrorist organizations, which are also “highly decentralized and dispersed.”³ In many ways, the 9/11 attacks were a blow by cellular, networked, modular, nimble terrorists against a centralized tower, an icon, a pillar, reflecting how the new global crisis is one “between centralized hierarchical powers, and distributed, horizontal networks.”⁴

While the years immediately following 9/11 might have initially focused on portraying pro-American patriotic messages, the shift quickly began to emphasize that the voice of freedom inevitably stems from the rogue hero fighting *against* the military machine or the corporate establishment. Examples of these rogue heroes abound. In *24* (Fox, 2001–2010), it is Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) who leads the Counter Terrorist Unit as a one-man army. In *Toxic Skies* (Andrew C. Erin, 2008), it is Tess (Anne Heche) who stands up to the military and pharmaceutical establishments. In *Covert One: The Hades Factor* (CBS, 2006), it is Jon Smith (Stephen Dorff) who defies government orders and flees a secured military base. In *The Craziest* (Breck Eisner, 2010), it is David (Timothy Olyphant), Ogden Marsh’s sheriff, who discovers the initial conspiracy, shuts off the town’s water against a direct order from the mayor, escapes quarantine, and shoots military personnel—all in an attempt first to save the town and, after that fails, to keep himself and his wife alive. Torin Monahan writes that these rogue heroes “are the only ones that can act sufficiently,” and that even though they might prefer to think things through and follow the rules, the circumstances of modern risk societies do not allow for it.⁵

Just one week after 9/11, letters containing anthrax spores were mailed to news media offices and two Democratic senators. Five people died and seventeen were infected. The FBI eventually identified the culprit in 2008 as Bruce Ivins, a scientist in the US Army’s biodefense lab at Fort Detrick, in Maryland, although many still feel the investigation was inconclusive.⁶ In fact, a congressional inquiry identified major gaps in the case.⁷ The length of the investigation and inconclusive results, combined

2 Matthew B. Hill, “Tom Clancy, *24*, and the Language of Autocracy,” in *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture*, ed. Andrew Schopp and Matthew B. Hill (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), 127.

3 Boaz Ganor, “Terrorism Networks: It Takes a Network to Beat a Network,” in *The Network Challenge: Strategy, Profit, and Risk in an Interlinked World*, ed. Paul R. Kleindorfer, Yoram (Jerry) Wind, and Robert E. Gunther (Philadelphia: Wharton School, 2009), 454.

4 Alexander Galloway, *Protocol* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 201, 204.

5 Torin Monahan, “Just-in-Time Security,” in *Reading 24: TV against the Clock*, ed. Steven Peacock (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 114.

6 Yudhijit Bhattacharjee, “FBI to Request Scientific Review of Its Anthrax Investigation,” *Science*, September 16, 2008, <http://news.sciencemag.org/scientific-community/2008/09/fbi-request-scientific-review-its-anthrax-investigation>.

7 William J. Broad, “Inquiry in Anthrax Mailings Had Gaps, Report Says,” *New York Times*, December 19, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/20/science/inquiry-in-anthrax-mailings-had-gaps-report-says.html?ref=topics&_r=0.

with the death of Bruce Ivins, the victim of an apparent suicide, further compounded fears of future incidents of biowarfare. If the American government was so unable to prevent anthrax and 9/11, much less apprehend those responsible, why should it be any less unable to prevent future attacks? At the time, the fact that the anthrax used in the attacks was traced back to Fort Detrick also intensified questions of whether the greatest danger was already within our borders, possibly in the hands of our own government. A repeated plot point in many of these narratives is that a virus the American government has created is then used against the very Americans it is supposed to protect. This is exactly what happens in *The Hades Factor* and *The Crazies*, for instance.

The fact that 9/11 and the subsequent anthrax attacks were both masterminded and carried out intentionally not only exacerbated a sense of vulnerability and horror but also intensified fears of a potential bioterrorist attack. If pandemics reshape trauma by being open, messy, and timeless, then terrorism, too, disrupts traditional understandings of trauma. Terrorism, much like contagion, does not respect finite time frames or finite locations. Kevin J. Wetmore describes the color-coded terrorism threat scale unveiled by the Department of Homeland Security in March 2002. Green represented low risk; blue, general risk; yellow, elevated or significant risk; orange, high risk; and red, severe risk. Wetmore emphasizes that, significantly, “there was no color for none.”⁸ Art Spiegelman’s three-panel strip in his 9/11 graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers* captures the relentlessness of such anxiety.⁹ First we see people drowsing in front of the TV; then suddenly people with hair standing straight up; and in the final graphic, people drowsing in front of the TV with their hair still standing up. There is no reprieve, because nowhere feels immune. Intensifications in connectivity have brought this terror to our very doorsteps.

Although anthrax is not a contagious disease, the anthrax attacks did demonstrate the seemingly effortless ways in which terrorists could spread disease and the current power of ordinary social networks to harm us. Contemporary life makes us all interconnected, leaving us especially vulnerable to viral attack. Who thinks twice before opening mail addressed to them? Before drinking water? Walking down a city street? All of these actions, based on this crop of outbreak narratives, as well as some recent headlines, can now kill us. We do not even need to board a plane. The virus comes to us.

Both natural viral outbreaks and terrorist-orchestrated outbreaks call attention to the significance and power of networks in contemporary life. Whereas bombs and gunfire are location specific, a viral outbreak can (and often does) travel the world via networks (both visible and invisible) and becomes nearly impossible to contain. A viral outbreak is literally contagious information spreading throughout globalized vectors of disease. In particular, it is the standardization of networks in the twenty-first century that facilitates the effective spread of contagion and that allows terrorists to work as effectively as they do. It is no longer simply that globalization spreads disease, but that globalization exacerbates scenarios where terrorists can create and spread disease.

8 Kevin J. Wetmore Jr., *Post 9/11 Horror* (London: Continuum Books, 2012), 173.

9 Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

For example, *The Blacklist* episode “The Front” aired on October 20, 2014, on NBC. With Ebola getting ample news coverage at the time, this episode was perfectly synchronized with real-life events. In the episode, Maddox Beck (Michael Laurence) is an eco-terrorist who resurrects a dormant pneumonic plague virus and weaponizes it so that it operates at an accelerated rate. His goal is a worldwide epidemic that will kill off the entire human race, thereby supposedly saving the planet. “To preserve life on earth, we need to become extinct,” Beck tells his cultlike followers, who infect themselves with the virus so that they can then spread it around the world. Sharon (Freya Adams) is his first follower to infect herself before heading to Washington, DC, to spread the virus intentionally. An average-looking young woman with dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, dressed inconspicuously in torn jeans and a striped sweater clutched around her, Sharon walks the streets, the pustules around her nose and mouth ignored by the passersby, spreading the virus merely by breathing. The virus is airborne and therefore requires no physical contact to spread. By the time she is identified as Patient Zero, roughly 2,300 people have been quarantined and given less than a day to live. Similarly, in *Global Effect* (Terry Cunningham, 2002), Sasha (Rolanda Marais), the terrorist ringleader’s girlfriend, infects herself with the virus so that she can walk the streets of Cape Town, South Africa, infecting as many people as possible. The same basic premise also appears in *The Hades Factor*, where Hassan (Conrad Dunn), the terrorist leader, infects his men with the virus so that they can spread it within the United States via aerosol devices. In this case, contagion literally replaces explosives.

The national security apparatus is also portrayed as both ineffectual and corrupt in the TV miniseries *Covert One: The Hades Factor*. As in the book of the same name by Robert Ludlum and Gayle Lynds (originally published in 2000), an unknown Ebola-like virus begins to spread rapidly across the United States. Disease expert and former government agent Jon Smith must save the world from terrorists, untrustworthy double agents, and a deadly virus engineered to destroy. The film features several significant changes to the original story, most obviously the addition of al-Qaeda as the terrorist organization behind the outbreak. The miniseries opens at Camp Pendleton in California, where an army sergeant collapses, blood dripping from his mouth and nose. Meanwhile, in Seattle a waitress collapses midshift, blood dripping out of her mouth and nose. Finally, the scene shifts to Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, where a Muslim prisoner is found passed out, blood dripping from his mouth and nose. A terrible chain of reactions has begun.

This is the Hades virus, an airborne Ebola variant with a kill rate higher than 90 percent. Later tests also confirm that the virus is weapons grade and had been developed by the American government as a bioweapon. The dead Muslim prisoner from Guantánamo is linked to a known terrorist by the name of Hassan, and he is suspected to have been an intentionally infected “weapon,” a suicide bomber with a virus in his detonation device. Other terrorists already in the United States plant aerosol dispersal devices full of infected blood in Dulles Airport and at the Department of Health. Panic and contagion ensue. The movie ends with the government’s involvement kept secret. There is no easy and comforting resolution. Elwood Reid, writer of the screenplay, credits the involvement of the military-industrial complex in various illicit activities as inspiration for the film. Reid elaborates: “There are countless

examples, and what they all have in common is the military ‘defense of country’ excuse and the profit of corporations anxious to put potentially deadly things into the market place but doing so under the guise and guidance of military defense. It’s a symbiotic relationship that the American public is, by and large, indifferent to. So that was the idea. The hypocrisy of the US military complex/business.”¹⁰

The covert and untrustworthy nature of the American government was already evident ten years earlier, with the *X-Files* episode “F. Emasculata,” which tackled notions of bioterrorism, viral outbreak, pharmaceutical conspiracy, and government cover-ups long before 9/11.¹¹ This variation on the terrorist narrative features corporations, and specifically pharmaceutical corporations, as villains who spread viruses intentionally for their own greedy motives. The episode follows a typical outbreak narrative arc in which we discover a deadly and unknown virus, watch it be introduced into the general public, and then follow our heroes as they try to contain it. Of significance is the way the virus is spread (via mail, foreshadowing the later anthrax attacks) and the culpability of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), working hand in glove with the corrupt pharmaceutical company to bypass Food and Drug Administration regulations by testing new drugs on unknowing prison inmates. Mulder (David Duchovny) demands that the government reveal to the public what is happening, but government agents refuse, arguing that this kind of knowledge would only cause panic. And so the episode ends, leaving us with the same feelings of unease, lack of resolution, and government conspiracy as *The Hades Factor*. As Monahan writes about 24, “Just when the characters and viewers long for—and expect—resolution and safety[,] the best that can be hoped for is temporary management, containment, or postponement of the indiscriminate annihilation of civilian populations.”¹² We can already see, even before 9/11, that distrust of the government was circulating alongside doubts, arguably a result of the AIDS epidemic, that the CDC could protect the American people.

The hypocrisy and untrustworthy nature of the US government also plays a central role in *Toxic Skies*. Tess is a World Health Organization doctor who discovers that the real cause of an epidemic is reduced immunity caused by pharmaceutical companies. In this case, contaminated chemtrails spread by planes cause diminished immune resistance, leading to an increased dependency on the very same drugs the companies are producing. Hospitals fill up with victims of an unknown viral strain that appears to be spread through touch and is referred to as “the plague.” The similarities to HIV are numerous: the virus creates red spots that resemble Kaposi’s sarcoma, actual death comes as a result of a compromised immune system, the infected first manifest acute flulike symptoms, the course of the disease can be documented with a rapidly decreasing antibody count, and it will not respond to any existing medications. As the virus spreads to other cities, it soon becomes clear that the military is affiliated with the pharmaceutical cover-up. People keep dying until Tess exposes the scheme.

10 Elwood Reid, e-mail message to author, November 3, 2015.

11 “F. Emasculata,” *X-Files*, season 2, episode 22, Fox, aired April 28, 1995.

12 Monahan, “Just-in-Time Security,” 111.

These various narratives all reflect the different ways that America, both pre- and post-9/11, felt itself to be under threat of attack, while they also depict how the forms of that attack had changed. While 9/11 may have brought fears of terrorism to the fore, temporarily alleviating our distrust in our own government with an onslaught of patriotic fervor, those feelings were soon replaced by a sense that the very establishments constructed to protect us were actually only looking out for their own interests. Threats—both of viral outbreak and terrorist attack—can no longer be naively projected upon distant countries. Viruses (much like terrorism) now lurk next door; internal threats are just as realistic as external ones, and our own government is as likely to kill us as the unknown Arab. The opening moments of the first episode of the television show *Quantico* (ABC, 2015–present) echo these sentiments. Miranda Shaw (Aunjanue Ellis), the assistant director of the FBI Training Division, tells the new students: “The state of this country is the most precarious it’s ever been. Not only are there more threats than ever before, but the majority of those threats don’t come from known organizations or extremist groups but our own backyard—a neighbor you grew up next to, a one-night stand you had, perhaps even a family member.”

Without traditional signifiers, like meaningful geographic boundaries or race, gender, language, or cultural differences, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine who deserves suspicion. Instead, terrorism is more of a “contagion that circulates throughout society and may, theoretically, adhere to anybody (though certain bodies—brown, Arab, Muslim—remain more susceptible).”¹³ This fear that the threat may come from the inside—not only that the evil is within our borders but also that we cannot even identify it—is what informs our contemporary narratives of terror. *

13 Takacs, *Terrorism TV*, 75.

The Changing Shape of Our Fears

by STACY TAKACS

Fifteen years after the attacks of September 11, 2001, has anything changed in the ways we imagine terrorism and security on US television? If so, what is significant about these changes? Tackling these questions is the central aim of this essay, but the conclusion is fairly predictable: although the shape of our fears may have changed over time, the underlying politics associated with those visions has not. The media industries continue to prefer “defeatist narratives and spectacles of exception,” especially regarding issues of terrorism, security, and surveillance.¹ Such narratives, as Steve Anderson argues, are more likely to engender political quiescence than promote political agency and reform. Still, there have been some noteworthy modifications since 9/11, and it is worth tracking these changes, if only to chart the full range of the ideological problematic that now shapes popular conceptions of the security state.

I focus specifically on what Yvonne Tasker calls “terror TV,” shows about political violence and the attempts to counter that violence by state security agencies.² All such programs emphasize questions of fear—what there is to be afraid of, who should be afraid, and what can be done about this fear—but the answers they give have changed since 9/11. As Tasker describes, the first wave of such stories, including early *24* (Fox, 2001–2014), *The Agency* (CBS, 2001–2003), and *Threat Matrix* (ABC, 2003–2004), offered melodramatic narratives of US victimization, valor, and vengeance designed to reassure a nervous public that security could be guaranteed through strength. The extremity of the terrorist violence ensured that heroes like Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) of *24* could use any means necessary to defend the homeland and would never have to say they were sorry (which Bauer famously refused to do before a congressional committee investigating torture in season 7). After the invasion of Iraq turned disastrous, such celebratory narratives were replaced by a new wave of programs more suspicious of the government than of foreign agents and agencies. In later seasons of *24*, *Sleeper Cell* (Showtime, 2005–2006), and the many sci-fi programs that addressed issues of political violence during this period (especially *Invasion* [ABC, 2005–2006],

1 Steve Anderson, “Screening Surveillance,” *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies* 2, no. 1 (2015), <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/intransition/2015/03/11/screening-surveillance>.

2 Yvonne Tasker, “Television Crime Drama and Homeland Security: From *Law & Order* to ‘Terror TV,’” *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 4 (2012): 46.

Jericho [CBS, 2006–2008], and *Battlestar Galactica* [*BSG*, Sci-Fi/SyFy, 2004–2009]), the government either is behind the terrorist attacks or is responsible for overreacting to the threat in a way that causes more harm than good. Straight action heroes, like Bauer, become even more roguish and estranged from the government, to remove the taint of guilt by association, and different types of heroes emerge—heroes who use reason and compassion, rather than force, to counter terror (Russell Varone [Eddie Cibrian] and Sheriff Underlay [William Fichtner] on *Invasion*, Jake Green [Skeet Ulrich] on *Jericho*, and Laura Roslin [Mary McDonnell] on *BSG*). Most of these shows also call into question the utility (if not the morality) of counterterrorism techniques like racial profiling and torture. Thus, second-wave terror TV is marked by a desire to question, and complicate, post-9/11 security policies.³

The third wave might be dated from the premiere of *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–present). With its exaggerated fixation on issues of surveillance and drone warfare, the program depicts the devolution of the War on Terror into a series of “overseas contingency operations” run less by politicians and military strategists than by intelligence agencies, data analysts, and computer technicians.⁴ Surveillance systems are more than mere iconography in this wave of programs: they have become objects of thematic obsession and even narrative actants. Series like *Rubicon* (AMC, 2010), *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011–2016), *Intelligence* (CBS, 2014), *24: Live Another Day* (Fox, 2015), and *American Odyssey* (NBC, 2015) all feature electronic and digital surveillance methods in their plots and offer data systems, analysts, and hackers as objects of identification or, more often, fear.

Person of Interest (*POI*) and *American Odyssey* (*AO*), in particular, seem built for a post-Edward Snowden, post-PRISM America, in which the public is aware of how extensively its digital interactions are being monitored but feels powerless to do anything about it.⁵ *POI* is a hybrid of science-fiction, crime procedural, and political thriller, with a focus on the interrogation of cybersecurity systems. Its plot is nicely set up by the first season’s opening voice-over, spoken by protagonist Harold Finch (Michael Emerson):

You are being watched. The government has a secret system: a machine that spies on you every hour of every day. I know, because I built it. I designed the Machine to detect acts of terror, but it sees everything. Violent crimes involving ordinary people; people like you. Crimes the government considered “irrelevant.” They wouldn’t act, so I decided I would. But I needed a partner, someone with the skills to intervene. Hunted by the authorities, we work in secret. You’ll never find us, but victim or perpetrator, if your number’s up . . . we’ll find you.

3 For more on both waves, see Stacy Takacs, *Terrorism TV: Popular Entertainment in Post-9/11 America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012).

4 For more on *Homeland*, see Diane Negra and Jorie Lagerwey, eds., “In Focus: *Homeland*,” *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 4 (2015): 126–158.

5 PRISM refers to the illicit data collection program operated by the National Security Agency and exposed by Snowden in 2013. See Barton Gellman and Ashkan Soltani, “NSA Infiltrates Links to Yahoo, Google Data Centers Worldwide, Snowden Documents Say,” *Washington Post*, October 30, 2013.

In some ways *POI* is a conventional representation of surveillance. Ubiquitous screens and satellite shots depict the Machine as a newfangled panopticon, Big Brother updated for the postindustrial age.⁶ In other ways, however, the show defies the conventions of surveillance texts by fetishizing data analysis rather than visual observation. Finch and his agents spend as much time following their subjects' digital silhouettes as they spend following the subjects themselves, and they are less interested in the content of the transmissions they intercept than the metadata attached. They want to know where, when, and how the victim came into contact with the villain so they might predict, and disrupt, the next meeting. At the time of writing, *POI* was entering its fifth and final season. The program featured two sentient AIs battling it out for control of the digital networks that controlled human society. Vigilance, an antisurveillance hacker collective modeled on Anonymous, had been exposed as a puppet of Samaritan, the "evil" AI, and resistance had become increasingly futile. As the series aged, the do-gooding procedural elements gave way to greater complexity and seriality, and the show began to question its own initially reassuring premises. It now asked, is a total surveillance society about protecting innocents or disciplining them?

American Odyssey tackled the same question but in a more conventionally reassuring way. We follow US Army Sergeant Odelle Ballard (Anna Friel), who, while on a Special Operations mission in North Africa, uncovers evidence that a US corporation called Societal, or SOC, is secretly funding terrorist organizations. SOC calls in a Blackwater-type security agency (OSELA) to confiscate the evidence and eliminate the witnesses. Ballard survives the attack on her unit, and her attempts to return home and expose the truth constitute the "odyssey" of the title. Two parallel stories find an Occupy Wall Street agitator (Harrison Walters [Jake Robinson]) and a corporate lawyer (Peter Decker [Peter Facinelli]) each discovering evidence of the same corporate malfeasance and independently pursuing the leads until, together, the three expose the corporation. Vulture TV critic Matt Zoller Seitz aptly describes the series as a mash-up of old-fashioned melodrama and high-concept geopolitical thriller, the *Perils of Pauline* (Louis Gasnier, 1914) meets *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005). He also notes the hodgepodge of political references in the series:

If you became obsessed with a major American political topic during the last eight years, it's probably in here: the drone strikes, state-sanctioned torture, black-ops treachery, and Blackwater arrogance of the War on Terror; the financial collapse, bailout, and one-percenter immunity of 2008; the mangled idealism and cracked skulls of Zuccotti Park; every frightening image of abusively sexist Arabic men that ever appeared on Fox News Channel, *24*, or *Homeland*.⁷

What makes *AO* different from *24*, however, is the increased role of "dataveillance" in the narrative. As in *POI*, data mining and hacking supplant visual surveillance as the

6 On surveillance cinema, see Anderson, "Screening Surveillance"; Catherine Zimmer, *Surveillance Cinema* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

7 Matt Zoller Seitz, "American Odyssey Is Too Serious for Its Own Good (or Not Serious Enough)," *Vulture.com*, April 2, 2015, <http://www.vulture.com/2015/04/american-odyssey-review.html#>.

weapons of choice, and they are wielded by people on all sides of the struggle. It is not difficult to read these new conspiracy narratives as updated attempts to cognitively map the dematerialized structures of global power.⁸

The move to identify surveillance systems and big data as fields of action clearly references developments in national security practice under the Obama administration. The narrative centrality of drone warfare, for example, acknowledges the administration's drone-assisted assassination campaigns in the Middle East and North Africa. Likewise, as TV critic James Poniewozik notes, "Prime time discovered Big Data before much of the media and public did, maybe because it's about a classic narrative force: the power and danger of secrets."⁹ Open secrets being the life blood of terror TV, these shows have set many of the terms by which we understand this new, highly indiscriminate form of warfare.

In *AO* and *POI*, the locus of anxiety has shifted from foreign terrorists and state operatives to free-floating actors who are difficult to locate or describe, let alone target. Foreign terrorists now work with power-hungry US politicians, corrupt government agencies, paranoid military personnel, greedy mercenaries, and corporate movers and shakers to target the "little guy," who must hack "the system" in order to save him- or herself. It is difficult not to see this nebulous "system" as an emblem of the common person's confused perception of neoliberal governance, which, by definition, promotes de-differentiation of all sorts (the privatization of public services, the publicization of private life, the deregulation of capital, and the reregulation of everyday life). Adam Armus and Nora Kay Foster, the cocreators and show runners of *American Odyssey*, are symptomatic in this respect. They claim the series was inspired not by the "war on terror" but by the *Citizens United* ruling, which empowered corporations to donate ever-larger sums to political campaigns, effectively buying off the government. As Armus explains, "We're trying to tap into the zeitgeist that's out there. Ever since *Citizens United* and corporations became people, a lot of people felt they didn't have a say anymore. This is about three people who could've been from anywhere coming together and fighting back."¹⁰ While these programs may do a poor job of explaining the current imbrication of capitalism and democracy, big corporations and big government, they at least draw attention to a phenomenon that is real and pressing: the US government *does* rely increasingly on commercial enterprises to conduct its wars and police its people.

Today, the state lacks the resources and freedom of movement to address many of the most challenging security problems, so it outsources those responsibilities to private military and security corporations.¹¹ Likewise, the state is not entirely free

8 Fredric Jameson has argued that 1970s conspiracy thrillers with similar aesthetics are about mapping the totality of the global system. See Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

9 James Poniewozik, "PRISM of Interest," *Time*, June 24, 2013, <http://entertainment.time.com/2013/06/07/prism-of-interest-how-tv-drama-anticipated-the-data-mining-news/>.

10 Marlow Stern, "'American Odyssey' Creators: Our Show Is Anti-Corporate and Anti-Citizens United," *Daily Beast*, April 5, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/04/05/american-odyssey-creators-our-show-is-anti-corporate-and-anti-citizens-united.html>.

11 On this, see P. W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

to create the surveillance systems upon which national security (allegedly) depends. Private corporations, by contrast, have both the money and the social prestige to create a global-girdling cyber-surveillance system and brand it a tool of liberation. Their public relations personnel have successfully reframed invasions of privacy as consumer interactivity and empowerment. Both politicians and intelligence agencies use, and abuse, these corporate data systems in the name of security, and the corporate owners present only the mildest forms of resistance. The political, economic, and security realms *have* become interoperable features of a decentralized system of neoliberal governance, and late-stage terror TV captures something of what this *feels* like (though little of how it actually works).

Ultimately, however, what terror TV disavows or misunderstands about surveillance may be more telling than what it gets right. For one thing, terror TV is still narcissistic and xenophobic. The United States and its citizens remain the privileged targets and actors, no matter how far afield the narratives travel. Hence the “American” in *American Odyssey*. The original title for the project was *Odyssey*, reflecting the inspirational source text by Homer, but NBC apparently changed it after the box-office success of the myopic war pic *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014).¹² The new title more accurately reflects the content of the series, which subjects its suffering American heroine to all sorts of heinous punishments meted out by evil foreigners. Zoller Seitz again nails this in his review: “[The show takes] the viewer on a horror-movie tour of Mali that might as well be the Republic of Islamophobia. . . . [T]here’s a cheeseball exploitation-movie quality to the way that [Odelle] endures every variation of a woman’s nightmare voyage through Arabia,” complete with labyrinthine streets, scorching heat, and our heroine pegged to the sand.¹³ And while Western agents are more frequently identified as sources of menace in contemporary series, their motives are still coded as evil by association with foreign territories or peoples. Think Nicholas Brody (Damian Lewis) on *Homeland*, whose conversion to Islam signifies his guilt long before his intentions are revealed, or Luc Girard (Grégory Fitoussi), a French national of suspicious loyalties on *AO*, who appears to have lived in North Africa so long that he has “gone native.” What is striking about this pattern is that it persists even in the face of evidence that homegrown terrorism is a bigger threat to citizens of the West than stranger danger. Since September 11, 2001, the *New York Times* reports, “nearly twice as many people [in the United States] have been killed by white supremacists, antigovernment fanatics, and other non-Muslim extremists than by radical Muslims.”¹⁴

In addition to an ethnocentric image of the world system, these new terror TV series also produce a warped perception of state and corporate surveillance. First, they fail to acknowledge that those most likely to be subject to monitoring by the state are still poor people and people of color, who live their lives in the shadow of a militarized

12 Rick Kissel, “NBC Drama ‘Odyssey’ Changes Title to ‘American Odyssey,’” *Variety.com*, March 12, 2015, <http://variety.com/2015/tv/news/nbc-odyssey-title-change-american-odyssey-1201451796/>.

13 Zoller Seitz, “American Odyssey Is Too Serious.”

14 Scott Shane, “Homegrown Extremists Tied to Deadlier Toll than Jihadists in US since 9/11,” *New York Times*, June 24, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/25/us/tally-of-attacks-in-us-challenges-perceptions-of-top-terror-threat.html?_r=0.

police force. The programs focus more on high-tech digital surveillance—especially data mining—than the routine visual and aural surveillance through which urban spaces are increasingly policed. They also tend to emphasize the impact surveillance has on well-heeled white subjects and, generally, frame the problem in terms of the invasion of individual privacy. As Christian Parenti argues, this narrowly individualistic focus misses what is really at stake in the emergence of a surveillance society.¹⁵ The point is not that our individual quality of life might be beset by intrusive surveillance (that surveillance might make us uncomfortable or expose our private secrets); it is that the power to surveil is unevenly distributed. Groups who already possess inordinate social power will only acquire more as they learn to mine the data and use it against the disempowered. “The government,” Parenti explains, “[gains] massive power over citizens who might dissent, employers [gain] massive power over workers. . . . [A]ll powerful groups have greater technical advantage in pursuing their interests.”¹⁶ To say that no one is immune to surveillance is not the same as saying everyone is equally subject to it, and contemporary terror TV seems oblivious to these issues of structural disparity.

One aspect of surveillance the shows get right, however, is the degree of cooperation elicited from individuals in these processes of monitoring. Both *American Odyssey* and *Person of Interest* have used interactive paratexts to create a *mise en abyme* of the current surveillance society, albeit to differing effect. The official website for *AO* offers little room for genuine interactivity. A manipulable map is the only dynamic aspect of the site, and it acts as little more than a portal for the delivery of preconstructed “truths,” specifically, mock-ups of the information dossiers already glimpsed on the show. While some of the material is about OSELA, SOC, and other power agents—implying that surveillance might empower the public to watch the watchmen—most of it is about the “little people” affected by the games of those in power. The dossiers provide little more than salacious bits of color to flesh out the story line. For example, watchers of the show learn that Peter Decker once had an affair with would-be Greek prime minister Sofia Tsaldari (Orla Brady), but visitors to the website get to read their “sexts” (Figure 1). As an embedded representation of the surveillance society, the site encourages people to identify not with those who struggle to right the imbalance of power, but with the data analysts who abet state and corporate corruption.

Person of Interest produces a much more disquieting encounter with the contemporary surveillance machine, both in its narrative, which rejects the notion that exposing the system will lead to its reform, and in its interactive advertising campaigns. Rather than asking viewers to identify with the monitors, these campaigns bring viewers face-to-face with their own subjection to surveillance. “To highlight the theme of citizen surveillance,” the *Wall Street Journal* explains, “CBS is tapping into the trend of interactive billboards, installing one each in New York City and Los Angeles. The window display looks like a mirror, and when passersby stop and turn toward it, sensors zero in

15 Christopher Sprinkle, “Surveillance in America: An Interview with Christian Parenti,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 48, no. 10 (2005): 1375–1382.

16 *Ibid.*, 1376.



Figure 1. Visitors to the *American Odyssey* website become data analysts peering into the secrets of the characters, in this case, the “sexts” exchanged between Peter Decker and Sofia Tsaldari, (NBC, 2015).

on their faces with the notification, ‘Person of Interest Identified,’ followed by ‘Taking Photo.’”¹⁷ The photo is integrated into a signature *POI* graphical interface (Figure 2), and users receive a phone number or text message, which allows them to acquire the photo and post it to their social media accounts. As one user explained, “It connects to my Facebook account, and it accesses my Facebook information, gathers it all up, and makes my own personal, classified persons of interest file.” Although she initially described this operation as “cool,” upon reflection, she amended that to “scary cool” because “it knows so much about me.” Another user proclaimed, “I was freaked out . . . it made me feel paranoid.”¹⁸ Apparently, these people had never considered how much information they delegate to apps like Facebook; *POI* provided them with an image of their own digital silhouettes, thereby forcing them to recognize themselves as subjects of, rather than over, media and surveillance systems.



Figure 2. The interactive billboard used by CBS to hype *Person of Interest*. Viewers confront the fact that they are subject to an expansive surveillance system (Inwindow Outdoor, 2011).

17 Barbara Chai, “Media: ‘Person of Interest’ Takes to Streets to Give People a Taste of the Show,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 12, 2011, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/888519741?accountid=3320>.

18 You can witness this process in the YouTube video “*Person of Interest* interactive digital signage by Inwindow Outdoor,” 2:29, posted by Inwindow Outdoor, February 24, 2012, at <https://youtu.be/Fa6K0v-Ywe0>. User quotations are from the video.

Thus, *POI* seems to grasp the new shape of our fears better than other terror TV texts. Yet even here, fear remains the prime driver of human engagement, and American fears continue to be narrowly defined. The social emphasis on fear results in increased repression, especially for vulnerable populations like the poor, immigrants, refugees, and peoples who “look like” Arabs or identify as Muslims. Meanwhile, the concern for US security comes at the expense of the privacy and security of others in the world. The target of American fears has clearly shifted since 9/11, but the difference this makes seems slight. As cognitive mappings—images of our relations to the current world system—such caricatures fuel the continued militarization of both domestic and foreign policies. Fifteen years after 9/11, perhaps it’s time we learned to tell new sorts of stories. *

The Aesthetics of the Procedural in Post-9/11 Cinema

by FABRIZIO CILENTO

The convergence of the 9/11 attacks with the rapid technological changes of the new millennium created a withering of epistemological certainties about the relationship between history and moving images, and the wide diffusion of digital technology challenged the indexicality of the latter. The abundance of audiovisual material that was immediately available and accessible caused an artistic impasse around the fictional representation of the event and its aftermath. Almost two billion people worldwide watched the intensive initial television media coverage, but this peak of visibility was followed by an ocular regime of denial, erasure, and incredulity or invisibility, epitomized by Richard Drew’s photograph *The Falling Man* and by the *New Yorker*’s “black cover” on the September 24, 2001, issue.¹ In addition, the Iraq War generated a series of controversies over privacy and surveillance, rendition, civil rights, and prisoner abuses. These events influenced Hollywood cinema, whose disaster and action productions typical of the 1990s suddenly appeared obsolete, forcing it to adopt new aesthetic and narrative strategies. As a consequence, post-9/11 cinema marks a distinctive

1 See Thomas Stubblefield, *9/11 and the Visual Culture of Disaster* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

period in US film history and is based on an imaginary of hidden global networks, potential threats, and exposure to random acts of violence.²

A noticeable tendency in the representation of the War on Terror is the revision of the ultraprocedural subgenre as it appears in films, such as *Rendition* (Gavin Hood, 2007), *In the Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggis, 2007), *Standard Operating Procedure* (Errol Morris, 2008), *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008), *Fair Game* (Doug Liman, 2010), *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2013), and *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014), and in TV series such as *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–2015), among others. In blending documentary (or documentary-like) and fictional images, these works refrain from a simplistic reconstruction of events and are mainly concerned with producing what does not immediately appear on the surface. Consequently, they raise questions about the nature of the “truth” promoted by institutions, newspapers, archives, dossiers, television, and new media reports. By highlighting unanswered questions, they often leave us with a lack of clarity. In fact, while their plots convey information, the questioning of their procedural documentation becomes the actual narrative.

As Steven Shaviro emphasized in a blog post on *Zero Dark Thirty*, the capitalist system often elevates the process itself to a dominant value independent of any particular goal and of any positive political result. This has become the signature mode of the increasingly entropic dissolution of our mode of living. “Proceduralism is concerned that actions must be conducted ‘fairly’ but is not with the problem of whether the outcome of the action is actually fair. . . . [T]wenty-first century liberalism is obsessed with the ‘regulative’ aspect in and of itself, to the point of forgetting the ‘ideal,’ which is what really matters. . . . Everything from the ‘reforms’ that are currently decimating the US educational system, to the way that American foreign and military policy is conducted, adheres to a strictly procedural logic.”³

Read in this light, despite its apparent optimistic patina and its representation of the triumph of the individual against a Kafkaesque system, *Zero Dark Thirty* poses some rhetorical questions in reconstructing the pursuit of Osama bin Laden. Notwithstanding the focus on the success of hardworking CIA analyst Maya (Jessica Chastain), what emerges in Bigelow’s film is a sense of diminished human agency, the decline of individual self-control, and the increasing autonomy of social structures, especially the ways in which government and bureaucracies control technologies and mass media while managing regularity and order. This results in Maya’s existential tribulation, and her final tears in one of the most intense, but also enigmatic, endings of post-9/11 cinema. Is she experiencing relief or regret over what she has done in the line of duty? Or is she rather suffering from “proceduralism exhaustion”? Maya’s portrayal is contained within her job, and she succeeds primarily because she is able to navigate the liveness and instantaneousness of the new multimedia environment in which she is immersed, surrounded as she is by statistics, metadata, visualizations of remote weaponry, satellite photography, and an all-pervasive surveillance. This

2 See Steven Prince, *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Guy Westwell, *Parallel Lines: Post-9/11 American Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

3 Steven Shaviro, “A Brief Remark on *Zero Dark Thirty*,” *The Pinocchio Theory* (blog), January 18, 2013, <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog>.

becomes a sort of Platonic cave in which the protagonist also confronts her own obsession. As often happens in proceduralist films, a set of anonymous metadata brings the network narrative forward, creating simultaneous forking paths that in the end overlap with each other.⁴ Throughout the film, we see undisclosed locations and CIA black sites at the ISI detention center and the tribal northern territories in Pakistan, the Marriott hotel at Islamabad, Khobar (Saudi Arabia), London, the Bagram Air Base, and the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. Authoritative intertitles identify strategic sites, giving audiences an illusion of dominance, control, and empowerment. In addition, Bigelow integrates an abundance of images of television, messages, e-mails, geopolitical maps, and digital audio and video files that become an integral part of the narrative and at times take up the whole screen.

The same could be said of the environment inhabited by other real-life (or inspired-by-real-life) characters depicted in procedural films, such as Valerie Plame (Naomi Watts), an intelligence officer who is forced to resign after her husband writes a controversial editorial in the *New York Times* refuting stories about the sale of enriched uranium to Iraq (*Fair Game*, based on the true stories); Douglas Freeman (Jake Gyllenhaal), a CIA analyst who witnesses the enhanced interrogation of the real-life Egyptian American engineer Khalid El-Masri and engages in the struggle to secure the prisoner's release from a secret facility (*Rendition*); police detective Emily Sanders (Charlize Theron), who helps retired army sergeant Hank Deerfield (Tommy Lee Jones) search for his son, a soldier who went missing soon after returning from Iraq (*In the Valley of Elah*, based on actual events); Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes), a member of the Counterterrorism Center with bipolar disorder who becomes obsessed with American prisoner of war Nicholas Brody (Damian Lewis), who has been turned by al-Qaeda (*Homeland*); Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner), a battle-tested veteran sustained by the adrenaline rush derived from disarming one bomb after another, which becomes another form of purely routinized professionalism (*The Hurt Locker*); and finally, US Navy SEAL and Iraq War sharpshooter Chris Kyle (Bradley Cooper), assigned to hunt the al-Qaeda leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (*American Sniper*).

These personalities are often characterized by their nearsighted vision, which relates exclusively to their misadventures and traumas. The protagonists, who often remain completely silent or struggle to explain themselves, are brought to the edge of madness, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or addiction to war. Post-9/11 films are in essence documents of desperation, failure, and loss, but their open narratives possess a unique capacity to undermine the ideology in which they were conceived, by completely immersing us in its extreme consequences. What is remarkable is how the dry, analytical, and detached aesthetic that permeates the directorial style clashes with the affective charges of the inflammatory issues of the so-called War on Terror.

Because they share a common approach to these events, these films have often been labeled "political," and some of the directors have publicly expressed their polarizing and divisive visions in this regard, but I am suggesting instead that the body of post-9/11 movies compose a mosaic that transcends the current, disheartening

4 See Alissa Quart, "Networked: Don Roos and *Happy Endings*," *Film Comment* 41, no. 4 (2005): 48–51; David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 189–245.

debate of right-wing versus left-wing to enter in a more complex, even if ambiguous, terrain. They walk the razor's edge between the two poles of human emotion and soulless proceduralism without completely falling for either of them. This dialectic problematizes the rhetoric according to which a form of heroism would reside in the capacity to spend hours, weeks, and years on the judicious exercise of care—with no one there to admire a life often protected by anonymity as a result of security issues. Portraying routine, repetition, and monotony without falling into the same dynamic is not an easy task or a minor achievement.

The underlying key to survival in a society that has reduced foreign politics and war itself to a list of people to kidnap, torture, and eventually eliminate (visualized through Carrie Mathison's famous wall in *Homeland*) is the ability to deal with boredom and tedious practices, to function effectively and without medication in an environment saturated with secrets that preclude everything vital and human. The protagonists breathe, so to speak, without air, arrive at the breaking point in which a forced smile turns into a grin, and then into a desperate interior cry for help, until all these emotions become virtually indistinguishable.⁵ Their success hinges on their ability to find links between seemingly unrelated sources, discovering the minor detail in a pixelated enlargement, tracking a suspect through hours of surveillance video, begging their superiors to appreciate their discoveries in situation rooms, and above all the coordination of Sisyphian military and/or intelligence maneuvers.

For this reason, the films heavily rely on the performances of stars whose formation is linked to method acting: Naomi Watts in *Fair Game*, Jake Gyllenhaal in *Rendition*, Charlize Theron in *In the Valley of Elah*, Claire Danes in *Homeland*, Jeremy Renner in *The Hurt Locker*, and Bradley Cooper in *American Sniper*. The emotional spectrum and imaginative sympathy required to sustain the challenging roles of post-9/11 traumatized characters includes disillusionment and social estrangement, madness and irascibility, and above all a capacity of showing without saying. We know almost nothing about their private lives, and we are left wondering what drives their unrelenting desire to push themselves into the dark corners of proceduralism and to fight the most unpleasant of fights. Cinematically speaking, they exist more as machines than as humans, and they are resoundingly mute about their past traumas. Their analytic and strategic mistakes can't be explained, and even if they could, civilians in the drama would not understand them, so they are only occasionally referred to via the use of oblique and fragmentary flashbacks or flashbacks within a flashback. It is clear that their motives are quite irrational and based on personal obsessions, and for this reason they are functional in the service of a war that has itself become inexplicable. This makes the protagonists both fascinating (they are intolerant victims of the proceduralist machinery) and repulsive (they perpetrate acts of violence and abuses that are often gratuitous and above the law, and for which they are rarely punished). They experience a "procedural transcendence" that allows them to go beyond their

5 See the "I was right" climactic sequence at the end of *Homeland*'s second season, episode 3, when the culpability of Nicholas Brody is finally proved, thanks to an audiovisual file. This presents dynamics that are similar to what I have discussed in relation to *Zero Dark Thirty*. For an extensive analysis of the TV series, see Diane Negra and Jorie Lagerwey, eds., "In Focus: *Homeland*," *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 4 (2015): 126–160.

own egos in the name of an allegedly superior patriotic goal; however, in the end, it is this exact catalyst that annihilates them.

Consequently, proceduralist films are not about power but about what Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose last film, *Salò, or the 120 days of Sodom* (1975) involved a ritualistic and systematic use of torture operated by institutional figures such as the Duke, the Bishop, the Magistrate, and the President, called the anarchy of power: “Nothing is more anarchic than power. Power does what it wants, and what it wants is arbitrary or dictated by its reasons which escape common logic.”⁶ Thus, strict adherence to proceduralism becomes a way to a questionable display of authority perpetrated on other human beings by subjects who are borderline to begin with, and whose lives would be otherwise miserable and insignificant. Pasolini’s logic is supported by the fact that proceduralist films raise awareness of the difficulty in creating an effective geopolitical map because power cannot be located or is so volatile that we can never point a finger directly at it. Thus, faced with the impossibility of narrating the whole story, directors adopt an administrative approach and confront the War on Terror’s otherwise labyrinthine micronarratives.

The other oscillation that I register here is between the documentary and fiction, which often overlap with each other (by way of the insertion of real newsreel or war footage, or clips featuring the real-life characters in the films already mentioned). *Standard Operating Procedure* by Morris is his most self-reflexive documentary, and it incessantly interrogates the degree of reality that develops in front of the camera. In doing so, conversely, it includes reconstructed dramatizations of the events. The film unsettles the preconceived notions of the leaked Abu Ghraib photographs, taking as its subject how atrocities can become digital files and vice versa. Although some abuses undeniably took place at Abu Ghraib, the photographs themselves do not offer transparent access to the events.⁷ Morris scrutinizes how proceduralism led the democratic system to suspend any norm and law defending prisoner rights during a period of political crisis—the no-man’s-land between public fact and political fact, as well as between judicial measures and human life. This involves a daily, functional torture, which is sadistic yet opposed to premodern, artisanal torture, possibly operated via water and electricity, without leaving traces or causing disfigurement (such techniques are also depicted in some controversial sequences of *Rendition* and, again, *Zero Dark Thirty*). The documentary argues that it is necessary to listen to the authors of the pictures, the military police, in order to illuminate the intricate environment that produced them: an environment in which everything was in violation of the Geneva Conventions, with an administration that created the conditions for this to happen and dodged responsibility by blaming a small group of “bad apples.” These are the dynamics that the documentary exposes, patiently portraying the legal form of that which cannot have legal form.⁸ The photographic evidence became part of the metadata that the military prosecutors would later analyze to demonstrate the guilt of the jailors.

6 Quoted from the documentary *Pasolini prossimo nostro* (Giuseppe Bertolucci, 2006).

7 Caetlin Benson-Allott, “*Standard Operating Procedure*: Mediating Torture,” *Film Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (2009): 39–44.

8 Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

However, as Linda Williams argues, to judge the US soldiers' crimes as singular or collective perversions is to miss their larger symptomatic value as the consequences of the impossible position into which they were put: "Morris makes us see how such photos could have made sense to these soldiers 'on the ground' who craved a higher vantage point that would dissociate them from the prisoners with whom they lived. The photos were a legitimate expression of the frustration of their own impotency, their own inability to act successfully as soldiers, their pathetic imitation of 'norms' that utterly failed to tell them their duty."⁹ Furthermore, she points out that such contextualization of the photos makes it clear that the human pyramid and other aberrations were most likely not the worst crimes of the US military and "other governmental agencies" (the CIA and groups whose presence never formed part of the official record and who could thus act with impunity).¹⁰

In the end, the prison appears to be a deranged laboratory for the mechanisms and apparatuses of proceduralism as a model of Western democratic governments, in which its explicit denunciation has gradually been replaced by an unprecedented generalization of the paradigm of security as the normal technique of government. This paradigm is sustained by ultraprofessional individuals ready to sacrifice themselves and to become ambiguous heroes of modernity in the name of the common good, or, when situations go wrong, rotten individuals to blame. For this reason, we are still facing the consequences of a moral implosion that began with the televised, architectural implosion of the towers themselves, followed by the tropes of proceduralism of which Hollywood movies are a pale reflection. *

9 Linda Williams, "'Cluster Fuck': The Forcible Frame in Errol Morris's *Standard Operating Procedure*," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 25, no. 1 (2010): 52.

10 See also Julia Lesage, "Torture Documentaries," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* vol. 51 (2009): 51; David Resha, *The Cinema of Errol Morris* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2015): 187–209.

"It Was Like a Movie," Take 2: Age of *Ultron* and a 9/11 Aesthetic

by KAREN RANDELL

In 2010, I wrote of *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone, 2006) that "the difficulty for Hollywood filmmakers in representing the World Trade Center catastrophe is that the notion of a consensus of memory of 9/11 seems to render the image beyond the conventional modes of representation."¹ How does Stone, I asked, "make a movie of a day that already played out like a movie?"² What he achieves is to variously employ the generic tropes of the Hollywood disaster movie to enable a traumatic event to be represented with some notion of resolution. Stephen Keane asserts, "Whether human or environmental, alien or accidental, most of all disaster movies provide for solutions in the form of a representative group of characters making their way towards survival."³ The pleasures for the audience of the disaster genre are, then, within the spectacle and special effects of the catastrophe and the plot line, which sets up a "who will survive" mystery. The form and rhythm of *World Trade Center* adopt characteristics of the 1970s disaster movie, providing a familiar and nostalgic hook for its audience so that, strangely, *World Trade Center* will seem like a feel-good movie no matter what played out in real life. In his discussion of 1970s disaster movies (e.g., *Towering Inferno* [John Guillemin, 1972], *The Poseidon Adventure* [Ronald Neame, 1972], *Earthquake* [Mark Robson, 1974]), Nick Roddick notes their generic traits: the disaster must be "diegetically central," "factually possible," "largely indiscriminate," "unexpected (although not necessarily unpredictable)," "all encompassing," and "people must believe it could—very well might[—]happen to them."⁴ In the post-9/11 environment Roddick's list becomes an ironic description and a chilling list of the events in New York City. For the filmmaker the scene is already set; 9/11 is already a disaster movie, waiting to be made.

1 Karen Randell, "It Was Like a Movie: The Impossibility of Representation in Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center*," in *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the "War on Terror"*, ed. Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula, and Karen Randell (New York: Continuum, 2010), 141–152, 142.

2 Ibid.

3 Steven Keane, *The Cinema of Catastrophe* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 5.

4 Nick Roddick, "Only the Stars Survive: Disaster Movies in the Seventies," in *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama: Aspects of Popular Entertainment in Theatre, Film and Television, 1800–1976*, ed. David Bradby, Louis James, and Bernard Sharratt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 246.

In this essay I discuss Marvel's *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, 2015) and its repetition of destroyed city imagery as what James N. Gilmore calls an "aesthetic of wreckage."⁵ He suggests that in post-9/11 superhero films the repeated image of urban destruction signifies that "something has changed: the city is no longer a site to be saved but rather to be sacrificed; 9/11 imagery is no longer prevented . . . it is permitted."⁶ Such permission, I argue, is granted to genre films, in particular in the parallel universe of the recent superhero cycle where urban destruction has taken on what I call a 9/11 aesthetic. It is an aesthetic designed to affect its audiences through its special-effects sound and images. There is in these movies a repetitive set of sounds: helicopter blades; emergency services sirens; screaming and shouting, particularly the phrase "Oh my God"; and a repetitive set of images: aerial shots of a devastated modern city; vertically falling high-rise tower blocks; emergency responders, particularly firefighters; stunned, injured people; people running from dust clouds; falling debris and falling paper. These effects echo and often replicate the images of 9/11 in extraordinary detail in a way that is not seen in more realist cinema. It is in genre, particularly disaster and superhero films, that these repetitions can be identified.

Steve Neale sees something reassuring in genre films: "The existence of Hollywood genres means that the spectator, precisely, will know that everything will be 'made right in the end'—that everything will cohere, that any threat or any danger in the narrative process itself will always be contained."⁷ More recent superhero films have not conformed to this notion of reassurance, though, and the hero cannot always save the day. Batman (Christian Bale), for instance, could not save Rachel (Maggie Gyllenhaal) from dying in *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2009), and any resolution found at the end of the Marvel superhero cycle of films is undermined by the final, extra scene in which the teaser for the next film leaves this one more open ended than we had thought. For instance, in the middle-credits scene of *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, Thanos, a cyber-enhanced, superhuman, power-hungry supervillain, menacingly growls, "Fine, I'll do it myself," referring to Ultron's inability to keep hold of the Gauntlet and to find all the Infinity Stones (which will make the wearer all-powerful). The appearance of this evil "baddie," a character seen last in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (James Gunn, 2014) provides an ominous end for those watching the credits. For the uninitiated fan, the final scene of the film is less uplifting than one might expect—considering that the Avengers have just worked together to stop the total annihilation of Sokovia and have obliterated the villain, Ultron. The Avengers then disassemble. Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) leaves in his shining Audi, Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner) returns to his secret family and his new baby, Thor (Chris Hemsworth) goes back to Asgard, Quicksilver (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) has died, and the Hulk (Mark Ruffalo) removes himself from all civilization. There is no collective victory moment. The audience still leave the theater knowing that some bad guys paid for what they did and that the

5 James N. Gilmore, "A Eulogy of the Urban Superhero: The Everyday Destruction of Space in the Superhero Film," in *Representing 9/11: Trauma, Ideology, and Nationalism in Literature, Film, and Television*, ed. Paul Petrovic (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 53.

6 *Ibid.*, 54.

7 Steve Neale, *Genre* (London: BFI, 1980), 28.

superheroes will win the day eventually—but the reassuring narrative of genre is, I suggest, becoming destabilized, for the moment at least, by several factors, including the wanton destruction of the city by the very superheroes who have strived to save it.

There is now an iconography of this urban wreckage in film after film that has a proximity to the 9/11 site, allowing a resonant memory to reemerge each time it is repeated.⁸ There is something about this ash-cloud-filled image of the destroyed city that provides and insists on the neurotic repetition of a resonant trauma—unresolved and underexplored in realist cinema—that has a power to affect. It repeats and infects different film contexts and genres, but particularly the superhero film and the disaster film. Cathy Caruth writes that “a traumatic event cannot be ‘assimilated’ or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it.”⁹ Traumatic time, then, is not linear; there is no easily resolved moment post-event. Rather, assimilation happens after countless and belated returns to the site of trauma. A traumatic event is understood only by its recurring circular return, and in terms of the cycle of superhero films of the past ten years, this moment of return is signaled by the recurring image of urban wreckage that (often in uncanny ways) approximates the aftermath of 9/11—for example, Batman among the rubble and mangled metal in *The Dark Knight* or the vertically falling high rise in *Age of Ultron*.

Fifteen years after the event, it appears that American popular culture is no nearer to assimilating the traumatic experience of 9/11 than it was ten years afterward in 2011. Rather, the belated repeated image of the destroyed city and its aftermath point to the ways in which this event remains a wound in the American psyche. It is this emotional impasse that I discuss in terms of a single extensive scene from *Avengers: Age of Ultron*: the scene in which the Hulk and Tony Stark as Iron Man fight each other over an unnamed South African city (the country’s flag clearly visible during this scene), leaving it a pile of rubble.¹⁰ Gilmore suggests that “urban wreckage alters how we might *feel* the hero’s transcendental flights of fancy,” and it is this affect that I interrogate here as our two heroes destroy a city because of the Hulk’s inability to separate his dream (an illusion purposely implanted by the Scarlet Witch [Elizabeth Olsen]) from reality.¹¹ The visions that the Hulk has in his head play to his emotional weaknesses, namely, that no one will ever be able to love him and that he will destroy everything and everyone he loves because of his strength. Iron Man is the only Avenger strong enough to stop him.

This scene of urban destruction in South Africa, which echoes 9/11, is set up by an earlier scene in the film. A crane shot takes us—really, flies us—into New York City

8 See, for instance, *The Dark Knight*, *Avengers Assemble* (Joss Whedon, 2012), and *Man of Steel* (Zack Snyder, 2013), not to mention the many disaster films and alien invasion films since 9/11 that also catalog the destruction of the city, such as *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002), *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008), *Battle: Los Angeles* (Jonathan Liebesman, 2011), and *San Andreas* (Brad Peyton, 2015).

9 Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4, emphasis in original.

10 There is no narrative reason for the move to South Africa beyond a desire to make the film as international as possible for its worldwide audience. However, displacing a 9/11 aesthetic to South Africa for this scene suggests that the threat of mass urban destruction caused by a threatening “other” is a worldwide problem and not only assigned to Western capitalism.

11 Gilmore, “Eulogy,” 54, original emphasis.

toward the Avengers' building over a statue of a fireman, a memorial reminiscent of the much-circulated photograph of three firefighters erecting the Stars and Stripes on the morning of September 12, 2001, and evocative of the Marines' raising of the flag at Iwo Jima in World War II. By including the image of the first responders to 9/11, this aerial shot of the city signals the close relationship that the skyline image of New York City has with its 9/11 past; even in the fictional parallel universe of the superhero world, we must be reminded that the city is essentially vulnerable. And it is this vulnerability and the expectation (and fear) of destruction that creates such an excessively spectacular extended scene—over five minutes long—between the Hulk and Iron Man, who is wearing his “Hulk-Buster” armored suit. Chasing down the Hulk, who fled to the other side of the world in frustrated and confused anger, Iron Man flies toward the tall skyline of a modern city, a plane's-eye view of the skyscrapers. This haunting perspective shot, offering the audience a perception similar to the cockpits of the planes that hit the two towers, is fleeting. This sight is repeated when Iron Man lifts up the Hulk and flies toward a glass skyscraper, whose vestibules echo the shopping halls of the World Trade Center; when the Hulk smashes against the walls and escalators; and again when Iron Man identifies the building that he will drop the Hulk into in a final attempt to halt his rampage through the South African city. No Hollywood film has so replicated the moment when the two planes hit the twin towers; yet in this superhero universe, the point-of-view shot through Iron Man's eyes provides the audience both a thrilling and a terrifying visual account of that moment, leaving little ambiguity about its referent.

As the Hulk falls through the center of the tallest but unfinished skyscraper, Iron Man fires rockets at him, and the building starts to explode (a nod to the conspiracy theorists who believe that the World Trade Center was rigged with explosives) and collapses. The camera cranes alongside the Hulk, the audience seeing the way in which the walls and floors fall in on him (and them), a victim's-eye view of what it looks like inside a collapsing building. As his descent accelerates, the camera moves outside and hovers above the tower as it collapses, as the first World Trade tower did, from the bottom and in an enormous cloud of dust and debris. The next scene is in slow motion as white dust and debris fall down on a panicked population. The cloud moves toward the camera, which is now at street level, where the victims cling to one another, wounds clearly showing on faces and heads, as they look up with dazed expressions. As the Hulk attempts to escape the debris, he is trapped in the mangled metal and large concrete boulders, unambiguously replicating the twisted and upright metal infrastructure of the World Trade Center that could be seen in the aftermath of 9/11, once the dust cloud was lifting.

As the camera pans from the Hulk's bewildered face, the musical soundtrack gives way to the sounds of the rescue crews, the sirens and horns of fire trucks that echo the aural soundscape of 9/11. In slow motion we see the scene expand as the camera tracks back to show the drifting paper scraps, dust cloud, and rubble surrounding the survivors of what has been understood as an attack—an attack on the city by the very superheroes who are charged with saving populations and the world. Michael Calia remarks that whether *Age of Ultron* is “a clear reference to 9/11 doesn't matter[.] . . . this is what destruction looks like, though, and audiences need to believe what they're

seeing even in popcorn spectacles.”¹² The type of computer-generated imagery (CGI) destruction of the South African city is uncannily authentic, and it evokes an image of contemporary destruction that audiences across the world will recognize. Calia goes on to state that “sometimes it’s worth remembering that audiences worldwide just like to watch powerful entities knock down buildings, guilt free, or that they may even be watching these modern day disaster epics for catharsis in a crazy world.”¹³ I wonder whether such a catharsis is yet possible for any audience while real destruction is experienced by so many people in so many countries at war.

There is now a generation that did not see the events of 9/11 play out in live action but that, I would argue, has been imprinted with the *effect* of 9/11, an aesthetic affect, through the repeated imagery of the destroyed city, in particular the vertically falling building, enveloping ash clouds, people running toward news cameras, paper raining, and the mangled metal wreckage, which in neurotic repetition within these fantasy movies refuses the notion of catharsis. These imprinted images of the events of 9/11 now really *are* a movie. I suggested earlier that there has been no palatable lexicon of images available to Hollywood in its quest to make a movie about 9/11. However, what we now see in genre cinema is that the very images of 9/11 are used as a cipher for the total annihilation of a city—any city. Be it San Francisco in the disaster movie *San Andreas* (Brad Peyton, 2015) or an unnamed South African city in a superhero movie like *Age of Ultron*, urban wreckage reverberates with the look of 9/11. In one way, it’s a neat trick, making a constant and insistent discussion of 9/11 possible, keeping that day very much at the forefront of America’s—and indeed, the world’s—consciousness. In another way, it signifies an inability to find resolution. The lexicon of 9/11, the vocabulary and iconography that exist in the falling buildings and dust cloud, insists on a repeated collection of images that we cannot resolve. We still can’t believe it happened to a city that “never sleeps,” to a city whose images of shiny, modern glass-and-concrete *wholeness* have populated the entertainment film (particularly the musical and the rom com) for the entirety of Hollywood’s history. I wonder if, when this post-9/11 generation watches recorded images of the two planes hitting the World Trade Center towers, they too will exclaim “It’s like a movie!” and mean those superhero and disaster films of their youth—not a real memory or a nostalgic engagement with the disaster movies of the 1970s, but an imprinted recognition of something that they are entirely familiar with but never knew. *

12 Michael Calia, “The Guilty Pleasure of Mass Destruction in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 1, 2015, <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2015/05/01/the-guilty-pleasure-of-mass-destruction-in-avengers-age-of-ultron-and-superhero-movies/>.

13 *Ibid.*