

A Clear and Present Danger: Portrayals of Destruction in Modern American Cinema before and  
after the September 11 Attacks

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Abstract:

The attacks on September 11, 2001 were a devastating and shocking event that was observed on live television throughout the world. This event was traumatic for those that watched it on television, knew about it, and saw it in person in New York City and Washington D.C. The impacts on the American government have been profound, with emphasis placed on security, aggressiveness, war, and surveillance. These changes occurred in the United States following a studied phenomenon called cultural trauma, where a society reacts as if it were a person traumatized by an event. This can have a significant effect on both a culture's development and the media it produces.

By examining blockbuster films produced and released before and after the September 11 attacks, one can compare them and find the differences between them. These post-9/11 films show that American society is more fascinated with the new reality of major destruction in urban centers, the possibility of imminent danger to the individual from foreign threats, and the reality of a new warlike environment within their cities. All of these effects are reflected by the media that Americans watch, and is most reflected in large blockbuster films due to their huge production costs and film crews who create spectacles to be watched by the largest audience possible. This psychological view of trauma is important in the context of history because it allows the examination of societal trauma as the world enters the twenty-first century.

## **Introduction**

The September 11 attacks caused worldwide, systemic changes to society, culture, geopolitics and American life. The most obvious changes to come about as a result of the attacks are those that have legal and historical effects that are easily measured, such as the PATRIOT Act (2001) and the War on Terror (2001-present). However, the psychological impacts of the September 11 attacks are just as far reaching but not nearly as well recognized academically. These psychological impacts were severe however and have a significant impact on history.

When a traumatic event occurs in an individual, that trauma is mapped to the brain and is so overwhelming that it cannot be processed at the time of the event. Therefore, the brain compartmentalizes the trauma through a mental technique called dissociation. This is where a particular element of trauma, or the whole event of the trauma, is kept separate from the conscious mind and the rest of the event. Processing of traumatic events involves remembering all of the events and elements that occurred in the trauma and joining them together, and therefore putting the event as a whole into the past. Until this processing is complete, an individual may suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), where reminders of the event can trigger flashbacks and the individual does not feel safe in their own body.<sup>1</sup>

Traumatic events can also occur for an entire society, which is called cultural trauma. Cultural traumas are events or series of events, which take place over a varying period of time, which leave lasting changes on a culture. One of the most recognized cultural traumas in world history is the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Due to the speed and the sheer violence of the bombings, Japanese culture still expresses a fear of destruction and nuclear weapons. It is widely believed that the Godzilla franchise of movies originated as a result of

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<sup>1</sup> Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, 1st ed. (New York: Viking, 2014), 13

cultural trauma of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings being reawakened in Japanese culture and as a result of the Castle Bravo hydrogen bomb test which harmed a number of Japanese citizens on a nearby fishing trawler.<sup>2</sup> Due to the suddenness and horror of the September 11 attacks, it too is a cultural trauma that has a wide impact on American culture today.

Trauma has been proven to interact with a person's creative pursuits, usually starting during childhood and continuing throughout the lifespan until a traumatic event has been processed.<sup>3</sup> This creative expression of trauma can also be used to process traumatic events directly, such as combat veterans painting and using other forms of art therapy as a unique method to process the stimulus surrounding the event and "complete" the trauma in order to remove their symptoms. Just as individual creative pursuits can be used as evidence in discovering or processing traumatic events, so too can films be used as a method of analyzing cultural trauma. Therefore, films created before and after a traumatic event can also be used to observe the effects on a trauma on a society, both through the creative teams bringing a film to the screen and the audiences that pay to watch them. Films produced after the September 11 attacks are more likely to employ thematic elements that were present in the attacks, denoting the impact that the attacks had, and still have, on the American culture.

### **Methodology**

This paper will use popular action and disaster movies before and after the September 11 attacks in order to analyze the effects of the attacks on the American psyche. Action and disaster blockbusters are the most optimal types of films to use for this examination because they are created using large creative teams of potentially thousands of people (which ensures that any

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<sup>2</sup> Bob Eggleton, "Godzilla, King of the Monsters! (Film, 1954)" in *Pop Culture Universe: Icons, Idols, Ideas*, (Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, 2019). Online, accessed June 7, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 73

individual team member's life experience does not override the overlapping effects of trauma throughout the cast) and are designed to be marketed to the largest audience possible, usually in the millions of people (who would also be affected by this cultural trauma). By examining the blockbusters occurring in the decade before and after the September 11 attacks, an analysis reveals a variety of films which demonstrate changes to the psychological aspects of filmmaking including environment design, storyline, and cast members.

When comparing two films, many aspects of the film may be different or similar depending on a variety of known or unknown factors. For instance, just because two films both portray an alien invasion of the planet Earth does not mean that these two films are portraying the invasion in the same way or for the same reasons, and these films will most likely not have the same thematic message. In order to control for some of these differences, each of the sets of two films in this analysis will only be compared by the elements in which they share similarities. For instance, directorial changes and thematic elements can be compared in two movies that share the same director, and changes in the depiction of certain events in a story can be compared if two films share a similar plotline.

Controlling for these conditions allows for a semiotic and film structure analysis to discuss specific differences in films that are accountable only by time and the major cultural events that happen between the first and second films' release. The changes expected to be found in this analysis are those that match the symptoms of PTSD. These include flashbacks to similar events of the September 11 attacks,<sup>4</sup> the environment in the film being portrayed as unsafe,<sup>5</sup> and the threats become less imaginative and more realistic.<sup>6</sup> All of these conditions will reveal

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 25

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 129

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 109-110

whether or not the film, its crew, and the culture that produced the film were affected by the September 11 attacks in psychological terms.

The six films in this analysis were chosen based on shared themes and the potential for strict analysis. Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996)<sup>7</sup> and James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009)<sup>8</sup> are both science fiction films. Science fiction is often used as a way to analyze the past and place it in a future that brings the issues of the past in great relief, which is why these two movies are good comparisons.<sup>9</sup> John McTiernan's *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (1995)<sup>10</sup> and Len Wiseman's *Live Free or Die Hard* (2007)<sup>11</sup> are films that take place across time but are films taking place in the same series, meaning that they are very similar to each other in a structural manner when concerning elements of plot, environmental design, and character arcs, making them a good comparison for these elements. Finally, Michael Bay's *Armageddon* (1998)<sup>12</sup> and *Transformers* (2007)<sup>13</sup> are both known for their extreme spectacle and explosions, but the way these elements are used within each movie paints a different view of destruction in major urban environments before and after September 11.

### **Literature Review**

A discussion of the origins of cultural trauma would be impossible without analyzing the literature around individual psychological trauma first. After the Vietnam War, Dr. Bessel van der Kolk and his team began researching the individual effects on trauma matching the

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<sup>7</sup> *Independence Day*, DVD, directed by Roland Emmerich (1996; Los Angeles, CA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> *Avatar*, DVD, directed by James Cameron (2008; Los Angeles, CA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> S. R. Toliver and Keith Miller, "(Re)Writing Reality: Using Science Fiction to Analyze the World," *English Journal* 108, no. 3 (January 2019): 51–59.

<sup>10</sup> *Die Hard with a Vengeance*, DVD, directed by John McTiernan (1995; Los Angeles, CA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> *Live Free or Die Hard*, DVD, directed by Len Wiseman (2007; Los Angeles, CA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> *Armageddon*, DVD, directed by Michael Bay (1998; Burbank CA: Buena vista Pictures, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> *Transformers*, DVD, directed by Michael Bay (2007; Universal City, CA: DreamWorks Pictures, 2007)

description of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. His studies incorporated information and techniques that were previously unavailable to researchers, such as brain imaging scans and further developed analytical techniques researching the impact of trauma on the human brain. He published this work in a book titled *The Body Keeps the Score*,<sup>14</sup> which explains the various impacts of trauma in a language that any layperson can understand. This brought the discussion around trauma out of the clinical and academic settings and into the public sphere.

One of the approaches to treating trauma mentioned by van der Kolk is the use of dramatic or thematic reproduction of trauma, either through acting out a play or reproducing the original event and changing the ending.<sup>15</sup> This sort of reproduction rewires the brain in order to process the original event differently, thereby integrating the event. In order to reproduce the trauma in a different way, therapists and other associated healers use the science of archetypes in order to tell a story that is relatable to the actors, thereby changing their perspective towards the trauma over time.

This science of storytelling can best be summed up by the seminal work on screenwriting *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* by Robert McKee.<sup>16</sup> While this book is primarily used as a teaching tool for amateur screenwriters to tell an exciting and enthralling story for production of a film, McKee makes a compelling argument that this sort of creative process cannot be divorced from any culture that it takes place in. Any story that is made into a film must also align culturally with the audience, lest it prove to be a message that will cause the movie to fail because it doesn't appeal to them. He further argues that all messages in any good film have a universal message regardless of the context of the film itself, thereby

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<sup>14</sup> van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 5

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 332.

<sup>16</sup> Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York, NY: ItBooks, 2010).

allowing the reinterpretation of cultural events. He analyzes specific films in his book such as *Casablanca* (1942), *The Godfather* (1972), and *Chinatown* (1974),<sup>17</sup> three films which take place in times of cultural change in the modern American story. He denotes that these works were culturally significant in helping explain American culture at the time.

John Truby and K.M. Weiland both explore these aspects of story in their respective works *The Anatomy of Story*<sup>18</sup> and *Creating Character Arcs*.<sup>19</sup> Both of these works address the universality of storytelling and the development of plot and structure, examining every element of a film. Each protagonist is essentially universal, and the journey they all take in the course of a film is similar to every other, as if human beings have a universal understanding of roles and stories. They each explore several films for the amateur screenwriter, showing the reader how each film has similar story “beats” and that all elements of the film, including environmental design, ancillary characters, and all interactions have to fit with a universal theme. Therefore, any film is a product of its screenwriter, director, actors, cast, and crew as each person follows a universal theme that all of them share.

All of these fields are relevant in a discussion of cultural trauma. In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by Jeffrey Alexander, a series of sociologists examine the formation of trauma amongst a group of individuals to find that cultural trauma is an event which leaves an impact on all the individuals of that culture.<sup>20</sup> They move towards understanding cultural trauma through the framework of a universal or “quintessential” traumatic event that is a framework that

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 260

<sup>18</sup> John Truby, *The Anatomy of Story: 22 Steps to Becoming a Master Storyteller* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> K.M. Weiland, *Creating Character Arcs: The Masterful Author's Guide to Uniting Story Structure, Plot, and Character Development* (Scottsbluff, Nebraska: PenForASword Publishing, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520235946.001.0001>.

can be applied to a variety of traumatic events.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, an epilogue after the conclusion of the book analyzes the events of September 11 and determines that these events also qualify as an event of cultural trauma, leaving Americans with conflicting values about war and protectionism.<sup>22</sup>

Studying the impacts of trauma surrounding the September 11 attacks reveals a wide variety of mediums used to express this trauma, including that of architecture. Due to the War on Terror and the increasing needs of urban centers to increase security in public spaces, architecture specialists have analyzed new trends in cities, seeing the city itself as a psychological space.<sup>23</sup> Architecture, therefore, is an artistic expression that summarizes a psychological expression of the public psychology through the construction of a single structure. The One World Trade Center complex in New York exemplifies this concept through the construction of the new mega-skyscraper near Ground Zero. Lauren Kogod and Michael Osman analyze this construction of space in their work *Girding the Grid: Abstraction and Figuration at Ground Zero*.<sup>24</sup> They argue that the redesign of Freedom Tower, the proposed structure to replace the Twin Towers, to the One World Trade Center was inspired by the psychological fear of another terrorist attack and the economic competition in the area for a more profitable space.<sup>25</sup> This security and fear in space is also exemplified in studies of *Military Operations in Urbanized Terrain (MOUT)*, a new series of tactics studied by the military under the assumption that

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 10-11

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 264-282

<sup>23</sup> Anna Minton, "The Paradox of Safety and Fear: Security in Public Space," *Architectural Design* 88, no. 3 (May 1, 2018): 84–91, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ad.2305>.

<sup>24</sup> Lauren Kogod and Michael Osman, "Girding the Grid: Abstraction and Figuration at Ground Zero," *Grey Room*, no. 13 (Fall 2003): 108–21, <https://doi.org/10.1162/152638103322751083>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 109-110

combat will take place in cities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>26</sup> Robert Warren studies the implementation of this doctrine extensively, showing that it stems directly from urban combat and systemic fears that occurred after the September 11 attacks, significantly outside the development envelope of Cold War military doctrine. Ultimately, the study of trauma and lived experience of safety go outside the realm of psychology to also incorporate elements of social history and artistic expression in popular culture.

### **Psychology of Trauma**

The field of psychology has greatly benefitted by the study of trauma due to major wars that have occurred over the twentieth century. As these conflicts spread, the concept of combat trauma causing a psychological reaction in soldiers who were exposed to overwhelming amounts of stimulus was recognized as early as World War I, when it was diagnosed as Shell Shock. As no formal diagnoses or diagnostic criteria were available at the time, Shell Shock was applied indiscriminately and without any knowledge or cause.<sup>27</sup> In World War II, Shell Shock would be renamed Combat Fatigue and during the Vietnam War it would receive a further renaming to what it is commonly known as today: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).<sup>28</sup>

In short, trauma contains an overwhelming amount of stimuli which occurs all at the same time.<sup>29</sup> Usually, the stimuli are overwhelming to the person experiencing the trauma in both normal perception (touch, hearing, sight, etc.) and in the abstract meaning of a trauma (behavior or emotions). In some traumatic situations, the human brain is unable to successfully transfer the large amount of material and encode it into long term memory. Therefore, the stimuli associated

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Warren, "Situating the City and September 11th: Military Urban Doctrine, 'Pop-up' Armies and Spatial Chess," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 26, no. 3 (2002): 614–19, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.00404>.

<sup>27</sup> H Matson, "The treatment of 'shell shock' in World War I: Early attitudes and treatments for post-traumatic stress disorder and combat stress reaction- ClinicalKey," *European Psychiatry* 33 (March 2016): 1.

<sup>28</sup> van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 31

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 70

with an event is still located in the short-term memory on the right side of the brain, where present events are still being processed.<sup>30</sup> As a result, individuals who have experienced this trauma perceive it as never having ended; to them, it is still going on long after the actual traumatic event has ended, even decades later.

As a response to this perception of trauma or threat, human beings may act differently than they normally would. For instance, sufferers may consciously avoid events or films that remind them of their trauma to prevent a reaction.<sup>31</sup> Usually, reactions are non-proportionate to the present-day stimulus, but would be proportionate to the past stimulus. For instance, a combat veteran may dive under a table due to a car backfiring. To the veteran, their brain was reacting in response to the original trauma (gunfire) and not the present-day stimulus (a car backfiring).<sup>32</sup>

In an effort to process the trauma of the event, the human brain attempts to bring the unprocessed stimulus from the right side of the brain to the left side, and therefore bring it to conclusion.<sup>33</sup> This can take the form of nightmares, flashbacks, and disconnected stimuli being brought up in relatively normal environments. The official diagnosis of these symptoms, according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V), is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Processing the trauma will eventually lead to the cessation of symptoms.<sup>34</sup>

These principles of trauma as they apply to an individual also apply to a larger population. When trauma happens to a large enough population all at once it leaves a traumatic imprint on that population until it is processed, leaving them with the emotional scars of the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 73

<sup>31</sup> Babette Rothschild, *The Body Remembers: the Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment* (New York: Norton, 2000), 71-72

<sup>32</sup> van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 67

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 68-69

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 221-222

event. This is known as cultural trauma, which is reflected in a culture's media, art, and sociocultural practices.<sup>35</sup>

### **American History from the End of the Cold War the September 11 Attacks**

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the United States enjoyed a period of economic prosperity and relative geopolitical calm. No longer competing with the Soviet Union in the Cold War, the United States government and its people could focus on other pursuits, such as prosperous economic growth. The Cold War had proven to be a stressful period for the American subconscious, especially considering the threat of nuclear war and international armed conflict due to the dominant military policy of Domino Theory in the Cold War.

The 1990s did not stop all war, however. The First Gulf War in 1990-1991 was a military conflict brought about by Iraq's invasion of neighboring Kuwait for economic reasons. This invasion prompted an international response from NATO, spearheaded by the United States in what would become known as Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm. The US military proved to be a far more superior force against the local Iraqi army, mostly due to the advances the American military had made during the Cold War to fight another superpower.<sup>36</sup> This left the American people feeling superior about not only their nation's military might but also their power projection. Put another way, to normal Americans, war was something that happened half a world away, but never at home. Moreover, the American military was so powerful that it was perceived as invincible in conflict, further strengthening Americans' perception of their domestic safety in the post-Cold War years.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Alexander et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, 10

<sup>36</sup> Tom Mahnken, "The Gulf War in Retrospect," *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed June 8, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/01/20/the-gulf-war-in-retrospect/>.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Yet, there was no shortage of conflict at home in terms of domestic terrorism. The Waco Siege (1993) and the Oklahoma City Bombing (1995) were both incidents in which the integrity of the US government was put to the test in dealing with domestic terrorist activities. These attacks also followed a long lineage of attacks against US civilians that received less attention than foreign terrorism at the time. These attacks stand in contrast to the bombing of the World Trade Center parking garage in 1993, the 1998 bombings of US embassies by al-Qaeda terrorists, and the bombing of the USS Cole (2000) abroad, which were perceived as being far more significant to the world at large and in the eyes of the American public due to the emphasis on localized media in domestic attacks while still maintaining international coverage on the national level.<sup>38</sup>

The World Trade Center attacks on September 11th, 2001, initiated by al-Qaeda operatives, changed the American perspective on international terrorism. The death of nearly three thousand Americans in the middle of one of the largest cities on Earth and the destruction of the World Trade Center Towers (a symbol of global wealth and prosperity) catapulted the United States toward a significant international response. The United States had declared what would become known as the “War on Terror” against networks of terrorist organizations and fighters operating abroad and the governments which supported them. This declaration would eventually result in Operation Enduring Freedom and the War in Afghanistan (2001-2016) and the Second Gulf War in Iraq (2003-2011), both of which would further shock the American psyche through the presence of returning US war veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

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<sup>38</sup> Scout Sigmund Gartner, “Making the International Local: The Terrorist Attack on the USS Cole, Local Casualties, and Media Coverage,” *Political Communication* 21, no. 2 (April 2004): 139–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600490443859>.

The United States government promptly responded, sending forces in an invasion of Afghanistan in an attempt to disable al-Qaeda and Taliban operations in the region. Two years later, the combined arms invasion of Iraq deposed Saddam Hussein and eliminated the Iraqi army. The United States and international forces continued to maintain a presence in the countries for more than a decade, resulting in a long-standing, negatively perceived conflict that American's were slow to support after the initial invasion.<sup>39</sup> Americans would not receive a moment of closure for the attacks on September 11, 2001 until May 2, 2011 when Osama bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda was killed in a combined strike of military special forces and CIA operators in Operation Neptune Spear. American forces continue to maintain a presence in the two countries today in a more limited force in order to participate in the conflict against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Domestically, the American government responded to the threat of terrorism by instituting sweeping changes in legal code and domestic policy in order to prevent further terrorist attacks. This occurred mostly through the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and the writing of the PATRIOT Act (2001). Notably, the PATRIOT Act allowed for extended authority of the state in order to investigate possible terrorist activities and was criticized by several civil liberties organizations as being damaging to civil rights and the right to privacy for Americans.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> David Blair, "The Gulf War Marked the Pinnacle of American Military Supremacy," January 17, 2016, sec. World, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/12101906/The-Gulf-War-was-the-beginning-of-the-end-for-American-supremacy.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Herbert Lin, "Having a Conversation about Bulk Surveillance," *Communications of the ACM* 59, no. 2 (February 2016): 40–42, <https://doi.org/10.1145/2809777>.

## **History of American Disaster and Action Films**

American disaster movies originated in the silent film era, but the progression from simply making a movie about a possible disaster to making a blockbuster film about one began with the movie *Airport* (1970).<sup>41</sup> The critical changes in the movie formula in *Airport* that makes it distinct from previous disaster films is the use of a large cast and the presence of characters who solve a problem by simply acting as a normal person was meant to do.<sup>42</sup> Essentially, the film portrayed normal people as heroes in order to survive a disaster, which was a popular film metric at the time. With the success of *Airport* (1970) and *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), the disaster movie genre had successfully launched itself to widespread acclaim.<sup>43</sup>

The success of the genre continued into the 1990s with films such as *Backdraft* (1991), *The Perfect Storm* (2000), *Twister* (1996), and *Speed* (1994) depicting rather small-scale disasters among others such as *Deep Impact* (1998) and *Armageddon* (1998), which depict large scale destruction and the possible destruction of the entire world and humanity. The main differences between films that occur before the September 11 attacks and afterwards are the scale of the destruction and the methods used to portray the disasters themselves. Films such as *Children of Men* (2006), *Cloverfield* (2008), *2012* (2009), and *Deepwater Horizon* (2016) emphasize the danger towards the protagonists directly in the story as a persistent threat as opposed to the looming danger which can be prevented in pre-September 11 disaster films.

## **Destroying Worlds**

On the surface, Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996) and James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) have little in common with each other. In *Independence Day*, Will Smith and

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<sup>41</sup> Robbie Collin, "Apocalypse Wow: How Hollywood Fell for Disaster Movies," *The Telegraph*, May 28, 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/san-andreas/history-of-disaster-movies/>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

company fight an alien race, which, in 1996, destroys several of the world's major cities in one simultaneous and overwhelming attack before taking the fight to the aliens and defeating them. *Avatar* is about a twenty-second century militarized corporation travelling to another star system and harvesting valuable minerals from the native lands of another culture on a moon called Pandora. In the process of this resource gathering, the corporation commits genocide of the native population in an overwhelming attack with superior technology that destroys the native Na'vi civilization, before the Na'vi fight back and defeat the human invaders. The two movies structurally are very different but have similar features in their portrayal of civilization destruction, which will be the point of this analysis.

The opening scene of *Independence Day* portrays the alien ships as larger than any human force could oppose. The first shot of the alien spaceship shows its shadow on the moon as it passes by, shaking the dust from the size of its gravity. The many city-sized spaceships slowly emerge from the clouds and center themselves over the world's major cities, including New York, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles. The world's response is to simply watch in horror or evacuate their cities in preparation for an unseen doom. The aliens themselves are never pictured in this section of the film, and no communication between the aliens and humanity occurs. The aliens are portrayed as an abstract concept to humanity. The relationship between the invaders and humanity is abstract, as if the audience could not personally relate to the invaders.

The attack by the alien spaceships is through a single large laser weapon, which completely destroys major urban landmarks in all three cities and causes an explosion that spreads fire and destruction in its wake. The massive city-sized eruption proceeds through the city, block-by-block, blowing out building interiors, flipping cars, and destroying airborne

vehicles. Individuals in the wake of these attacks are assumed to have died, but no direct deaths are shown in the film.

Any destruction or deaths that appear on screen in *Independence Day* are for the purposes of escapist entertainment and not to elicit direct emotional impact. The only characters who die in these scenes are the comedic relief characters, one on top of a building when the invaders fire their weapons and the other when a taxi falls on his car and kills him instantly. The aftermath of the destruction only occurs for a few seconds after the scene is over, depicting a ruined city still on fire. Notably, most of the buildings, while severely damaged, seem rebuildable in the aftermath of the attack.

*Avatar* differs significantly in all of these elements. The attack on the Na'vi home (a gigantic tree structure pictured to be several stories tall called "Hometree") is pictured as the climax of the movie about two hours into the three-hour epic. The attackers are pictured as aggressive humans who have been characterized throughout the movie up to this point as greedy and violent, features intimately relatable to the audience. The humans fly in on futuristically designed VTOL (vertical-take-off-and-landing) helicopter-like vehicles, which are not markedly different from Osprey landing craft currently employed by the U.S. military. The commander of the attack is directly pictured through the glass cockpit of the largest attack craft, showing his true face while the aliens in *Independence Day* are rarely pictured. Communication between the aliens and the humans has occurred throughout the film, leading to an intimate connection between the two sides. An emotional connection between the Na'vi and the audience is well established by the time of the attack, which makes the destruction of Hometree more visceral and real.

While the alien assault on Earth's major cities in *Independence Day* takes the form of massive laser weaponry that attacks in one moment, the attack on the Na'vi Hometree is prolonged and uses technology that is relatable to the audience through years of news coverage and war footage in the modern day. The first attack is with tear gas, which disperses the majority of the population and forces them to flee in terror. Incendiaries serve to burn the interior of the tree, while heavy explosive missiles finally send the helpless inhabitants falling to the ground as the main characters take cover behind a tree root. Once the support columns of the tree are destroyed, the Na'vi must abandon it as debris and the falling structure collapse and kill dozens of people.

Moreover, the destruction of Hometree affects each of the characters throughout the film. Even those who casually ordered the attack appear dazed at the destruction. The shocked faces of the Na'vi are shown after the destruction of their home and as they flee from the burning ruins. The ruins of the tree are shown as ash litters the ground like snow and all the colorful textures of Pandora, a major feature throughout the rest of the film, are muted and greyed out in the aftermath of the destruction.

## **Discussion**

These destructive events cause enough damage to their respective societies to cause cultural trauma, and they serve as a jumping off point for the rest of the plot of each film. In *Independence Day*, the president of the United States gives a speech, rallies the combined air forces of the world, and destroys the alien invaders on July 4, 1996, ultimately saving the world. In *Avatar*, the protagonist Jake Sully (a former US Marine) rallies the Na'vi tribes and ambushes the human private military troops, forcing the invading "aliens" off of the alien moon. What differs is the change in how the destruction is depicted.

The events of September 11 caused a trauma that led to the psychological wounding of the American psyche. As seen in the film *Avatar*, made after September 11, the destruction of a society is no longer depicted in an escapist and entertaining way. The only way to show the destruction of this kind of scale is by recognizing the damage that it would do to the inhabitants of that culture. After the events of September 11, destruction had become intimate to all American moviegoers. The faces of the Na'vi after their cultural homes and society have been destroyed, which reflects an experience that is relatable to modern American audiences.

### **Old Patterns Die Hard**

The *Die Hard* series of films stars Bruce Willis as police officer John McClane a police officer who is often placed into dire circumstances. Every *Die Hard* movie since the first has a similar plot, where Officer McClane is found trapped in a fight with terrorists and must defeat them in order to achieve his objective, usually saving someone he loves. John McTiernan's *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (1995) finds McClane and an everyman shopkeeper from Harlem, Zeus Carver, fighting a group of East German and freelance terrorists blowing up bombs in New York City in an attempt to steal all the gold in the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank. In the fourth film, Len Wiseman's *Live Free or Die Hard* (2007), McClane picks up computer hacker Matthew Ferrell and finds himself fighting domestic terrorists in a "Fire Sale" attack designed to immobilize and destroy American infrastructure as a distraction in order to steal all the financial data in America.

*Die Hard with a Vengeance* (1995), opens with Lovin Spoonful's hit song *Summer in the City*, as an idyllic Manhattan skyline and city streets are shown, representing the peaceful life that is about to be disrupted by the attacks laid out by the film's antagonist Simon Gruber, an international terrorist for hire. The first attack occurs ninety seconds into the film, as a suitcase bomb destroys a Bonwit Teller department store on Fifth Avenue in downtown Manhattan. The

bottom floor of the building explodes, throwing dust and cars into the street as the music is interrupted, representing the disruption of daily life in Manhattan. This is only a quick shot, which depicts limited damage and no casualties. The interior of the department store, while surely being ruined beyond comprehension, is never shown to the audience.

This particular attack, like many made before it in cinema, is seen as abstract by the audience and as a form of escapist entertainment, where no direct casualties are depicted and no emotional connection is made between the audience and the characters in the film. The view from the street immediately moves to the interior chaos of the police station. Officer Joe Lambert, who serves as comedic relief throughout the film, asks, “Bonwit Teller, who would want to blow up a department store?” and another detective responds, “You ever see a woman at a shoe sale?” The captain then barks orders to his subordinates, telling them to focus on rerouting traffic or they’re going to “get the traffic jam from Hell.” These jokes serve to reinforce that the attack was isolated, that the police are capable of dealing with it in time, and that normal life can continue to occur for the majority of New Yorkers.

The second attack derails a subway under Wall Street so the antagonist can get access to the Federal Reserve Bank. McClane throws the bomb out of the back of the subway car, causing the train to derail. Dust clouds fly through the air and the last subway car tumbles through the station, causing pedestrians to flee in terror. The columns of the station do nothing to prevent the derauling and the protagonist barely climbs out of the back of the car.

This terrorist attack is portrayed as laughable or comical by the people surrounding the event. The protagonist is portrayed as laughing at the destruction as he climbs out of the rolled subway car while the nearby office workers watch the scene while eating popcorn. When a detective comes out of the subway, he yells to the protagonist, “We have a shitload of cuts and

bruises, a couple concussions, an old man's pacemaker stopped, and a pregnant girl's water broke, and that's all." The only impact ever reported to the audience is the ever-present traffic jams throughout New York City.

Moreover, the more devastating and direct attacks occur away from the rest of New York and society at large. As McClane pursues Gruber through the city, the antagonist decides to destroy a major aqueduct in an attempt to kill the protagonist with oncoming water. However, destroying the dam does not net a large amount of destruction, as the water is entirely contained by the construction tunnel, limiting the damage to the surrounding city and population. Moreover, in his last terrorist attack, Gruber destroys a container ship with the hope of killing the protagonists; however, this attack occurs out at sea and away from the rest of the population of New York, allowing the world to go on as normal.

While these terrorist acts are devastating attacks on the protagonist of this film, their violent effects are relatively isolated from the rest society. Life in New York City can continue to go on as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened that day. This is due to the quick reactions of the protagonist to prevent massive civilian casualties before they are inflicted. Moreover, the terrorists in this film are not interested in civilian casualties and are instead interested in a gold theft from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. Individual citizens living in New York can avoid the threat of terrorism and a sense of normalcy is restored to the region, closing the trauma and bringing the protagonist's world back to normal.

The same cannot be said for *Live Free or Die Hard* (2007), the sequel to *Die Hard with a Vengeance*. In this film, Bruce Willis is cast as John McClane again and forced to stop a group of concerted cyber terrorists. Led by Thomas Gabriel, a former Department of Defense contract-based programmer, the group attempts to steal the world's financial information in a staggeringly

large cybertheft. To cover their theft, the terrorists engage in a cyberattack that cripples the infrastructure of the United States.

From the very beginning of this film the environment no longer protects innocent people from harm. Among the very first scenes of the film, terrorists destroy the home of a hacker, also killing his friend. The house is completely destroyed when a bomb planted nearby explodes. When McClane confronts the terrorists for the first time in an attempt to save the computer hacker, Matt Farrell (who was used by the terrorists to create a program they would use in the cyber-attack), gunshots pierce the walls of Farrell's apartment both from a sniper across the street and two other henchmen outside the apartment door. The examination of psychological space is further informed when the bullets puncture the walls of the apartment, leaving no room for privacy or security for the terrorists' targets. The fighting between McClane and the attackers gets more intimate as more of the environment is destroyed, eventually involving personal collectible objects and hazardous elements of the environment like fuel lines. While the attacks in the last movie are contained to areas that isolate the damage from bystanders, this film shows that these attacks can happen in normal houses and apartment buildings of the average American family.

This theme of vulnerability is continued throughout the movie as well. The initial attacks seek to create fear and destruction in the lives of everyday Americans. These attacks cause traffic accidents throughout the major cities in the United States shown directly to audiences in scenes of the accidents rather than attacks that are only reported to the audience by police officers, as in *Die Hard with a Vengeance*. In *Live Free or Die Hard*, cyberattacks penetrate every government institution and trigger the anthrax alarms in many government buildings, forcing their evacuation in downtown Washington, D.C. The cyberattacks bring typical business in the nation's capital to

a halt, affecting all inhabitants of the city. This is a direct shift from the other *Die Hard* movies, which generally allow life to continue while the drama of the movie plays out.

The responses to these attacks are also far different than those portrayed in *Die Hard with a Vengeance*. While the response to the subway bombing in *Die Hard with a Vengeance* involves a number of police officers and firefighters organized into a coordinated response, the fourth *Die Hard* film abandons the idea of a coordinated response to a national attack, and instead portrays the scenes of devastation as a menagerie of National Guard soldiers, FBI agents, and other national response agencies, in addition to police officers, firefighters, and biochemical response teams. This flood of officers and response teams to the scene of the disasters shows the audience how the destruction is no longer on a small scale, but on the scale of an attack similar to that which occurred on September 11. In this film, the attacks are portrayed as uncontrollable, as if even the large federal response cannot contain the chaos. Attacks in major urban centers are no longer portrayed as isolated tragedies, but instead as an unmitigated catastrophe.

As part of his terrorist attacks, Thomas Gabriel shuts down the utilities infrastructure of the United States, and in an attempt to kill the protagonist, routes natural gas to a utilities control hub in order to destroy the complex while McClane and Farrell are inside. This is part of a consistent theme where the very environment that the protagonists live in is under threat and they cannot fight it but can only survive it. A comparison of similar scenes and plot lines show the parallels between the two films. In *Die Hard with a Vengeance*, McClane uses a dump truck to flee down a tube of rushing water, which is contained underground. The parallel scene in *Live Free or Die Hard* features above ground explosions that tear through the grounds of the terminal, destroying buildings and power lines in its wake. The building shakes as sparks fly from the lights as the protagonists are forced to flee from the destruction. They barely make it into a van

in the basement of the building in time before it is forcibly thrown across the room and impaled on steel beams in the opposite wall by the explosive force. The building is completely destroyed and power outages affect the entire eastern seaboard. The eastern control hub building is pictured as a smoking pile of twisted metal, rubble, and concrete as the protagonists observe the devastation, echoing many of the images seen in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

Destruction of this magnitude is portrayed once more in the movie, during the concluding scenes where McClane chases the fleeing Gabriel. Gabriel hacks the U.S Marine Corps radio communication frequency and sends an F-35 joint strike fighter after McClane, who is pursuing the antagonist in their big rig through the now abandoned streets of Baltimore. At the time of the film's release, the F-35 was the most advanced jet fighter in the world. Its presence in this film is an indicator of patriotism and militarism, in addition to a faith in advanced military technology to protect American citizens in the post-9/11 world.

The fighter makes several attempts at killing McClane, using machine gun fire and missiles that destroy both the truck that he is occupying and the surrounding roadway. The plane chases after McClane and destroys a nearby overpass and traffic circle. As debris flies off the truck, it hits the plane's engine, causing the aircraft to fall out of the sky, nearly landing on top of the protagonist as he slides through a nearby destroyed piece of highway overpass. By the time that the plane has fired its devastating payload and crashed, the surrounding scene looks less like a city and more like a post-apocalyptic wasteland of abandoned buildings, piles of rubble, flaming cars, kicked up dust and dirt, and destroyed roadways. Among all of the films in this analysis, the presence of a plane being used to attack the protagonist (who in these movies takes up the symbolism of the "American Cowboy" representing traditional American justice) is perhaps one of the strongest echoes of post-9/11 trauma in any of these films.

## **Discussion**

By examining films that occur in sequence, critics and analysts can see the difference that time brings to the portrayal of elements throughout a film series. This is especially true of differences of geopolitics or the state of current affairs when a movie is made. In these films, the themes change from anonymous international terrorists affecting small changes in the environment of a city in order to meet their goals to a series of international and domestic terrorists killing innocent civilians and causing destruction over the entire country. The ability for the government to respond to a crisis changes from a just-manageable disaster to an out-of-control catastrophe that requires every federal agency and the military to try and get a leg up on the disaster. Most importantly, the environment goes from an element that protects the innocent civilians of the United States to an element that is intimately dangerous to all of them.

Moreover, *Live Free or Die Hard* portrays a number of incidents that directly reference the events of September 11. These events include the triggering of the anthrax alarms in downtown Washington, D.C. (referencing the anthrax mail attacks after September 11), the use of a plane falling on the protagonist (a direct reference to the September 11 attacks, as airplanes were the primary weapons of the attacks) and attacks on utilities (as nuclear power plants were considered a secondary target for the 9/11 attackers). Moreover, the degree of federal response after the attacks in Washington D.C. in the film mirrors those that occurred in New York in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

## **Transforming Explosions**

Aside from sharing the same director, Michael Bay, *Armageddon* (1998) and *Transformers* (2007) seem to be opposites. *Armageddon* tells the story of a group of oil drillers being conscripted by NASA to destroy an asteroid from the inside out by landing on it, drilling

down to a critical depth, and detonating a nuclear weapon before it destroys the Earth.

*Transformers* is a story about two factions of alien robots coming to Earth and continuing their war for an all-powerful power source. The similarities for a comparison of trauma occur in the depiction of the films' destruction of urban environments.

*Armageddon* depicts the destruction of several cities due to asteroid impacts. The initial impacts in New York City destroy several large buildings and even destroy the top of the Chrysler Building and bring it tumbling down to the ground. These asteroid impacts are scattered throughout the city, showing the widespread destruction and leaves New York City in flames. Most notably, the camera placement in this scene shows many perspective shots of street level, but the majority of the views taken with the camera are wider shots of the city itself as it gets pummeled by asteroids. By doing this, Bay makes the film's events seem somehow "farther away" from the audience from a cinematic perspective, making the destruction more abstract.

This technique is used twice more in *Armageddon*, during the destruction of Shanghai and Paris. Both of these scenes are short considering the first scene's runtime, but far more damaging in terms of the destruction in the cities. Both scenes begin with a few establishing shots showing a normal life in both cities, giving the impression that the impacts hold some sort of spectacle for the audience. The asteroids in question arrive suddenly and without warning to most residents, strike the two cities, and send waves of destruction out from their impact points much like the attacks in *Independence Day*, but even quicker than those explosions. Paris is ultimately destroyed in less than thirty seconds, a time that allows for no emotional processing of the event and is created for obvious spectacle throughout the movie.

*Transformers* spends more time on destruction and emphasizes its role in affecting both the audience and the characters in the film. The opening few minutes of the film depict a

Decepticon (one of the evil alien Transformers) spending a few minutes destroying an American military installation in Qatar. Notably, the US military is unable to do a thing about the attack or do any damage to the alien, and the image of US Army soldiers being made helpless in the face of an unstoppable enemy is powerful. This image directly contradicts the American public's view of the armed forces as indestructible and superior, an image that became nearly universal after the Cold War.

The film maintains a skeptical view of American military dominance by ending on the note that the United States military can only respond to attacks, not prevent them. While the primary motivation of the plot of *Armageddon* is to *prevent* damage from occurring, in *Transformers* it is quite clear that the US military can only respond to the threat. The conclusion of the film takes place in "Mission City" (which is a code word for Los Angeles) and takes the form of a battleground in the center of the downtown urban sprawl of that city. Throughout the long conclusion of the film, transformers are shown to take the fight to each other and the American military is hard pressed to do any damage to the aliens. It is only at the conclusion of the film that the human race is able to do any damage to the aliens through the presence of F-22 advanced fast attack jet fighters (much like the presence of the F-35 at the conclusion of *Live Free or Die Hard*).

Perhaps one of the most consistent symbols during these destructive scenes is the presence of civilians at nearly every moment of conflict. The camera during this section is placed at ground level, often below human head height in order to give perspective to the unmanageability and level of destruction at the human level. While *Armageddon* focuses on destruction in a very out-of-this-world sense, *Transformers* focuses destruction on the level of the individual human being. This approach also includes a scene where the leader of the

Decepticons takes the form of a plane and runs straight through an office building in downtown Los Angeles, mirroring the destruction on September 11 for all to see. Ultimately, peace is only restored through the courageous acts of the American military and the persistence of the protagonists of the film in fighting for their freedom. In fact, several of the lines between the leader of the Decepticons and the Autobots (the good alien robots) in this scene reference fighting for the freedom of the human race in an avoidance of slavery to the Decepticons, which is a theme present throughout the film.

### **Discussion**

By placing the Decepticons in roles similar to the terrorists on September 11, and having the Decepticons take actions that are remarkably similar to the attacks that occurred on that day, *Transformers* aims at providing a sense of catharsis and safety for the American people from foreign threats after the destruction of September 11. Notably, the American military was unable to stop any of the attacks from occurring on September 11, and Americans felt powerless against the destruction happening in their cities. This attempted emotional catharsis towards defeating the enemy invaders on American soil is far more personal to the audience than asteroids heading towards Earth and shows how post-9/11 films have a link to the destruction on that day. The reality of these films and the events of September 11 have shaken the American conscious, but an attempt at emotional release can still be present throughout American media.

The personal and grounded perspective of the fighting in both Qatar and Los Angeles points to a personal perspective for the audience as well. In New York September 11, civilians were forced to run from destruction that most of them did not understand and could not comprehend at the time. The suddenness of the trauma of that day may have seemed like aliens had come from outer space and started destroying American homes and cities. The difference

between *Armageddon* and *Transformers* in the levels and depiction of destruction points to a deeper psychological shift in the American consciousness, recognizing the possibility of large-scale destruction in major cities throughout the US, and underscoring the feelings of being unsafe in urban centers as a result of terrorist attacks that occurred a little over seventeen years ago.

### **Conclusion**

Cultural trauma causes effects for generations surrounding a tragic event and alters the course of history due to its psychological and emotional impact. The anger that the American people expressed after the September 11 attacks was directly responsible for the nation's launch of the War on Terror, implementation of the PATRIOT Act, and engagement in a number of foreign wars in reaction to the feeling of insecurity in their own homes. The American public was, in a sense, a cornered beast that was lashing out in order to protect itself from the perceived threat of foreign attack. While these attacks were certainly traumatic, this level of cultural trauma can also be recognized and processed, leading to a reduction of the psychological effects they hold over the collective American psyche.

These effects have been evident in films before and after the September 11 attacks. Before the attacks American films reflected attacks that were sudden, comedic, and spectacular, that in some cases could be prevented. Films created after the September 11 attacks portray a deeply personal trauma of powerlessness against forces that are uncontrollable, overpowering, and in many cases, incomprehensible. These portrayals match those of the emotions felt by Americans on September 11, when an incomprehensible enemy suddenly and without warning destroyed a seemingly indestructible symbol of American economic might and prosperity in a matter of hours.

In the aftermath of September 11, the impulsive decisions made by the American people and their government caused conflict to spread throughout the Middle East. Today, these wars and conflicts continue in various forms, with the presence of ISIL and other terrorist groups threatening the security of everyone living in the region. An American military presence is still maintained throughout the world with an emphasis on special forces hunting down terrorist leaders. Fear in the United States has arguably resulted in the election of Donald Trump as a reactionary figure for the masses. Ultimately, the story of this trauma continues to unfold in the present day.

After the release of all these films, the American media has continued on its quest to produce more films that replicate the trauma of the original event. Films and television shows such as *Eagle Eye* (2008) and *Designated Survivor* (2016) both depict the possible fall of government authority due to terrorist attacks and an overemphasis on security. *Cloverfield* (2008) shows a terrible and sudden attack on New York City which bears similarity to the September 11 attacks, while films like *I am Legend* (2007) and *Contagion* (2011) deal with very personal tales of the fall of American society by unseen threats like disease. It appears that films depicting this nature of trauma are here to stay, due to the persistence of trauma and its effects on the human brain. Until the original event of the trauma is processed, there is no reason to believe that Americans will ever feel safe in their cities again.

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