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INTRODUCTION

The films of a nation reflect its mentality in a more direct way than other artistic media . . . What films reflect are not so much explicit credos as psychological dispositions – those deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness.

Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*

While the precise definition of post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] is contested, most descriptions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the events.

Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*

Every history really is two histories. There is the history of what actually happened, and there is the history of the perception of what happened. The first kind of history focuses on the facts and figures; the second concentrates on the images and words that define the framework within which those facts and figures make sense.

W. L. T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror. The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present*

Just forty-eight hours after two hijacked jet airliners struck the World Trade Center (WTC) on 11 September 2001, the trailer for Sam Raimi's upcoming *Spider-Man* (2002) was hurriedly withdrawn from cinemas all across America. The short teaser, shot exclusively for marketing purposes and not consisting of scenes meant for inclusion in the final film, had shown the perpetrators of a smoothly orchestrated bank robbery fleeing in a helicopter through the skies of New York. Their celebrations, however, are abruptly brought to a halt, as somehow they become suspended precariously in mid-air, high above the city streets below. As the camera slowly pulls back, it reveals that they are actually caught in a giant spider's web, trapped between the imposing Twin Towers still dominating the Manhattan skyline. Not only was the trailer removed, but all of the film's posters in which the World Trade Center could be seen reflected in Spider-Man's eyes were also recalled. The distributor, Sony Pictures Entertainment, released a press statement, asserting,

Due to the devastating events that took place yesterday [11 September 2001] and out of respect for those involved, Sony Pictures Entertainment is requesting that all *Spider-Man* teaser posters and trailers be taken down and returned to the studio. Our profound sympathy goes out to the friends and families of those who have lost loved ones in this tragedy. (Sony Pictures Entertainment cited in Grossberg 2001)

The removal of the trailer for *Spider-Man* proved to be the opening shot in a protracted cultural battleground that continued throughout the post-9/11 decade and beyond. In the years that followed, American cinema had a distinctly problematic relationship with the traumatic events of September 11th 2001. As we will see, 9/11 was paradoxically both erased from the cinema screens and returned to in film after film. Some commentators expressed the view that the gratuitously violent spectacles that had characterised American cinema in the preceding decades, films that revelled in outrageous displays of wanton destruction and flagrant loss of human life, would lose their audiences after 9/11. In November 2001 Peter Matthews, in an article entitled 'Aftermath', predicted that such films would become forgotten relics of a bygone era.

For a long time to come, there will be little appetite for the entertainment staples of bombs, plane crashes and burning buildings, since to enjoy such kinetic excitement affectlessly seems a violation of the dead. Temporarily, the whole idea of entertainment becomes obscene – or at least those versions that offer clean, airbrushed carnage for fun and profit. Escapism in all its cultural forms might be said to rest finally on a denial of the fact of death. Now it cannot be denied, and that circumstance threatened to shake popular cinema to its roots. (Matthews 2001: 20)

Even studio executives articulated similar concerns. Amy Pascal of Columbia Pictures remarked: 'The world changed profoundly on Tuesday [11 September 2001] and clearly some of what we thought was entertaining yesterday isn't today' (cited in Eller 2001: A36). Mark Slouka in the article 'A year later: Notes of America's intimations of mortality' worried that art and, in particular, popular film, might become irrelevant after 9/11, echoing Theodore Adorno's widely quoted contention in his 'Cultural criticism and society' that 'after Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric' (1967: 34). How could American cinema possibly continue to function *semper idem* after America at large had been subjected to such a 'monstrous dose of reality' (Sontag 2001)?

As a direct result of these uncertainties a whole succession of films were re-shot, re-edited or had their release dates delayed by worried film studios, eager not to offend the public in the national outbreak of grief and mourning following 9/11. Barry Sonnenfeld's *Big Trouble* (2002), for example, had been set for release just a few weeks after 9/11 but was pushed back due to its portrayal of a nuclear device being smuggled onto a hijacked plane, a plot point that went from being a potentially humorous episode to a cultural taboo overnight. *The Sum of All Fears* (2002) had its Islamic jihadist terrorists changed to the less contentious neo-Nazis. *Bad Company* (2002) was delayed because of a key scene featuring a bomb primed and ready to explode in Grand Central Terminal, and *The Time Machine* (2002) suffered the same fate due to its depiction of a meteor attack on New York being seen as bearing too close a resemblance to the disturbing imagery of 9/11. The innocuous Gwyneth Paltrow romantic comedy *View from the Top* (2003) about a small-town woman and her dreams to become a flight attendant had its release date postponed because it was felt inappropriate to joke about air cabin crews in the aftermath of 9/11. *Buffalo Soldiers* (2003), which had been filmed before 9/11, saw itself delayed and then criticised for its satirical depiction of the US Army at a time when America was seen to be at war. The director of the film, Gregor Jordan, stated,

The film was finished before 9/11 and then got its premiere screening at the Toronto [International] Film Festival on September the 8th 2001. It was received very well and a bidding war amongst distributors ensued. We finally closed a deal with Miramax (Harvey Weinstein) on the night of September the 10th. So the timing for a film about drug fucked American soldiers was probably not so good. The film was delayed in the US and then when it was released it was effectively flushed down the toilet – put out on two screens with no marketing spend. (Jordan 2012)¹

Images of the Twin Towers, which Terry Smith described as 'key symbols within the later twentieth century society of spectacle, icons with the capacity

to stand for crucial values' (2003: 37), became the focus of much heated debate. Should they be shown on-screen or removed for fear of offending the grieving families of the victims of 9/11 and America as a whole? They were airbrushed out of the frivolous *Zoolander* released on 28 September 2001, as they were from *Serendipity* (2001), *Sidewalks of New York* (2001) and *People I Know* (2002).² However, Steven Spielberg, Cameron Crowe and Martin Scorsese decided to retain them in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), *Vanilla Sky* (2001) and *Gangs of New York* (2002). This discourse reached its zenith in May 2002 when an online appeal entitled 'Rename [*The Lord of the Rings:*] *The Two Towers* [2002] to something less offensive petition' gained some momentum in the media. The creator of that appeal, Kevin Klerck, wrote,

Those of us who have seen *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* [2002] know what an amazing director Peter Jackson is. When I learned that there apparently was to be a sequel, I was overjoyed. However, Peter Jackson has decided to tastelessly name the sequel *The Two Towers*. The title is clearly meant to refer to the attacks on the World Trade Center. In this post-September 11 world, it is unforgiveable that this should be allowed to happen. The idea is both offensive and morally repugnant. Hopefully, when Peter Jackson and, more importantly, New Line Cinema see the number of signatures on this petition, the title will be changed to something a little more sensitive. (Klerck cited in Refrag 2002)

Of course, the novel was published in 1954, and Klerck was well aware of this, yet more than a thousand people signed the document. It was later revealed to be a hoax, although many of the responses to it were genuine. Klerck's act was a satirical one aimed at the hypocrisy of studios altering their films because of 9/11. He noted, 'It's my way of pointing out how ridiculous people have gotten post-9/11' (cited in Refrag 2002).

In the days after the attacks, the media frequently framed its coverage of the tragic events as a series of personal narratives, focusing on tales of loss, heroism and redemption, removing any discussion of why the attacks may have been perpetrated in the first place. George W. Bush's assertion that America was targeted for attack because it is 'the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world' became echoed in editorials all across the country (Bush 2001). This rhetorical self-aggrandisement set a tone that was continued for the rest of the administration and would be mirrored in many American films produced in the subsequent decade. It was one that identified a stark divide between good and evil, with America uncritically on the side of the former. Anyone who sought to challenge this binary rhetoric or place the attacks in some sort of historical or socio-political context was vociferously criticised by the mainstream media and condemned as unpatriotic. Susan

Sontag was labelled a 'terrorist sympathiser' for suggesting that 'a few threads of historical awareness might help us understand what has just happened, and what may continue to happen' (Sontag 2001). One of the foremost commentators on American foreign policy, Noam Chomsky, was attacked by an army of critics led by Christopher Hitchens who called him one of those liberals who sought 'to "rationalise" the aggression of September 11' (Hitchens 2001). When Bill Maher pondered on air (on *Politically Incorrect* on ABC on 17 September 2001) whether the terrorists should be called cowards or not, his show was discontinued shortly after. Maher dared to suggest, 'We have been the cowards, lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away. That's cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building, say what you want about it, it's not cowardly' (cited in Goldberg 2002: 77). Jean Baudrillard found himself denounced for arguing that 9/11 was a manifestation of our collective fantasies, citing Hollywood's perpetual destruction of American iconic landmarks as evidence that bore witness to it. He stated, 'The fact that we have dreamt of this event, that everyone without exception has dreamt of it – because no one can avoid dreaming of the destruction of any power that has become hegemonic to this degree – is unacceptable to the Western moral conscience' (2003: 5).

Russ Feingold, one of only twenty-three US senators to vote against the Iraq War Resolution in 2002 (formally the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002) that gave the go-ahead to President George W. Bush to use military force against Iraq, argued that in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 it became almost impossible for anyone to disagree with the policies of the Bush administration without being labelled unpatriotic.

If Afghanistan and Iraq were linked in the fight against terrorism, then anyone who questioned the Iraq intervention was somehow questioning the pursuit of Osama Bin Laden, which of course no one was doing. It then followed, of course, that if you did not support every military venture of the Bush administration you did not really support the troops and your patriotism was doubtful. (Feingold 2012: 92)

Given this tempestuous climate, it came as no surprise that the American film industry was initially reluctant to produce films about 9/11 and the war on terror, and it was not until four years later in 2005 that the first theatrically released features about the conflict emerged. Yet no one could deny that there was something resolutely cinematic about the image of the two planes striking the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001. A familiar refrain by those who witnessed the events, whether first-hand or through the television screen, was, 'It's like a movie.' The British journalist David Usborne, in New York at the time of the attacks, insisted that the dust appeared from nowhere, like a

huge tidal wave, barrelling down the canyons of the financial district . . . The police went berserk, we went berserk, just running, running for our lives . . . we were in a scene from a Schwarzenegger film . . . thousands of Hollywood extras, mostly in suits for the office, with handbags and briefcases, just tearing through the streets of the city. Every few seconds we would snatch a look behind us. (Usborne cited in Summers and Swann 2012: 70)

Subsequently many concurred that 'no national event has been more cinematic, and more suited to cinematic representation, than the planes flying into the World Trade Center' (Cousins 2007: 63). The reason why these tragic images seemed so cinematic was because such destruction of iconic monuments had been a staple of American popular cinema for decades. Science-fiction and disaster films had regularly perpetrated great crimes on prominent American landmarks in the guise of earthquakes, tidal waves, bombs, meteors and even alien invasions. The World Trade Center had undeniably become a synecdochal image of New York and even America for many cinema-goers around the globe: its construction can be seen in the backgrounds of *The French Connection* (1971) (see Figure 1) and *Klute* (1971); throughout the 1970s it was both immortalised in black and white in Woody Allen's iconic *Manhattan* (1979) and climbed by a giant ape in *King Kong* (1976); in the 1980s it provided a backdrop for narratives about the American experience in *Coming to America* (1988), *Bright Lights, Big City* (1988) and *New York Stories* (1989), and even featured on the poster for all three of these films; and in the 1990s it was memorably destroyed in *Independence Day* (1996), *Deep Impact* (1998) and *Armageddon* (1998) (see Figure 2). When the actual images of the destruction of the Twin Towers on September 11th 2001 were repeated on television day after day as if on a loop, we *knew* that they were real, but they *felt* like some special effect conjured up by the tech wizards at Industrial Light & Magic (ILM) (see Figure 3).

J. Hoberman was certainly not alone when he described how the experience of 9/11 only made sense to him through the medium of film: 'the *déjà vu* of crowds fleeing Godzilla through Lower Manhattan canyons, the wondrously exploding skyscrapers and bellicose rhetoric of *Independence Day*, the romantic pathos of *Titanic* [1997], the wounded innocence of *Pearl Harbor* [2001], the cosmic insanity of *Deep Impact*, the sense of a world directed by Roland Emmerich for the benefit of Rupert Murdoch' (Hoberman 2007).³ Roland Emmerich, the director of *Independence Day* before 9/11 and *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *2012* (2009) after, one of Hollywood's foremost purveyors of what has become known as 'disaster porn', went even further, expressing concern that Hollywood's obsession with death and destruction might have even inspired the terrorists (see Corliss 2009). Emmerich stated, 'A lot of people mentioned



Figure 1 The construction of the World Trade Center seen in *The French Connection* (1971).



Figure 2 The reason why the tragic images of 9/11 seemed ‘just like a movie’ was because the destruction of iconic monuments had been a staple of American popular cinema for decades in blockbusters like *Armageddon* (1998).

Independence Day because of the images of destruction, which disturbed me a little. I had this feeling that there is some terrorist watching my movie in some cave and saying he should do it like the aliens’ (cited in Epstein n.d.s.). The maverick auteur Robert Altman contentiously concurred, ‘Nobody would have thought to commit an atrocity like that unless they’d seen it in a movie. How dare we continue to show this kind of mass destruction in movies? I just believe we created this atmosphere and taught them how to do it’ (cited in Hoberman 2007).



Figure 3 When the actual images of the destruction of the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001 were repeated on television as if on a loop, audiences *knew* that they were real, but they *felt* like some special effect conjured up by the tech wizards at Industrial Light & Magic (ILM). Permission granted by Brian Boyd, Sr ©.

Popular cinema is often derided with the epithet 'it's only a movie', but *The 'War on Terror' and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second* argues that there is no more potent cultural artefact than popular film. Where should one turn to for a more resonant and compelling cultural barometer than cinema? Which artefacts are able to reveal more to us about the turbulent social and political climate of, for example, 1970s America than visceral cinematic texts like *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Chinatown* (1974), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978) or *Apocalypse Now* (1979)? Regardless of their political perspective or genre, they *are* the 1970s. We do not take them at face value, nor do we naively view them as simply reflecting the cultures in which they were made; instead, we regard them as dynamic texts, almost living time capsules of the era, rife with the discontinuity and ambiguity that characterised the decade. In them the fears and the anxieties of the times are projected on the screen for all to see. Correspondingly, a study of American cinema in the years that followed 9/11, eight years of which were during the presidency of George W. Bush, similarly reveals its trends: a period that came to be largely defined by the war on terror. Simply put, American film in the first decade of the new millennium became a war of representation and nothing less than 'the locus for America's negotiation of September 11 and its aftermath' (Schopp and Hill 2009: 13).

The central question explored in *The 'War on Terror' and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second* is in what way was American cinema able to uniquely reflect, interpret and even influence the cultural discourse of the era? This book examines the shifting coordinates of post-9/11 film to reveal a body of work that functions not as a simplistic cinema of escapism, as we are often led to believe, but as a collection of visceral responses to the era, whether consciously designed by the filmmakers to be so or not. In this way a substantial number of the films that emerged from the United States in the decade after 9/11 can be quite clearly seen as a reaction to the 'cultural trauma' of 9/11 and the war on terror. In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2005) Jeffrey C. Alexander argues that a 'cultural trauma' occurs 'when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways' (2004: 1). Alexander asserts, as many writers on trauma have, that the origin of a trauma is not located within the event itself, but in its aftermath: how it is culturally represented and how it comes to be understood by the society that it affected. In this definition, a trauma is never a 'natural' event, even if it appears to be so; traumas emerge as a process that is constructed at both cultural and symbolic levels: 'historically made, not born' (Smelser 2004: 37). Just as in September 1945 the holocaust had not yet become 'the Holocaust', we must ask ourselves how and when

did the events of 11 September 2001 become '9/11'? The role of the media is instrumental in this process of enculturation and frames how a society develops an understanding of a traumatic event, not just for the generation that experienced it, but just as significantly, for those generations that follow.

Even if the traumatic event is highly contested, a master narrative soon emerges, which is a collective understanding of the incident. It is one that appears on the surface to be ideologically neutral, but is, in actual fact, highly politicised. This master narrative is an almost sacred one; so central does it become to national identity that denial of it is considered an act of solecism bordering on the heretical. The master narrative of the cultural trauma of 9/11 was quickly formed within a matter of days of the attacks and saw itself perpetuated in a variety of media forms over the ensuing decade. Its understanding of 9/11 is of a heinous and unprovoked attack on a virtuous and blameless nation, an attack that was impossible to anticipate and that brought about a reluctant 'end of innocence' for the United States. Thus, according to this logic, America's responses to 9/11, whatever they may be, were legitimised due to the nature of the crime that had been perpetrated against it by individuals who, rather than being soldiers or criminals, were examples of Immanuel Kant's 'radical evil' (2009: 42).

As the years progressed, American film played a central role in propagating this hegemonic narrative, both in explicit (yet fictionalised) depictions of 9/11 and the war on terror and in allegorical accounts. Indeed, many of the cinematic texts explored in this book offer variations of this template and seek to reify 9/11 as an almost ahistorical moment.

- In Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006) the unprovoked and monstrous terrorist attacks on September 11th 2001 emerge from nowhere on an unsuspecting population. In the few days portrayed, New York is a vividly realised community, populated by those who put aside their differences to come together in response to a great national tragedy. The film concludes with the rescue of two of those trapped under the rubble of the Twin Towers offering a cathartic sense of closure to a highly traumatic event. One of them, John McLoughlin (Nicolas Cage), suggests that the harrowing experience they have all shared offers a lesson not just to America but to the whole world. He states, '9/11 showed us what human beings are capable of. The evil, yeah, sure. But it also brought out the goodness we forgot could exist. People taking care of each other for no other reason than it was the right thing to do.' (See *War of the Worlds* (2005), *United 93* (2006) and *Act of Valour* (2012) for other films of this pattern.)
- *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2011), based on the novel of the same name by Jonathan Safran Foer, views 9/11 through the eyes

of a young boy, Oskar Schell, who loses his beloved father Thomas (Tom Hanks) in the destruction of the Twin Towers. Oskar finds a key left behind by his father that he presumes is part of one of their elaborate puzzle games and embarks on a search across New York looking for clues as to what the key fits, during which he meets many people whose lives have been similarly touched by the tragedy. (See *Remember Me* (2010), *Julie & Julia* (2009) and *Reign Over Me* (2007) for other films of this pattern.)

- Even films that portray the broader events of the war on terror adopted a comparable perspective. Kathryn Bigelow's Academy Award-winning combat drama *The Hurt Locker* (2008) (explored in more detail in Chapter 2) is a visceral recreation of the tour of duty of a team of bomb disposal experts stationed in Iraq. The film provides an intimate and moving insight into the traumatic experiences of American soldiers at war. (See *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), *Lone Survivor* (2013), *Stop-Loss* (2008) and *Body of Lies* (2008) for other films of this pattern.)

These three films and the greater part of post-9/11 American cinema embody the collective understanding of 9/11 and the war on terror as a resounding cultural trauma. Outwardly, they appear to be ideologically neutral dramatisations of historical events, however, whether they portray a family worrying about the fate of their loved ones at Ground Zero, a young boy grieving over the loss of his father or an American soldier just trying to do his job and make a difference to the people of Iraq, they reproduce an uncritical and unreflective narrative of American victimisation, a pronounced disconnection from the complexities of the geopolitical arena, and, in some cases, even an elaborate erasure of political and historical context.

- *World Trade Center* offers up an idealised, almost prelapsarian New York, populated by martyrs in place of human beings in the working-class everymen heroes of John McLoughlin and Will Jimeno (Michael Peña) and their adoring, grieving families anxiously waiting for their return. While the film purports to be apolitical and 'not about the motives of the terrorists, or who the terrorists were, or the politics of 9/11 in any way' (Oliver Stone cited in Abramowitz 2005b: E1), by depoliticising one of the defining events of the new millennium it manages to bind itself to quasi-religious ideas about US exceptionalism and recreate the Bush administration's interpretations of 9/11 as an event without historical context (outside of the attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941). The defining character of its redemptory narrative is not McLoughlin or Jimeno, but Marine

Sergeant Dave Karnes (Michael Shannon) who is called, as if by God, to the ruins of the World Trade Center. Karnes says, 'God gave me a gift – to be able to help people, to defend our country. I feel him calling on me now for this mission.' The film's postscript reveals that after 9/11 Karnes volunteered for service in Iraq: 'We are going to need some good men out there to avenge this.' The centralisation of this character led B. Ruby Rich to suggest that the film 'seems explicitly to endorse the bloodthirsty revenge that has soiled America's hands ever since, positioning a Marine, an agent of war, as the film's savior' (Rich 2006: 18).⁴

- The same is true for the portentous and manipulative *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* that presents Tom Hanks's Thomas Schell as an idealised father who becomes a surrogate for the sense of security lost to the whole of America on 9/11. The character of Oskar is a shrewdly calculated exercise in contrived sentimentality, half Kevin McCallister from *Home Alone* (1990) and half Raymond Babbitt from *Rain Man* (1988). The film was described by Andrea Peyser (2012), writing for the *New York Post*, as '9/11 porn' for its cynical appropriation of cultural trauma and its use of the unidentified 'falling man' re-envisioned as Tom Hanks tumbling from the Twin Towers in slow motion towards the camera and his death (see Figure 4). In doing so the film turns an image that Mark D. Thompson called 'perhaps the most powerful image of despair at the beginning of the twenty-first century' (2008: 62–3) into an aesthetised and opportunistic pop culture moment designed to give a lacklustre tear-jerker emotional resonance.
- Despite its undeniably visceral re-creation of deployment in Iraq, *The Hurt Locker* rewrites the war as an exclusively humanitarian enterprise with the United States cast as the saviour of innocents and its soldiers as victims rather than as the perpetrators of acts of violence (see Figure 5). This highly subjective perspective led Mamoon Alabassi to assert that the film should not be truly considered an Iraq War film at all, as it 'does not really address the Iraq war, the reasons for the presence of the US squad or even the bombs they are supposed to defuse, and most importantly it ignores the feelings of the Iraqis' (2010).

These narratives share a conspicuous detachment from disconcerting questions of politics, history and causality. While it may seem unjustified to single out individual films for failing to provide socio-political context, when they are a part of such an overwhelming pattern such a criticism becomes not only pertinent, but entirely necessary. These films insulate audiences by providing them



Figure 4 Tom Hanks as the 'falling man' in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2011), a film that was described by one critic as '9/11 porn' (Peyser 2012).



Figure 5 While on the surface it appears to offer an ideologically neutral perspective on the Iraq War, *The Hurt Locker* (2008) envisions the conflict as a distinctly humanitarian enterprise with the United States cast as the saviour of innocents and its soldiers as victims rather than as the perpetrators of acts of violence.

with a cinema of proselytisation, one that is content to perpetuate the master narrative of 9/11 instead of asking troubling questions, as Anthony Summers and Robbyn Swann did in their book *The Eleventh Day*: 'Did the story begin twenty years ago during the Gulf War, when a great American army was installed in Saudi Arabia, a land sacred to Muslims? Did it begin in 1948, when the United States recognised the declaration of a Jewish state to be known as

Israel? Or on the day in 1938 when Americans discovered in Saudi Arabia one of the largest reserves of oil on the planet?' (2012: 11). Or Chalmers Johnson in his *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (2000), who did not predict the events of 9/11, but did correctly anticipate that '[w]orld politics in the 21st century will in all likelihood be driven primarily by the blowback from the second half of the twentieth century – that is, from the unintended consequences of the Cold War and the crucial American decision to maintain a Cold War posture in a post Cold War world' (229).

This is not to say that 9/11 was not a terrible tragedy, for it most certainly was, yet in the subjective narratives of victimisation and the quasi-mythological approaches to the event that emerged from the American film industry, much is lost. Slavoj Žižek acutely emphasised the moral quandary faced by those in the West about their reactions to 9/11 when he pointed out: 'If we simply, only and unconditionally condemn it, we simply appear to endorse the blatantly ideological position of American innocence under attack by Third World Evil; if we draw attention to the deeper sociopolitical causes of Arab extremism, we simply appear to blame the victim which ultimately got what it deserved' (2012: 62). Post-9/11 American cinema faced a similar predicament and in the overwhelming majority of cases it chose the first option. Yet Žižek went on to offer a third path: 'The only possible solution here is to reject this very opposition and to adopt both positions simultaneously' (2013: 62). However, this 'third-way' was an approach very rarely adopted by American society or film in the ensuing decade. In these cinematic texts we are able to observe a marked hierarchy of identity and subjectivity on display, where Western (most often American) experiences, almost without exception, are prioritised and portrayed as of greater worth than the experiences of non-Westerners, a vivid embodiment of what Judith Butler described as the 'precarious life' of non-Western people in her book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004). Therefore, while Dori Laub (2003) quite rightly called 9/11 'an event without a voice', in the decade after 9/11 American cinema provided it with one that played a substantial role in how 9/11 and the war on terror came to be understood by the public at large.

While some have argued that 'popular culture, or at least the part of it transmitted by the mass media, tends to "go in one eye and out the other", and that most individual television programmes, movies, and magazines are ephemeral for most people' (Gans 1999: xiii), writers like Siegfried Kracauer (1947), Robin Wood (1986) and Anton Kaes (2011) as well as many others have persuasively demonstrated how national cinemas are frequently able to function as a materialisation of ideological currents and are particularly revealing of the political and social climate in which the films are made. In his ground-breaking work *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947), Siegfried Kracauer argued that German films from the Weimar period

were able to reflect national consciousness in compelling ways, depicting a deep fear of chaos and a passionate desire for order that would see Germany embrace the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) and Adolf Hitler's promise of a restoration of national dignity and pride. Kracauer was criticised at the time (and it is contentious even today) for so explicitly linking popular culture with political ideology, but Anton Kaes's remarkable *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (2011), despite a different theoretical approach, advocates something similar. Kaes sees films of the same period, not as a foreshadowing of the rise of fascism, but as rather a personification of the traumatic aftermath of Germany's bitter defeat in World War One. Even though their conclusions are different, theirs is a shared contention that films are able to function as a potent embodiment of national discourse and what Kaes calls the 'historical unconscious' (2011: 2). Therefore, just as Kracauer and Kaes read films of the Weimar era like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), *Nosferatu* (1922) and *Metropolis* (1927) as literal manifestations of the ideological currents of Weimar era Germany, *The 'War on Terror' and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second* proposes that new millennial American film is able to articulate the divisive discourse of American identity in the immediate post-9/11 years. The films that emerged in America at this time are far from a homogenous entity: they are rife with the paradoxes and contradictions that characterised the decade. However, they often embodied a powerful fear of an Other that frequently happened to be Muslim or Arabic (e.g. *300* (2006), *Act of Valour* (2012) and *Taken* (2008)), or from elsewhere (Eastern Europe in *Hostel* (2005), *Chernobyl Diaries* (2012) and *Transsiberian* (2008), or Mexico in *Man on Fire* (2004), *How I Spent my Summer Vacation* (2012) and *Conspiracy* (2008)); they expressed anxieties about the effects of the USA Patriot Act and the expanding powers of executive authority (e.g. *Children of Men* (2006) and *Source Code* (2011)); they explored the ramifications of the collusion between corporations and politics (e.g. *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004) and *Michael Clayton* (2007)); they explored fears of an environmental apocalypse (e.g. *The Day after Tomorrow* and *The Road* (2009)); they debated the morality of torture (e.g. *Rendition* (2007), *Mission: Impossible III* (2006) and *The Dark Knight*); and they both embraced U.S. unilateralism (e.g. *The Expendables* (2010) and *The Kingdom* (2007) and criticised it (e.g. *Syriana* (2005) and *Green Zone* (2010)). In doing so, they provide a revealing interrogation of the fears and fantasies of the United States and an agreement with Kracauer's assertion that 'the evolution of the films of a nation are fully understandable only in relation to the actual psychological pattern of this nation' (1947: 5). At the very least, as Mark Lacey suggested, American cinema became 'a space where "commonsense" ideas about global politics and history are (re)-produced and where stories about what is acceptable behaviour from states and individuals are naturalised and legitimated' (2003: 614).

Trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth have long suggested that a certain amount of time is required between when traumatic events occur and when those traumatised by those events can begin to come to terms with their experiences. She suggests 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' (1995: 4). In one of the epigraphs that open this book Caruth argues that this delayed response to trauma 'takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviours stemming from the event' (4), a more fitting description of American cinema in the post-9/11 years would be hard to find. In fact, in the first decade of the new millennium, 9/11 and the war on terror became a symbolic touchstone for American film with a sense of repetition bordering on the compulsive, as the injunction to 'Never Forget' seemed wholeheartedly embraced by the American film industry. September 11th 2001 permeates the screen in detailed re-creations of its *mise en scène*: the dust, debris, panic and falling buildings of films like *Cloverfield* (2008), *2012* or *Man of Steel* (2013) or the crashing planes of *Knowing* (2009), *Vanishing on 7th Street* (2010) and *War of the Worlds* (see Figures 6 and 7).⁵ These visual motifs were returned to again and again in films that frequently refused to directly acknowledge 9/11, but self-consciously evoked it almost obsessively, their fictional re-creations becoming almost palimpsestic images, with September 11th lingering, still visible beneath the surface. In this way post-9/11 films become inextricably bound to 9/11 and the war on terror almost regardless of genre.

- When aliens attack New Jersey in Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*, a young girl asks her father, 'Is it the terrorists?' as she has been raised to view terrorism as an omnipresent fear in her life. From its ash and dust-covered victims, to its sustained depiction of destruction and devastation shot with a deliberate eye on 9/11 iconography, *War of the Worlds* uncomfortably 'remakes' 9/11 through the prism of a science-fiction blockbuster. As Spielberg himself stated, 'I think 9/11 reformed everything I'm putting into [the film] . . . We now know what it feels like to be terrorised' (cited in Abramowitz 2005a: E26).
- When her daughter is abducted in *Gone Baby Gone* (2007), Helene McCready (Amy Ryan) cries out in anguish, 'I feel like 9/11,' as the only comparable impactful event of her life were the terrorist attacks in 2001.
- In the interplanetary colonial narrative of *Avatar* (2009) the aggressively militaristic Colonel Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang) seeks to secure the precious resource known as Unobtainium found on the distant planet of Pandora. He targets the indigenous Na'vi who

refuse to move from their homeland with a war cry of, 'Our only security lies in pre-emptive attack. We will fight terror with terror!' The connections to the war in Iraq are so pronounced that some suggested, 'Ironically, and contrary to official film labelling, for many Iraqis *Avatar* is seen as the most accurate Iraq movie so far' (Alabassi 2010).

- In George Romero's apocalyptic zombie film *Land of the Dead* (2005), a Cheney-esque figure, Gerald Kaufman (Dennis Hopper), presides over the only secure location left, evocatively named Fiddler's Green in one of many references that connected America to the decline of the Roman Empire throughout the decade. Denied entry to the tower, one of Kaufman's erstwhile employees targets the building with a Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD) and the threat, 'I'm gonna do a jihad on his ass.' In response, Kaufman offers the deadpan retort, 'We don't negotiate with terrorists,' – a line that was echoed in several films throughout the era from *Tropic Thunder* (2008) to *Olympus has Fallen* (2013).
- In *Shortbus* (2006) when the drag artist Justin Bond is asked why so many young people flooded into New York in the 2000s, he answers, '9/11. It's the only thing *real* that's ever happened to them' (emphasis in original) (see Figures 6 and 7).

The 'War on Terror' and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second postulates that American cinema's obsession with 9/11 and the war on terror evokes the Freudian notion of 'repetition compulsion' in which the traumatised individual is repeatedly compelled to return to the traumatic event in an attempt to come to terms with the trauma. Undoubtedly we saw this as early as the morning of 11 September 2001 itself, with the continuous loop of the planes striking the Twin Towers broadcast on television, which was then repeated for days and days almost without end, as stunned Americans tried to reconcile themselves to the fact that they had been attacked on their own soil for the first time since 1812. Despite the aversion to recreating the events of 9/11 directly on-screen, there was a compulsive re-enactment of 9/11 and the war on terror in various forms in American cinema in film after film. In many of these fictionalisations, which range from explicit dramatisations to allegorical accounts, the events of 9/11 are rewritten in order for the subject to retroactively gain mastery over the trauma: whether the attacks are portrayed as entirely unprovoked, emphasising the wholesome righteousness of the United States (e.g. *World Trade Center*, *United 93*, *Taken* and *Cloverfield*), or American soldiers are depicted as the undeserving victims of the war both during their time in combat and after (e.g. *The Hurt Locker* and *Stop-Loss*), or the conflict is rewritten to portray the United States as some sort of plucky underdog fighting and



Figure 6 *Man of Steel* (2013) was one of many films to symbolically re-enact the collapse of the Twin Towers. It was an image that became a recurring visual motif in American cinema after 9/11.



Figure 7 Distraught crowds fleeing the wall of dust after the collapse of the World Trade Center. Permission granted by Denver Casado ©.

winning a war against incredible odds (e.g. *Transformers* (2007), *Act of Valour* and *Zero Dark Thirty*). Even the only two direct accounts of September 11th to be released at the cinema, *United 93* and *World Trade Center*, chose to focus on the heroism and redemption of the day rather than on the great loss of life or the historico-political context of the attacks. The more provocative films that emerged from America in the post-9/11 decade, many of which are also studied in this book, replay the war on terror but in very different ways. Some do provide a striking sense of context, often through a process of reverse focalisation and an attempt to deconstruct the quasi-mythological approach to dramatisations of trauma, revenge and justice that emerged after 9/11, even daring to suggest that the United States may not be such a bastion of moral clarity as President George W. Bush would have had us believe.

It is important to register that this sense of national trauma was not just an abstract one; several studies showed that after 9/11 many Americans suffered from recognisable symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Herscher and Pascual (2008) recorded that as many as 7.5 per cent of New Yorkers and 20 per cent of those who were near the World Trade Center when it collapsed declared themselves to be suffering from psychological conditions typically observed in soldiers returning from combat zones. Of course, one cannot directly equate the experiences of those who witnessed the events through their television screens to those who found themselves directly affected by the attacks. However, there certainly was a sense that many were profoundly moved and shocked by the events of 9/11, and a body of literature strongly supports the assertion that one does not need to experience a harrowing event directly in order to be traumatised by it and that vicarious trauma is a very real phenomenon (see Sontag 1977; Hirsch 2004). The genocide of the Native American Indians, the forced enslavement of Africans and the Holocaust are still profoundly affectual traumas that resonate throughout the generations, impacting on the present even though the event was perpetrated decades or even centuries ago. In the case of 9/11, Robert Jay Lifton asserted, 'As a result of 9/11, all Americans shared a particular psychological experience. They became "survivors". A survivor is one who has encountered, been exposed to, or witnessed death and has remained alive' (2003: 93).

In the overwhelming presence of these rather uncritical adoptions of the hegemonic master narrative of 9/11, audiences were forced to turn to documentaries or allegorical depictions of the war on terror for more compelling and sustained reflections on the issues that arose in the wake of 9/11.⁶ Such allegorical films can be found across a varied range of genres, many of which are explored in this book: in science-fiction (e.g. *Cloverfield* and *The Dark Knight* (2009)), in horror (e.g. *Hostel* (2005), *Land of the Dead* (2005) and *The Village* (2004)), even in historical drama (e.g. *There Will Be Blood* (2007), *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) and *The Eagle* (2011)). All can be read,

with varying degrees of success, allegorically, their texts redolent with themes that evoke America's turbulent political and social climate in the years since 2001. Despite the writings of many on the value of the allegorical mode (see Benjamin 1977; de Man 1979; Jameson 1981), a lingering distrust of allegory remains in favour of an uncritical acceptance of the ability of realism to render the world objectively. This book explores the value of allegory while at the same time offers analysis of several films that on the surface purport to offer 'realistic' and apolitical depictions of events (see Chapter 1 on *Zero Dark Thirty* and *United 93*). To disregard allegory is to refute its ability to articulate concerns, which, for a variety of reasons, become impossible to express explicitly in the climate in which they are made. The allegorical form often provided a valuable witness to ideological tension throughout the twentieth century: from Cold War fears of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) and Soviet invasion (also fears of the intrusion of HUAC upon civil liberties in the same period) reproduced in the science-fiction films of the 1950s to what Douglas Pye described as the 'Vietnam Western', in films like *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *Little Big Man* (1970), *Soldier Blue* (1970) and *Ulzana's Raid* (1972), which were able to manifest the ideological ruptures of the 1960s and 1970s before they were dealt with explicitly by American cinema in films directly about the Vietnam War (see Pye 1981). Walter Benjamin (1977) suggested that allegory emerges most frequently in periods of crisis and uncertainty; correspondingly, it is no coincidence that some of the most powerful films to emerge from American cinema in the new millennium are allegorical texts. Allegorical interpretations of these films are present to those who wish to seek them out and absent to those who do not care to. Therefore, one can appreciate Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* as a consummate example of the popular superhero genre, Paul Greengrass's *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007) as a thrilling spy caper and a direct descendant of *Dr. No* (1962) and *Goldfinger* (1964), and Steven Spielberg's adaptation of *War of the Worlds* as a rip-roaring sci-fi adventure, or one can look beyond their spectacularly realised blockbuster patina to see how far the films may offer a discourse on the war on terror era.

One may argue that this displacement into allegory is evidence of the failure of American cinema to adequately confront the war on terror era directly, and this is certainly true. However, in displacement into allegory, American cinema often proves able to function as a site of sustained and interrogative discourse on the era. Furthermore, Claire Sisco King argues that allegory is actually an inherent part of the trauma process: 'Allegory itself might be understood as a post-traumatic form. Characterised by both repetition (a return to a prior tale) and displacement (a refusal to confront that past openly), allegory performs symptoms characteristic of trauma at the same time that it attempts to enact a sense of mastery' (2012: 128–9). Therefore, we can discern that the popular

films American audiences embraced in these years, films like *Land of the Dead*, *Cloverfield* and *Taken*, texts that may seem on the surface like escapist fare, on closer inspection often reveal themselves to be vivid encapsulations of the prevailing ideological debates of the decade and able to, as Hillary Chute has argued about Art Spiegelman's remarkable comic book *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004), 'unmoor the trauma of 9/11 from 2001' (2007: 240).

In his book *Shocking Representations: Historical Trauma, National Cinema and the Modern Horror Film* (2005), Adam Lowenstein traces how periods of historical and political turmoil, what he calls 'allegorical moments', often become manifested in film where one is able to observe 'a shocking collision of film, spectator, and history where registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted and intertwined' (2). Therefore, in his chapter on American cinema of the 1970s he is able to consider a film like *The Last House on the Left* (1972), which ostensibly seems to have no explicit connection to the political realities of the 1970s, as a text able to 'confront the divisive historical trauma of the Vietnam era along the axes of political demonology that constitute it' (113). Similarly Robin Wood and Peter Lev perform a remarkable disquisition of 1970s' American cinema in their works *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (1986) and *American Films of the 1970s: Conflicting Visions* (2000). They are able to see genre films like *Dirty Harry* (1971), *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), *Sisters* (1973), *Star Wars* (1977) and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) not just as disposable entertainment, but as 'key moments of a debate on what America is and what America should be' (Lev 2000: 185). Thus Wood, Lowenstein and Lev join writers like Kracauer and Kaes in their desire to challenge preconceived assumptions that popular cinema is an inconsequential medium with little to say about the ideological realities in which it is produced.

Despite many concurring with Gene Seymour who wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* on 21 September 2001 that 'the whole notion of making spectacle out of mass destruction now seems trivial and indulgent at best, insensitive and tasteless at worst' (2001: F10), within a few brief years American cinema had not only begun to make films that evoked 9/11, but unquestionably subsumed one of the greatest traumatic events in the history of the United States into its narratives, re-packaged it and used it in order to sell movie tickets. In this understanding film becomes part of an extensive collection of ways in which 9/11 was constructed as a national trauma and then consumerised, as Dana Heller asserted in *The Selling of 9/11: How a National Tragedy became a Commodity* (2005). Heller charges that Americans 'both participated in, and bore witness to, a rapid transformation of the World Trade Center attacks into commodities aimed at repackaging turbulent and chaotic emotions, reducing them to pious, quasi-religious nationalism' (6). Like the 9/11 memorabilia that flooded the markets in the guise of memorial T-shirts, snow globes, poker chips

and postcards, 9/11 was incorporated into American cinema as one of its fundamental narrative and visual tropes in the first decade of the new millennium. As Stephen Prince argues in his book *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism* (2009), Hollywood 'seized upon terrorism as a kind of godsend, as a trope capable of animating popular genres for the foreseeable future because the issues posed by terrorism presently show no end coming' (306).

While I have used (and continue to use) the word 'reflect' to describe the relationship between film and society, one must recognise that the term is not entirely sufficient. Films do much more than reflect the cultures in which they are made; they instigate a dialogical relationship with them and even influence the public's perception of the events they portray. John Markert, writing in *Post-9/11 Cinema: Through a Lens Darkly* (2011), recognised the inadequacy of the word 'reflect' for its task, preferring to suggest that films may refract their cultural climate. Markert posits: 'Refraction theory suggests that recurring exposure to a film's message may not just reinforce existing attitudes and beliefs but shape them' (xx). Douglas Kellner chose to use the term 'transcode' with its pertinent contemporary technological associations to 'describe how specific political discourses [are] . . . translated, or encoded, into media texts' (2). This volume concurs with both Kellner and Markert and argues that American film in this decade did much more than just reproduce national fears and fantasies, but rather played a fundamental role in shaping them, restructuring how audiences viewed the war on terror. What is certain is that *every* film is ideological regardless of its genre or subject matter; as Comolli and Narboni memorably argued in 1976 '*every film is political*, inasmuch as it is determined by the ideology which produces it' (24). Thus, many films that on the surface seem to be disconnected from the contemporary political arena are, on close analysis, extremely politically charged texts. Films like *The Eagle*, *300*, *Taken* and *Marvel Avengers Assemble* (US title: *The Avengers*) appear to be generic American films, variations on those that have been made for decades, and in one sense they are, but at the same time they are affective dramatisations of moods and debates inextricably intertwined with new millennial America. Whether they are reifications of the ideological myths underpinning the identity of the United States or deconstructions of them, each, without a doubt, are the bearers of ideology and our political unconscious, what Frederic Jameson called highly 'socially symbolic acts' (1981: 20), whether their writers and directors intended them to be or not.

These complicated relationships are at the centre of *The 'War on Terror' and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second*, which asks the problematic question: 'What is a post-9/11 film?' Arguably, it is not enough to simply categorise all those films made after 11 September 2001 as post-9/11 films. While in a chronological sense they undoubtedly are, to truly be a post-9/11 film is to resonate with the decade. For every *Dark Knight*, *Avatar*, *Bourne Ultimatum*,

Hostel, *War of the Worlds* and *Cloverfield*, films this book contends positively resound with the tensions of the era, there are dozens of films made in the 2000s worthy of critical study but not included here by virtue of the fact that they are not regarded by the author as post-9/11 texts as the term has been defined. Of course, this selective process requires judgements to be made as to which films are and are not germane to debates about 9/11 and the war on terror. What makes Brian De Palma's *Redacted* (2007) more than just another war film? What makes Christopher Nolan's iteration of Batman (*Batman Begins* (2005)) distinctly post-9/11 in its presentation of a narrative that has existed in various forms since 1939? Or Steven Spielberg's adaptation of H. G. Wells's classic alien invasion novel *The War of the Worlds* (1898) intrinsically connected to the post-9/11 era? In the same way we must be careful not to see apophenic images of 9/11 and the war on terror everywhere, something I am quite sure this book will be accused of in any case. It is possible to get carried away, as Tom Pollard does several times in his otherwise astute *Hollywood 9/11: Superheroes, Supervillains, and Super Disasters* (2011), when he insists there is a 'subtle yet distinct post-9/11 message' (45) in Robert Zemeckis's *Beowulf* (2007), which apparently equates the three monsters Beowulf defeats with Bush's 'Axis of Evil' Iraq, North Korea and Iran. How can we discern what might be, as David Holloway calls them, 'modish' (2008: 75) references to the war on terror and what constitutes a text that has a discernible reciprocal relationship with the era? Is a science-fiction film like *Cloverfield* simply a new millennial reincarnation of a classic monster B movie, a cynical manipulation of traumatic imagery designed to make a quick buck at the box office, or a film that provides us with an opportunity to both vicariously experience and deconstruct the spectacle of 9/11 through the safety of an alien invasion film? Once again we see that the films American audiences escaped to in the post-9/11 era are not at all disconnected from the historical moment they are made in, but, on the contrary, are deeply immersed in it. Thus, it is readily apparent that the classification 'post-9/11' is inherently unstable in a variety of ways, as films like *28 Days Later* (2002), *The Bourne Identity* (2002) and *Minority Report* (2002) reveal. All three of these films were in production before, during and after 9/11, but have come to be regarded as key post-9/11 films. Of course, films are not closed texts and they certainly do not have one all-encompassing meaning. As Anton Kaes observes, 'Films are never organic, unified wholes carrying a single message. Rather, they are fractured entities that must be read, like products of the unconscious, by means of their omissions and silences' (2009: 5). It is this 'fractured' nature of post-9/11 cinema that makes it so compelling, and one of the central aims of this book is to open up these fractures to further debate, by suggesting how these texts might be connected to the era and asking the reader to decide for themselves.

While American cinema certainly did not experience some sort of monolithic

change in the post-9/11 era, it is clear that a sustained set of changes in emphasis can be observed, a foregrounding of tropes that may have been existent in prior decades but that were often presented rather differently after 9/11. We then must ask the question, 'What kind of films have emerged from the United States in the years since 9/11?' Did they endorse the Bush administration or were they critical of its policies? Matthew Alford's *Reel Power: Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy* (2010) would have us believe that all Hollywood movies made for more than \$30 million are inherently conservative and have been so for decades. Whereas Michael Medved in his *Hollywood against America* (1992) has argued the complete opposite – that Hollywood has historically functioned as a left-wing factory producing film after film that undermines core American values and traditions. Alford states, 'The most critical position Hollywood adopts on screen is to say that well-meaning forays into other countries backfire, with Americans – particularly those representatives of powerful institutions – being the significant victims of such innocent lapses' (3). There certainly is something to this, as we will see, as many American movies discussed in these pages wholeheartedly embraced the so-called Bush Doctrine and its values. However, America undeniably produced films across the broad political spectrum, many of which were vociferous in their criticism of the ideological path that the United States took at the beginning of the new millennium. Yet this book attempts to not adopt the style of Douglas Kellner's *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* (2010), which despite its frequent partisanship, is the defining book written on post-9/11 cinema to date. Kellner implicitly categorises American films made in this period as either progressive, and, therefore, worthwhile (i.e. those that criticise the Bush administration) or reactionary, and, therefore, contemptible (those that endorse the Bush administration). This book approaches post-9/11 American cinema in a less reductive fashion, regarding a film's value not exclusively by its political ideology. Thus, conservative films like *Taken*, *Act of Valour* and *300* are not failures just because of their reactionary perspectives, but are regarded as significant texts for what they are able to reveal to us about a nation at war.

The 'War on Terror' and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second asks, 'What role does film play in the understanding of cultural and historical events?' One might argue that as memory of the original events fades, the importance of media representations of cultural traumas may even grow in significance when the trauma is transmitted from generation to generation, as in the process 'media and memory transform each other' (van Dijck 2008: 21). Marita Sturken asked,

What does it mean for a *culture* to remember? The collective remembering of a specific culture can often appear similar to the memory of an individual – it provides cultural identity and gives a sense of the impor-

tance of the past. Yet the process of cultural memory is bound up in complex political stakes and meanings. It both defines a culture and is the means by which its divisions and conflicting agendas are revealed. To define a memory as cultural is, in effect, to enter into a debate about what memory means. (Sturken 1997: 1; emphasis in original)

Whether it is World War Two, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War or 9/11, cultural understandings of a historical event become highly mediated through their representation. Alison Landsberg argues that these media texts, rather than being inconsequential, actually function as powerful ‘prosthetic memories’ that are able to give us memories of events and experiences we did not gain through first-hand involvement. She states, ‘What this suggests is that the experience within the movie theatre and the memories that the cinema affords – despite the fact that the spectator did not live through them – might be as significant in constructing, or deconstructing, the spectator’s identity as any experience that s/he actually lived through’ (1995: 180). Andrew Hoskins provides an insight into how this process may work in his *Televising War: From Vietnam to Iraq* (2004), describing images or sequences called ‘media flash frames’ that prove so potent that they can be later misremembered as memories rather than images on a screen. As evidence of this he cites a 1992 *The New York Times* (NYT)/CBS survey concerning the assassination of President John F. Kennedy that reveals that many years later a considerable number of people believed they had seen the Zapruder assassination footage live, whereas in truth it was only broadcast on television to the public for the first time in March 1975, some twelve years after the initial event. The same poll revealed that 75 per cent of those asked believed that there had been an official cover-up in the case. Is it a coincidence that Oliver Stone’s visceral conspiracy drama *JFK* (1991) had been released the year before? (See D. Esch (1999).) Michael L. Kurtz suggested that ‘with the exception of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* . . . *JFK* probably had a greater impact on public opinion than any other work of art in American history’ (2000: 174). Films also function as ‘media flash frames’ and are capable of influencing our understanding of real-life events that are mediated through the screen. In her book, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (1997), Marita Sturken quotes a Vietnam veteran by the name of William Adams who stated, ‘When *Platoon* [1986] was first released, a number of people asked me, “Was the war really like that?” I never found an answer . . . because what “really” happened is now so thoroughly mixed up in my mind with what has been said about what happened that the pure experience is no longer there’ (cited in Sturken 1997: 121). If films can be so influential to those who encountered an event first-hand, what might the effects be on those who only ever experienced it vicariously through the media?

Landsberg's prosthetic memories can be progressive in that they 'enable individuals to have a personal connection to an event they did not live through, to see through another's eyes, they have the capacity to make possible alliances across racial, class and other chasms of difference' (Landsberg 2003: 156). According to this logic, the Deleuzian 'machinic eye' of the camera facilitates the experience of perspectives not of our own and thus offers the possibility of greater understanding and empathy. However, as the vast majority of popular media emerge from capitalist, corporate-owned enterprises, the texts that are produced and disseminated most widely frequently adopt and therefore inculcate dominant ideological perspectives. Thus, the collective memories that are memorialised and culturally transmitted transgenerationally are not the progressive ones that Landsberg describes, but hegemonic narratives that perpetuate the master narrative we have previously identified.

Just as significant as those events and perspectives that are selected for cultural memorialisation are those that are ignored and even erased from the framework of collective memories. This purging process proves not to be as uncomplicated as merely forgetting, which implies a passive experience; events, rather, become 'dis-remembered' in a procedure that requires a conscious effort on behalf of society and plays a fundamental role in the construction of national narratives. As Jeffrey Walsh and Alf Louvre observe in the introduction to *Tell Me Lies about Vietnam* (1988), popular culture representations of these narratives are vital, 'because the suppression of memory, of remembered alternatives, is one means by which dominant views win their power' (3). Witness how unpalatable historical truths are redacted from collective memory and rewritten as part of a larger national narrative: for example, how extirpative wars against Native American Indians have been rewritten to frame narratives of Manifest destiny and American exceptionalism; how the atrocities perpetrated by the Allied powers in World War Two like the fire bombings of Dresden (that killed more than 125,000 innocent civilians) and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (that killed more than 100,000 people) are marginalised or represented as both necessary and legitimate, while those analogous acts by the Axis powers are portrayed as monstrous crimes against humanity; how the war crimes committed by the American soldiers who liberated France have been elided in representations of the conflict that prefer to embrace the mythic narrative of 'the Greatest Generation', ignoring claims that about 14,000 rapes were committed from 1942 to 1945; how the issue of slavery has been erased from the Battle of the Alamo, an event that Richard R. Flores regards as one of the fundamental examples of a 'Master Symbol' in American identity (explored in Chapter 7).⁷ These events are potent examples of what has been described as cognitive dissonance, moments in which a subject is confronted with destabilising challenges to their firmly held conceptions of identity or beliefs.⁸ Franz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Mask* (1967) stated,

Sometimes people hold a core belief that is very strong. When they are presented with evidence that works against this belief, the new evidence cannot be accepted. It would create a feeling that is extremely uncomfortable, called cognitive dissonance. And because it is so important to protect the core belief, they will rationalize, ignore and even deny anything that doesn't fit in with the core belief. (Fanon 1967: 194)

These events (and many others not mentioned here) do not correspond with the master narrative that the United States has created for itself and thus are purged from the majority of popular culture representations or rewritten to some more amenable form.⁹

So while 9/11 *was* a 'monstrous dose of reality' for America at large, it was a reality that the American public quickly withdrew from and a reality that rarely found its way on to the cinema screen. Perhaps the most 'Real' moment in the history of America was systematically 'de-realised', first by the media that immediately imposed a series of perspectives on it: whether by narrativising the effects (see King 2005) or redacting its horrors from the screens. Žižek wrote 'while the number of victims – 3,000 – is repeated all the time, it is surprising how little of the actual carnage we see – no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people . . . in clear contrast to reporting on Third World catastrophes, where the whole point is to produce a scoop of some gruesome detail' (2012: 15).

With this in mind it becomes of paramount importance to ask in what way American cinema of the post-9/11 era may in fact be a cinema of disrememberment and mythologisation? In what way is it a cinema that chooses to construct a particular narrative, one that, for whatever reason, refuses to confront disconcerting questions about 9/11 and the war on terror? By portraying 9/11 as the 'end of innocence', what George Will called 'America's holiday from history', American cinema perpetuates the myth that the United States had excluded itself from international events prior to 9/11 and was forced to enter into the geopolitical world against its will. Yet this narrative only works by disconnecting itself from the history of the twentieth century, by ignoring American interventions in places like Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Cuba (1961), the Dominican Republic (1965), Vietnam (1965) and Chile (1973), to name but a few. As Noam Chomsky reminds us, 'The U.S. is the only country that was condemned for international terrorism by the World Court and that rejected a Security Council resolution calling on states to observe international law' (2001: 44). By separating themselves from troubling questions of historical and political cause and effect, films like *World Trade Center*, *United 93* and *Zero Dark Thirty* perpetuate a hegemonic narrative that ironically *becomes* a reality to those who embrace it. John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, writing in 1988, labelled this concerted desire for narratives that favour moral

binarism and fantasy over reality the 'American Monomyth' (2002). After 9/11 this theoretical paradigm was vocalised by none other than Karl Rove, the architect of Bush's *Top Gun* landing on the deck of the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, who saw an actual distinction between the 'reality-based community' and what the Bush administration was trying to achieve. Rove suggested:

We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do. (Rove cited in Suskind 2004)

Yet this monomyth has troubling repercussions in the way that it retreats from reality. Lawrence and Jewett stated, 'It gives Americans a fantasy land without ambiguities to cloud the moral vision, where the evil empire of enemies is readily discernible, and where they can vicariously (through identification with the superhero) smite evil before it overtakes them' (2002: 47–8). This 'fantasy land' was strikingly recreated in American film of the new millennium, even in films that attempted to depict real-life events. This mythologisation process, which reached far beyond the cinema, had dangerous ramifications, as Susan Faludi asserted in *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*: 'No doubt, the fantasy consoled many. But rather than make us any safer, it misled us into danger, damaging the very security the myth was supposed to bolster. There are consequences to living in a dream' (2007: 289). Faludi's criticism is of a culture that wholeheartedly refused to confront the troubling realities of 9/11, instead preferring platitudes and comforting narratives of legitimate revenge, retribution and moral superiority.

We can see a vivid manifestation of this dilemma realised in Ang Lee's 2012 adaptation of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001). After losing his family when the ship they are travelling in sinks, the eponymous Piscine 'Pi' Patel is cast adrift in a life boat. Understandably the event is a profoundly traumatic one for the young man, and the film proceeds to offer two rival narrative accounts of his experience, leaving the audience to decide for themselves which may be true. The first, which takes up the majority of the film's running time, is a fantastical tale of Pi's survival on board a small boat for 229 days with only an orang-utan, a hyena, a wounded zebra and a tiger for company. When the hyena is driven mad by hunger, it kills both the zebra and the orang-utan before being killed itself by the tiger. In this narrative Pi and the tiger, named Richard Parker, develop between each other a fragile sense of understanding, and they witness sights of tremendous natural beauty. When this account proves unsatisfactory for the ship's insurance agents who interview Pi after he is found alive, they demand to know 'what really happened'. In response Pi

offers a second version of his experience that is a much more disturbing one and recounted only in an extended close-up of his anguished face. He tells them that, in actual fact, his mother had initially survived and made it onboard the life boat alongside the ship's cook and a wounded Buddhist sailor. When the cook is driven mad by hunger, he kills both the sailor and then Pi's mother (in order to use them as bait and then later to eat them himself), before he is killed by Pi in an act of revenge. Pi asks those listening to his story which of the two versions they prefer. It is clear he has chosen the first, even though he seems to acknowledge that this incredible tale is a fabrication and a self-defence mechanism that he has constructed in order to insulate himself from the awful reality of the traumatic deaths of his family (acts that find themselves strikingly replicated in allegory in the first version). Despite this acknowledgement, Pi's embrace of the 'fictional' narrative has enabled him to overcome his trauma and lead a happy and prosperous life with seemingly no adverse effects at all. Yet what are the implications of such a choice, whether conscious or otherwise, to willingly choose fantasy over reality? Is a repressed and rewritten trauma truly a trauma that is 'worked through' or one that continues to be 'acted out' (LaCapra 2004: 11)? To 'act out' one's trauma is to fail to come to terms with it, to continually recreate the original traumatic moment without a sense of perspective or understanding. To 'work out' one's trauma is much more demanding; it is to confront and recognise it, and in the process to come to terms with it. Like Pi, America chose to construct a fantasy after 9/11, one that became subsumed in the majority of its cinematic narratives that were overwhelmingly dominated by conservative political paradigms. Certainly to provide a narrative to a trauma is to gain mastery over it; as Jay David Bolter suggested, 'an event that has not been narrativised constitutes a source of anxiety' (2005: 11). However, such a narrativisation is an inherently problematic process and one that is returned to in the course of *The 'War on Terror' and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second*. The history of post-9/11 American cinema is the story of this narrativisation, frequently a disavowal of trauma and an embrace of the mythologisation that emerged in its place; it is a story of a cinema that largely preferred to 'print the legend' in the words of Maxwell Scott, the newspaperman at the conclusion of John Ford's *The Man who Shot Liberty Valence* (1962). Yet the trauma of 9/11 was too powerful to be entirely contained and disavowed. Just as a bright image continues to appear on one's retina long after the original has disappeared, 9/11 is the quintessential after-image of the new millennium and has continued to linger on the frames of American film ever since.¹⁰

In the first decade of the new millennium 9/11 became much more than a singular event; it evolved into an ideological concept, a discourse in itself (see Melnick 2009). *The 'War on Terror' and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second* postulates that the post-9/11 era provides us with another such

culturally impactful 'allegorical moment', one that in many ways came to define the American film industry as much as it defined the nation itself. It became common in the months and years after September 11th to suggest that 9/11 'changed everything', a phrase that echoed from politician to commentator and back again. Yet this contentious expression was soon justly criticised as exposing the First Worldist nature of those living in contemporary Western democracies. However, without a doubt, 9/11 certainly changed political discourse and American cinema in the subsequent decade. *The 'War on Terror' and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second* is a survey of the extent of that change.

NOTES

1. In an interview conducted for this book Gregor Jordan continued, 'It was clear that Americans were not ready to examine themselves at all and even though this film had nothing to do with the current conflict it was seen as highly undesirable' (Jordan 2012). Another Miramax film, *The Quiet American* (2002), the second film adaptation (following one in 1958) of the Graham Greene novel of the same name, experienced the same fate. Harvey Weinstein commented, 'I showed the film to some people and staff, and they said: "Are you out of your mind? You cannot release this now; it's unpatriotic. America has to be cohesive, and band together." We were worried that nobody had the stomach for a movie about bad Americans any more' (cited in Thompson 2001).
2. A few years later the complete opposite occurred in the period-set films *Munich* (2005), *Miracle* (2004) and *Rent* (2005). To make them historically accurate the World Trade Center was digitally added.
3. Many witnesses recounted something similar. The newsreader Ron Insana said, 'And we heard it and looked up and started to see elements of the building coming down and we ran. And honestly, it was like a scene out of *Independence Day*' (cited in Monahan 2010: 60).
4. There is a succession of Christian iconography present in the film, the most resonant of which is when Jimeno is shown having a vision of Christ with a water bottle, in an image reminiscent of one from *Ben-Hur* (1959), as if Jesus is watching over him and by extension the United States. There is a suggestive dissolve between Jesus and Kearns, adding further weight to the suggestion that it depicts a righteous America endorsed by God.
5. Sean Redmond wrote, 'Since 9/11, I keep seeing planes falling out of the sky. In film and television, particularly, the image of the aircraft in flames, breaking up, hurtling toward the earth keeps cropping up' (2008: 34).
6. *The 'War on Terror' and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second* concerns itself with fictional and popular cinema. For a more detailed analysis of American documentary film after 9/11 see Markert's excellent *Post- 9/11 Cinema: Through a Lens Darkly* (2011).
7. See Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: A Half Century of Denial* (1996), John H. Morro, *Taken by Force: Rape and American GIs in Europe during World War II* (2007) and Richard R. Flores, *Remembering the Alamo: Memory, Modernity, and the Master Symbol* (2002).
8. The term was coined by Leon Festinger in *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World* (1956).

9. It is important to remember here that these reactions to culturally unpalatable events are mirrored everywhere, not just in the United States. Witness the problematic relationship between England and the British Empire, Germany and the Holocaust, Japan and the Nanking Massacre, Turkey and the Armenian Genocide.
10. Joshua Hirsch's book on cinematic accounts of the Holocaust was called *Afterimage: Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust* (2004). He wrote, 'an image that formally repeats the shock of the original encounters with atrocity – both the original eyewitnessing of the atrocities themselves, and the subsequent cinematic encounter with the images of atrocity' (19).