

# Reframing the Disaster Genre in a Post-9/11 World

by

Matthew James Connolly  
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## Introduction

On some level, we watch disaster films to have certain questions answered. These questions are often simple. What would it look like if an entire city were to suddenly be washed away by a tidal wave, or a whole building engulfed in flames, or an entire planet pulverized by alien lasers? And furthermore, what would it feel like to witness it? These may not be the deepest of human curiosities, but they get at something fundamental about why we go to the movies in the first place: to see people, places, and experiences that lay beyond the confines of our lives, our world, and even our imagination. The disaster genre fulfills this basic desire to experience what we have never seen, and perhaps cannot even conceive of. It does so through the construction of spectacular and terrifying imagery—often created through the latest in special effects—that entrances and frightens us with both its aesthetic power and its unsettling implication that what can be created on the screen might one day be duplicated in reality. Lest the act of witnessing what mass cataclysm and destruction would look like becomes too distressing, however, disaster movies also know when to pull us back from the brink and assure us that the scary and marvelous images we've just witnessed are ultimately controllable and confined: either by the actions of the film's protagonists or the parameters of the disaster genre itself. Writing specifically about the disaster films of the 1970s, J. Hoberman might have been referencing the entire genre when he wrote that, "despite their overt fatalism, the disaster films were fundamentally reassuring."<sup>1</sup> That paradox perhaps summarizes the inherent appeal of these films as a whole: their ability to take viewers to the edge of our fears and

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<sup>1</sup> J. Hoberman, "Apocalypse Now and Then," The Village Voice, 19 May 1998: 75.

curiosities about large-scale catastrophe; allow us a good, long look; and pull us— and, usually, the endangered world within the film— back to safety just before all seems lost.

If the genre rests upon the notion of witnessing spectacular disaster from a entrancing but ultimately safe vantage point, what happens to our desire to see catastrophe on screen when it enters our actual, everyday existence? Do we still feel the same urge to imagine disaster when we can turn on the television or think back in our minds and find images more immediate and haunting than anything seen in a movie theater? These were the questions that confronted the disaster genre in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. What was once kinetic fantasy became sobering reality as the Twin Towers crumbled to the ground in a manner that so many people saw as reminiscent of the imagery in 1990s disaster films like *Independence Day*, *Deep Impact*, and *Armageddon*. Films that defined escapism on September 10 now became markers of a crass and insensitive pre-9/11 mindset towards entertainment. The world had changed, many said, and no one wanted to see mass urban destruction and chaos on screen at all, much less made into big-budget fun.

Or did they? While an inevitable period of shell-shocked aversion to any imagery reminiscent of the September 11 attacks proved only natural, this thesis argues that the disaster genre most certainly did not disappear after 9/11. On the contrary, real-life tragedy inspired the creators of disaster cinema to look at the genre—its strengths and limitations; what it could offer a viewer in a post-9/11 world—and alter generic expectations to make films that would resonate with the new

set of fears, curiosities, anxieties, and fascinations that viewers now felt toward catastrophe and its consequences, and would inevitably bring with them into any new disaster film. Balancing artistic, industrial, economic, and cultural considerations, these post-9/11 disaster films show both how the genre's fundamental appeal remained intact after September 11 and where generic strategies needed to be reformulated to remain culturally relevant and formally compelling.

Why focus upon the generic shifts within the disaster film after September 11? In doing so, one is able to see how genre responds to the multitude of aesthetic, industrial, and societal imperatives placed upon it at a moment of particular historical friction. 9/11 questioned the fundamental pleasure viewers received from disaster movies. Why filmmakers and Hollywood studios chose to continue the genre and how they modified it to fit the post-9/11 era illustrates the dynamic processes through which film—as an artistic medium, as an economic practice, as a reflection and a generator of cultural ideas and values—changes in the aftermath of a critical societal and historical moment.

Additionally, studying the disaster genre's relationship to September 11 offers an ideal opportunity to complicate a fairly standard assumption regarding the genre: that its value comes primarily as a receptacle of cultural mores at any given time. The argument goes that, because disaster films concern themselves with the destruction and rebuilding of society (on either the micro or macro level), these films provide a window into what ideals American culture valued at the time, and what ideals they thought should be discarded. I'm not denying that the disaster genre can indeed reflect societal changes; my entire argument hinges upon the notion that viewers

would have a distinctly different impression of cinematic catastrophe after witnessing the events of 9/11 and its aftermath. However, there is a key difference between a prominent real-life disaster impacting viewer perception of its constructed equivalent on screen and the assumption that every disaster narrative somehow becomes imbued with the cultural *zeitgeist* of whatever era it happens to be produced in. From my perspective, genres are impacted by multiple factors (cultural included), but are principally influenced by the artistic impetuses of the filmmakers behind individual movies and the economic and industrial imperatives of the moment in which they are made. Films within the disaster genre primarily function as artistic and economic entities, and will incorporate or reject dominant cultural attitudes as fits these more fundamental missions. However, sometimes a cultural event proves too large and too impactful to ignore. September 11 proved to be such an event for the disaster genre, and filmmakers and studios had to balance issues of representation, sensitivity, and taste while continuing to appeal to the basic viewer desires and fears that prompted them to go to disaster films in the first place. In this way, the post-9/11 disaster film provides a fruitful case study in how culture can impact and reshape generic conventions in connection with aesthetic and industrial factors.

Indeed, when considering the films that came after September 11, one can see how an unexpected and potentially harmful real-life event can provide filmmakers with a fruitful artistic challenge, resulting in films that expand the boundaries of what we assumed the genre could do. This points to the final reason I have chosen to focus upon the disaster genre post-9/11. Due in part to the aforementioned assumption that disaster movies should be studied primarily as barometers for social mores, few

scholars have bothered to examine these films on a formal level. Their generally disreputable identity amongst critics only solidifies the notion that these films are not worth serious consideration as artistic works. However, the formal and narrative shifts that have occurred within the genre since the September 11 attacks illustrates just how flexible and aesthetically varied disaster movies can be. By charting these trends from the 1990s disaster cycle (beginning in 1996 with the releases of *Independence Day* and *Twister*) to the present (looking at films like *War of the Worlds* and *Cloverfield*), we can begin to see the levels of artistic sophistication and technical mastery that go into the creation of these films. Certainly, I'm not about to declare every film—or many of the films—within this study to be masterpieces of modern cinema. However, I feel their formal and narrative strategies for engaging the viewer with the on screen disaster (strategies that only became more complex in the aftermath of 9/11) show a level of artistry worthy of greater scrutiny and analysis. The generic shifts now occurring within the genre provide an ideal opportunity to do just that.

### **Genre History**

This thesis does not concern itself with the entirety of the disaster genre. Indeed, the first film considered was released less than fifteen years ago. However, it is important to note that the films studied here come out of a generic lineage of disaster films that provide models against which modern-day directors conform to, alter, or rebel against. Stephen Keane points out in his study of the genre, *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe* (which will be discussed in greater detail below), that a form of the disaster film can be seen all the way back in the 1900s, with the



release of 1908's *The Last Days of Pompeii*.<sup>2</sup> Disaster films continued to primarily take the form of historical and Biblical epics throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The 1950s also saw the rise of the science-fiction disaster film, which some argue work through the era's anxieties about nuclear annihilation within their narratives (primarily Susan Sontag, whose work will be discussed shortly).

However, the disaster genre arguably came into its own in the 1970s, with a string of films that often placed a group of disparate individuals (played by an all-star cast) within a contained and increasingly dangerous space which they then needed to collectively escape. Along the way, some would inevitably die, while others would find romance, redemption, etc. Among the more notable films to come out of the 1970s disaster cycle include *Airport* (1970), *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), *The Towering Inferno* (1974), and *Earthquake* (1974). As previously mentioned, some cultural commentators and critics see these films and their box-office popularity as reflective of their ability to work through larger issues and anxieties present within 1970s culture.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, however, the genre began to fade away, thanks to flops like *Meteor* (1979) and the ascendancy of the action film, which incorporated elements of the disaster and other previously popular genres.<sup>4</sup> While by no means comprehensive, this brief summary of the disaster genre provides some basic background on where the genre was and where the influences of past films might be seen in the films that comprise the genre's resurgence in the mid 1990s.

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<sup>2</sup> For a succinct summary of the genre up to the 1970s, see Keane, *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006) 3-15.

<sup>3</sup> For a summary of the 1970s disaster cycle, see: Nick Roddick, "Only the Stars Survive: Disaster Movies in the Seventies," *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama*, eds. David Brandy, Louis James, and Bernard Sharratt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). Keane also provides a balanced look at the cultural relevance of 1970s disaster films in relation to industrial and economic imperatives in his chapter on the cycle: Keane 16-43.

<sup>4</sup> See Keane 44-62.

## Review of Literature/Methodological Approach

As previously mentioned, my primary concerns in studying the disaster genre fall into the general analyses of formal/narrative characteristics of the films themselves and the economic/industrial contexts within which they were produced, distributed, exhibited, and marketed. While researching the disaster genre, I have encountered three generalized types of critical and scholarly writings that have proven applicable: studies of the disaster genre as a whole; examinations of certain periods within the genre; and analyses of individual films. Within each of these sub-categories, I have encountered authors that focus heavily upon the representation of social and cultural ideas within disaster films, and authors who analyze the genre's formal and narrative characteristics, as well as their industrial and economic contexts. While my own critical predilections lead me to value the latter, I feel there are helpful strengths (as well as clear weaknesses) to the former type of analysis. A brief comparison of two sets of texts will illustrate this.

Ken Feil's book, *Dying for a Laugh: Disaster Movies and the Camp Imagination*, argues that the modern history of the disaster genre (from the early 1970s to the present) can be seen in terms of movements toward and away from the notion of camp: "the ironic appreciation of low, failed culture, and the parody of taste codes that rank cultural works as 'high' or 'low.'"<sup>5</sup> Though this ideas spans across artistic mediums and genres, "disaster movies are especially prone to unintentional camp for the way they juxtapose low, trivial pop culture sensationalism with the high

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<sup>5</sup> Ken Feil, *Dying for a Laugh: Disaster Movies and the Camp Imagination* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005) xiv.

and important fight for group survival and, in many cases, the endurance of the United States.”<sup>6</sup> By acknowledging the somewhat disreputable nature of 1970s disaster films that have come before them, disaster films of the late 1990s maintain a level of ironic self-awareness that shield them from audience distaste, even as many of them ultimately ask their plots to be seen as emotionally and ideologically sincere. Feil lays the duality of the disaster film quite helpfully, both as a genre (combining deadly serious subject matter with an often kinetic and exciting visual style) and in its later incarnations throughout the mid to late 1990s (their push-pull between deflating, self-conscious humor and ultimate narrative sincerity). This proves particularly helpful when thinking about the genre’s issues post-9/11, when Feil argues that these internal contradictions felt disrespectful given the unambiguous enormity of the terrorist attacks and their real-life effects.

However, while Feil’s thesis proves helpful as a conceptual framework, his analyses of the individual films focus largely upon very specific moments of camp dissonance within the narratives. These often seem questionably divorced from narrative context (to say nothing of their general avoidance of formal analysis) and reliant upon a particular ideological reading of the images that does not address how these films reconcile, or exacerbate, the disparity between seriousness and levity through formal choices. The amount of time placed upon constructing a positive reading of Harvey Fierstein’s flamboyant and arguably degrading character in *Independence Day*, for example, may be intriguing in a particular context, but it fails to address some of the larger issues Feil hints at in his overall design: narrowing the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. xiv.

argument to the point that characters read by the audience as “queer” have the potential to upset traditionally conservative values within the film’s narrative.

The 1970s through the early years of the new millennium are discussed within Stephen Keane’s *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe* as well. His approach is more wide-ranging than Feil’s concentrated and ideologically-driven approach, hoping to provide a more generalized overview of the genre’s development. Though this all-things-to-all-people approach made me wish Keane had concentrated upon a particular decade or cycle of the genre, I admired the way in which he weaved comments on ideological or social meaning with formal analysis and industrial and economic context. Specific scenes of destruction, for example, are analyzed both for their “reflexive, contextual meanings” and “the ways in which key disaster sequences are used within the narrative structure of disaster movies.”<sup>7</sup> His description of the ominous weather within *The Day After Tomorrow*, for example, points to the level of sobering topicality it provides for the film, given the concentrated amount of natural disasters that had occurred overseas at the time of its release. However, Keane also considers the more practical and specifically cinematic issues of the weather plot, discussing how the film uses sound, camera movement, and shot differentiation to visualize the film’s “slow freeze” scene: a process “at once slow and invisible, a quick freeze providing for moments of sudden suspension, perhaps, but the dynamic ultimately replaced by the static.”<sup>8</sup> Such critical moves allow the reader to consider Hollywood’s use of free-floating cultural and political concerns as a way of attracting

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<sup>7</sup> Keane 5.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 100

audiences to their films, while also exploring the specific formal choices filmmakers face to display disaster in a visually interesting and emotionally effective manner.

While specifically dealing with science fiction films of the 1950s, Susan Sontag's essay, "The Imagination of Disaster," puts forth the widely influential idea that films constructed around images and scenes of mass destruction affect an audience by tapping into, not just political and cultural fears of the moment, but elemental apprehensions: "Besides these new anxieties about physical disaster, the prospect of universal mutilation and even annihilation, the science fiction films reflect powerful anxieties about the condition of the individual psyche."<sup>9</sup> Sontag goes on to define such anxieties specifically as the eradication of the self, whether it be mental subjugation to an alien power or physical annihilation at the hands of impersonal physical forces. I agree that part of the appeal of disaster movies can be found within their spectacle of destruction, providing audiences with a distanced and aesthetically pleasing vantage point from which they can watch and even enjoy acts that would inspire terror and revulsion if seen in real life. Sontag points to this idea explicitly, writing that 1950s science-fiction films are "concerned with the aesthetics of destruction, with the peculiar beauties to be found in wrecking havoc, making a mess."<sup>10</sup> Despite referencing specific plot points within many films to support her argument, Sontag ultimately provides little to no formal or aesthetic evidence as to how individual films tap into collective fears. She ignores the specific visual construction and narrative context through which films convey their meaning.

Without these readings of individual films, her argument feels more like a generality

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<sup>9</sup> Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster," American Movie Critics: An Anthology from the Silents until Now, ed. Phillip Lopate, (New York: The Library of America, 2006) 325.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 319.

than a specific understanding of how a certain type of film gets across particular types of meaning. Even her argument about “the aesthetics of destruction” loses some weight, because Sontag does not elucidate what the specifics of this aesthetic are, besides a wide-ranging survey of common elements of mise-en-scene. Like Feil (who explicitly cites Sontag within his book as an influential source), Sontag’s notion of the disaster genre gestures at ideas that I agree with: particularly, the visual construction of disaster as a kinetic and stimulating experience, and the use of social and political imagery within these films as a way of making disaster relevant and emotionally affecting. Her generalized overview of science-fiction film plots also proves helpful in attempting to define the parameters of the genre, and how it relates to later disaster movie narratives. Without specific analyses of films or even a detailed definition of these films’ visual vocabulary, however, Sontag’s ideas remain most useful as conceptual frameworks to be considered with a certain amount of skepticism.

Like Sontag, Eric Lichtenfeld’s writings on the disaster genre are ultimately tied up in other concerns: in his case, the development of the action genre, which he views the disaster film as linked to. His chapter on disaster films from the mid 1990s to the mid 2000s within his book, *Action Speaks Louder: Violence, Spectacle, and the American Action Movie*, proves quite valuable for its balanced consideration of the formal, industrial, social, and technological imperatives that bring about the re-emergence of the disaster genre and influence the films themselves. Like Keane, his writing provides a somewhat broad overview of the period, and I felt a similar frustration when Lichtenfeld provides two or three pages of selected formal analysis

before moving onto a different film. Still, his specific considerations of films are quite helpful in their focus upon aesthetic choices over large-scale cultural claims. His analysis of the opening meteor sequence in *Armageddon*, for example, pays particular attention to director Michael Bay's extreme-angle establishing shots, rapid-fire editing style and chaotic mise-en-scene that turns Manhattan landmarks into rubble. I also admired Lichtenfeld's analysis of the public reception and marketing of these films, which helps to underscore their economic importance to the corporate-owned studios that make them. He analyzes contemporary reviews of the films in a manner similar to Feil, but also looks into the promotion of the films and their influence about audience expectations and box office popularity. For example, his look at TriStar's questionable decision to withhold the image of *Godzilla's* titular creature until after the film's opening underlines the extent to which the management of hype and public sentiment can influence a film's success or failure. I hope to draw upon and expand these sorts of industrial and economic considerations within my own work, and Lichtenfeld's use of daily newspapers, interviews, and box office reports provides helpful guidelines for my own research.

I will be drawing upon ideas from these and other scholarly books and articles throughout my study. Additionally, I will be relying heavily upon reviews, box-office reports, and articles about the production, marketing, and reception of individual films and general generic trends from trade publications (*Variety*), mainstream newspapers and magazines (*The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Entertainment Weekly*), and the more-accessible film magazines and journals (*Film Comment*, *Sight and Sound*). These provide a glimpse not only into the histories of

these films, but offers an idea of how critics and journalists viewed the genre at various points over the last thirteen years.

### **Chapter Outline**

Chapter One will consider the 1990s disaster cycle—spanning from 1996-1998—to ground this study in a sense of where the genre was prior to the September 11 attacks. We will begin by looking at the industrial and economic imperatives that contributed to the genre’s resurgence. I will also address some of the sociological reasoning that some critics and commentators have offered for the return of the disaster film at this time. Next, I will outline some of the broad narrative, thematic, and formal characteristics of the 1990s cycle. *Independence Day* will then be used as a case study to examine how these characteristics operate within the most popular film of the cycle. The chapter will conclude with a brief discussion of why the cycle ended in 1998.

Chapter Two will focus on the cultural impact that September 11 had upon the disaster genre. We will examine the writings of critics and cultural commentators at the time, as well as the thoughts of Hollywood executives and filmmakers. Following this, we will consider in detail the two prominent disaster films made initially after 9/11: *The Core* and *The Day After Tomorrow*. Their industrial contexts and narrative and formal elements will both be considered, and I will offer some speculation on why *The Core* became a critical and commercial failure, while *The Day After Tomorrow* found box office success and a somewhat higher level of cultural capital.

Chapter Three will consider films made explicitly about the September 11 attacks. Though not disaster films in the same manner as the others discussed within



this study, these films provide insight into the opportunities and limitations of directly addressing the tragedy on screen, as opposed to dealing with its images and themes through the lens of the disaster genre. *United 93* and *World Trade Center* will both be examined as formal entities, with attention paid to the strengths and weakness of how they choose to frame 9/11. The chapter will conclude with brief comment upon their relatively moderate commercial performances, and how they relate to audience perception of films explicitly taking up September 11.

Chapter Four will focus upon disaster films that specifically incorporate the imagery and themes of September 11 into their narratives. We will begin by considering in general terms how the disaster genre offers a cinematic space within which the viewer can confront fears and curiosities surrounding the 9/11 attacks. From there, we will look in-depth at the industrial contexts, formal and narrative issues, and public receptions of the two major disaster films to explicitly incorporate 9/11 elements: *War of the Worlds* and *Cloverfield*.

## Chapter One

### How Did the Disaster Films of the Mid-to-Late 1990s Envision Disaster and its Consequences?

*“True, fireballs destroy whole cities, but the film’s ebullient comic-book sensibility takes much of the sting out of that.”*

-Janet Maslin, reviewing *Independence Day* in *The New York Times*.<sup>11</sup>

In March 1998, the International Astronomical Union reported that a one-mile wide asteroid might come within 30,000 miles of Earth in 2028. The report was widely disputed, with many astronomers saying that the space rock would harmlessly fly past the Earth with no chance of impact, and was soon forgotten. If the story itself proved largely superfluous, however, it only fueled interest in both *Deep Impact* (1998) and *Armageddon* (1998), the asteroid-centric films that were to be released that May and July, respectively. Would this brief scare have any effect on the film’s marketing and/or public reception? On March 13, 1998, both *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* ran similar stories on the subject. Both reported that the studios behind the films viewed the event largely in terms of adding relevance—not to mention publicity—for their own work. Not long after the announcement, “Disney and Paramount were both busy shipping their movies’ trailers off to news organizations, in hopes that they would be used to illustrate what such an event might really look like. Sure enough, by midday, the footage was appearing on everything

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<sup>11</sup> Janet Maslin, “Film Review: Space Aliens, Action and a Chance to Save the Planet,” *The New York Times*, 2 July 1996: C16.

from local Los Angeles TV stations to the British Broadcasting Corp.”<sup>12</sup> Each studio saw the potential to use real-life events to further stoke interest in their films, inviting audience members whose minds may have briefly wandered to the prospect of worldwide annihilation via massive space rock to come and indulge in what might have been. Most notably, the creators of both films were almost blithely upfront about their exploitation of the event, suggesting with a wink that the story’s fortuitous timing could not have been better if they planned it themselves. “You know how much it cost us to arrange this real event? I’m not at liberty to say,” *Deep Impact* co-writer laughingly told *The New York Times*.<sup>13</sup> *Armageddon* producer Jerry Bruckheimer joked in a similar vein: “We tried to plan it a little closer to the movie’s opening, but someone leaked it out.”<sup>14</sup>

Their comments not only reveal the level of comfort that the creators of 1990s disaster films had in manipulating real-life events to drum up publicity for their films (albeit with a wink), but reflect the publically-accepted notion that placing mass disasters at the center of big-budget summer spectacles was more than permissible: it was good marketing. It’s an idea rooted in the understanding that the chaos depicted on screen could occur in theory, but would most likely not materialize anytime soon within the United States. As a result, creators of 1990s disaster films could play off the amorphous fear and wonder of mass devastation (be it by comet, volcano, or alien invasion) and not fear any significant public criticism from audiences or the media. The danger, as they told it, was possible but unlikely, and viewers could therefore

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<sup>12</sup> Bruce Orwell and John Lippman, “Movies: Collision or Not, Hollywood is Ready,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 Mar. 1998: B1.

<sup>13</sup> Bernard Weinraub, “Asteroid, the Films, Heading to Theaters,” *The New York Times* 13 Mar. 1998: A16.

<sup>14</sup> Orwell and Lippman B1.

witness a vision of destruction that satisfied, in part, because it ultimately felt distanced from a sense of real danger. “The key to any good action movie is rooting it in reality,” Bruckheimer said when describing the comet scare in relation to *Armageddon*. “This one is definitely rooted in reality.”<sup>15</sup> And, indeed, it was: a reality in which the slim likelihood of a comet possibly hitting the Earth some 30 years after the release of his film had just been rejected by the scientific community.

While it lacked a central public cataclysm on the level of September 11<sup>th</sup>, however, it would be simply untrue to say that the 1990s were a disaster-free decade for the United States. Widely-publicized incidences of terrorist acts on American soil were relatively fresh when the first of these new disaster films were in their planning stages. Tom Shone writes of the events that may have given Fox studio executives pause as they considered going forth with *Independence Day*: “Just a few months earlier, Timothy McVeigh had parked a Ryder truck of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 166 people; two months before that, an Egyptian cleric was found guilty of a plot to blow up the U.N. Building in New York and was implicated in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, which killed six people.”<sup>16</sup> Potential audiences for this and other 1990s disaster films would not necessarily be watching scenes of mass urban chaos free of contemporary associations or resonances. However, the economic and cultural rationales for reviving the genre made it an attractive enough prospect for studios to do so. The question, then, becomes: how to make disaster films that take full advantage of the genre’s foregrounding of spectacular disaster (made all the more spectacular and disastrous by a new

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<sup>15</sup> Weinraub A16.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Shone, *Blockbuster: How Hollywood Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Summer* (New York: Free Press, 2004) 233.

generation of CGI effects) without evoking real-life tragedy in the minds of audience members that would lead to dissatisfied viewers and damaged box-office potential?

To answer this question is to broadly define the generic characteristics of the 1990s disaster film, as many of the narrative and formal strategies employed by the filmmakers behind them served to provide audiences with a certain amount of empathetic distance from the spectacle itself: allowing them to engage in moments of dazzling cinematic destruction by not lingering on disaster's messier, more tragic consequences and, ultimately, telling stories in which an active and knowledgeable protagonist triumphs over adversity. At worst, this might sound like some sort of mass cinematic anesthesia, administered by filmmakers and studios looking to capitalize on collective tragedy and resulting in a mass audience benumbed to the true effects of large-scale calamity. Such is the narrative presented to us by many post-9/11 critics of the 1990s disaster genre, who denounced their seemingly gleeful destruction of major American cities (not to mention their helpless populations) as incompatible with a post-9/11 culture that purportedly valued seriousness and sincerity. These post-9/11 critiques and their potential effects upon the disaster genre will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter. Foregrounding these criticisms, however, provides a useful jumping-off point to more closely examine 1990s disaster films and, particularly, how they framed the idea of disaster within them. Were post-9/11 critics justified in demonizing these films as tasteless and insensitive in their depiction of mass destruction? By examining the narrative and formal strategies through which the films' creators chose to cinematically imagine disaster, we can begin to understand what effects they intended to have upon their audience.

Considering 1990s disaster films also proves necessary in understanding how the creators of post-9/11 disaster movies dealt with the challenge of crafting disaster imagery and narratives for an audience both familiar with the tropes and conventions of the 1990s disaster cycle and highly attuned to the real-life costs of catastrophe. The box-office successes of many of the 1990s disaster films indicate that the types of images and stories they chose to highlight proved popular with the filmgoing public. As creators of simultaneously artistic and economic entities, directors were challenged to determine what aspects of these previously successful films could be co-opted by post-9/11 disaster films, which ones would have to be altered, and which would have to be jettisoned all together. Understanding what those options will be useful in determining the reasoning behind the artistic and industrial reasoning behind post-9/11 disaster films.

The chapter will begin with a consideration of why the disaster genre experienced a resurgence within the mid to late 1990s. Besides providing some industrial and formal context within which to view these films, such a consideration will hopefully point to some of the reasons why, despite its intrinsic challenges, Hollywood studios and filmmakers chose to return to the genre after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. After this, some general narrative and formal trends of the 1990s disaster cycle will be laid out. This is not meant to be seen as a definitive or complete analysis of the cycle, but rather to point out some of the common characteristics that run throughout these films that specifically worked to frame disaster as a dazzling visual spectacle ultimately controllable by the actions of the protagonist. The remainder of the chapter will consist of a case study of *Independence Day*, whose box office

success in the summer of 1996 helped fully launch the 1990s disaster cycle. While keeping in mind the film's individuated concerns, I will argue that this film is largely emblematic of the genre trends laid out earlier in the chapter, and whose manifestation within this film provides a particularly acute example of the pre-9/11 treatment of mass destruction. I will conclude with a brief comment on where the disaster genre stood before September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Seven films were considered in this brief study of the 1990s disaster cycle (in order of release date): *Twister* (1996), *Independence Day* (1996), *Dante's Peak* (1997), *Volcano* (1997), *Deep Impact*, *Godzilla* (1998), and *Armageddon*. Though possessing a wide range of formal and thematic concerns, I consider all of these films to be disaster films, in that they revolve around—or prominently incorporate—scenes of mass destruction and chaos into their narratives. Given both that the vast majority of the 1990s disaster films take place in the present day and that the challenges that September 11<sup>th</sup> posed to creators of disaster films primarily revolve around how to cinematically present mass destruction and chaos in a contemporary setting, I have chosen to exclude historical disaster films by this study. Therefore, this omits *Titanic* (1997) and *Pearl Harbor* (2001), two major releases that concern themselves with prominent, historically-based disasters. As they both focus on representing events from the past, these films, I feel, did not fit into the primary concerns of this study, and will not be included in the following discussion on the 1990s disaster cycle.

### **Economic/Industrial/Cultural Factors**

While difficult to determine what exact combination of industrial, economics, and/or cultural factors led to the resurgence of the disaster genre in the mid to late

1990s, some general assertions can, and have, been made, given both the specific context of the times and the broader nature of the disaster genre. As I have confessed a personal bias towards the industrial factors that go into the production of these films, I will begin by laying out some possible reasons why the disaster genre may have both fit into the modes of production Hollywood utilized at the time and been seen as potentially lucrative in domestic and international markets.

One much-remarked-upon reason for the revival of the disaster genre (both at the time and after the fact) was its ability to prominently showcase the use of special effects, particularly computer-generated imagery, within the narrative. By the mid-1990s, major Hollywood releases had utilized CGI imagery in manners both explicit—the morphing villain in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* or *Jurassic Park*'s marauding dinosaurs—and subtle, like the seamless incorporation of *Forrest Gump*'s titular character into established historical footage. Incidentally, all three of these films topped the domestic box office in their respective years of release. While it's somewhat problematic to draw a direct link between box office success and incorporation of the latest special effects technology (particularly in the case of *Forrest Gump* which, unlike the other two, largely subordinates technological wizardry to narrative concerns), it's fair to say that Hollywood studios could logically assume that audiences responded positively to films employing special effects to creative and often spectacular ends. When considering which potential projects to financially back, therefore, any genre that could effectively utilize and showcase the latest advances in special effects would be looked upon with interest.



Disaster films, where the narrative revolves around a central cataclysmic event that characters individually and collectively respond to, provide a generic framework into which the incorporation of special effects would be not only convenient, but practically expected. Filmmakers have an ideal narrative reason to showcase CGI-enhanced spectacle, as the ability to produce credible scenes of destruction and chaos would theoretically only enhance a story that hinged on the characters' survival of and/or triumph over the devastation's source. As Geoff King notes, "there is a close fit between the spectacle delivered by these films and the perceived needs of the industry in the late twentieth century. A volcano, for example, is the perfect vehicle for the delivery of an excess of the kinds of flame and fireball effects so beloved of the contemporary action format."<sup>17</sup>

The technological capability of filmmakers to visualize increasingly grand apocalyptic scenarios carried with it an expectation of disaster films on an appropriately large scale. An *Entertainment Weekly* article on the production of *Volcano* quotes Fox 2000 Chief Laura Ziskin as saying that "the technology has reopened the genre. We now have the capability to execute anything you can imagine."<sup>18</sup> Ziskin's comment underlines the industry assumption that these films will use the advanced technology that helped revive the genre to produce films full of spectacular images that would prove distinctive in filmgoers' minds. (Such an expectation might have been particularly on Ziskin's mind, as *Volcano* had to distinguish itself in the marketplace from the other volcano film, *Dante's Peak*, which

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<sup>17</sup> Geoff King, *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2000) 160-161.

<sup>18</sup> "Lava is a Many-Splendored Thing," *Entertainment Weekly* Apr. 25, 1997, 15 Nov. 2008 <<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,287585,00.html>>.

opened less than three months earlier.) Though critics debate the quality of the films that resulted, however few question that the genre proved flexible in its ability to expand beyond the more geographically-contained disaster films of the 1970s and encompass the massive special effects that now proved crucial to their existence. “Ranging in scope from tornadoes and volcanoes to alien invasion and approaching asteroids,” writes Stephen Keane, “the natural disasters are overwhelming, and the aliens and asteroids invariably bring the world to the brink of total destruction.”<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, the quality of the visual effects helped to separate the 1990s disaster films from those made in the 1970s, which had attached to them a connotation of low-budget cheesiness (although their effects were seen as impressive when released). Indeed, this proved an active worry for some connected with this new wave of disaster films. *Twister* co-producer Kathleen Kennedy, for example, insisted at the time of its release that her film “does not fit a disaster-film definition. We’re not doing what those ‘70s movies did.”<sup>20</sup> Sophisticated special effects, in theory, provided disaster films with a higher level of respectability, or at least distance in the audience’s mind from earlier, more aesthetically dubious incarnations of cataclysm. As King writes: “A thematic concern with the purging of the metropolis is likely to be better served by the detailed and sweeping high-definition images produced by *Armageddon* and *Deep Impact* than the shaky sets and assemblage of stock footage that comprise the hit on New York City in *Meteor* [admittedly one of the lesser efforts of the 1970s cycle].”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Stephen Keane, *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006) 63.

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin Svetkey and Jeffrey Wells, “Flirting with Disaster,” *Entertainment Weekly* May 17, 1996, 23 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,292597,00.html>>.

<sup>21</sup> King 162.

Reliance upon special effects also bolsters two preexisting and connected aspects of the disaster genre that would make it appealing to Hollywood studios: casting and marketing. Because disaster films traditionally revolve around a group of individuals dealing with a central destructive force, the genre inherently places less emphasis upon the use of high-profile stars to foster narrative interest. The 1970s disaster films were often a cavalcade of actors either rising or falling in the public eye. While the 1990s disaster films did not prove havens for aging stars to sentimentally riff on their established personas (as they did in the 1970s), they largely utilized rising actors and actresses whose individuated performances and ensemble chemistry added charm and character to the film's central appeal: spectacular displays of special effects wizardry. These actors ranged from television stars segueing into feature-film stardom (Helen Hunt in *Twister*, Will Smith in *Independence Day*) to supporting actors being given leading roles, albeit within an ensemble context (Teá Leoni in *Deep Impact*, Ben Affleck and Liv Tyler in *Armageddon*, Anne Heche in *Volcano*) to well-known stars whose careers had cooled (Tommy Lee Jones in *Volcano*, Matthew Broderick in *Godzilla*, Linda Hamilton in *Dante's Peak*). Such casting choices also helped reduce costs on almost-uniformly expensive productions, as studios could forego budgeting the hefty salaries that accompany the participation of a major star in a big-budget film. There are exceptions to this rule, most notably the decision to cast Bruce Willis in *Armageddon*'s leading role, though even Willis' career had lost some of its post-*Pulp Fiction* momentum by this point. Even there, however, he plays the leader of a team in a film that gives much weight to both the group's dynamic and the romance between the film's younger couple.

The use of non-star-centric ensembles also leads to a greater diversity of actors within a film's cast, potentially broadening the market appeal of a film. Established character actors often share the screen with budding newcomers, increasing the chances of gaining a wider audience through their presence. Many (though certainly not all) of the 1990s disaster films also incorporate a certain amount of racial and ethnic diversity within its ensembles, both widening potential market appeal and nominally supporting the notion of multiculturalism, which gained increasing cultural prominence and importance throughout the 1990s.

*Independence Day*, with its multi-racial and –ethnic cast of up-and-comers and well-known supporting/character actors all reacting to the scenes of dazzling, CGI-enhanced alien destruction, fits this model particularly well: something those involved with the film pointed to explicitly after of its highly-successful opening. Michael Wilmer, the agent for *Independence Day* producer Dean Devlin and director Roland Emmerich (they also co-wrote the script), was quoted in a *New York Times* article as saying that, “One of the points we made was that we didn’t want this to be a movie-star movie. The movie was the star. We didn’t need a movie star to make it more expensive. And it would complicate the marketing.”<sup>22</sup> By employing a decentered cast, therefore, the filmmakers streamline audience attention to the most important aspects of the film while simultaneously reducing costs. In the same article, meanwhile, Devlin himself comments on the cast’s diversity, emphasizing its audience accessibility was a natural result of their attempt to reflect the heterogeneity of the American experience: “Everyone can participate. It wasn’t really planned that

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<sup>22</sup> Bernard Weinraub, “Films Vault to the Top with Tricks, Not Stars,” *The New York Times*, 9 Jul. 1996: C11.

way; we were just trying to show a tapestry of American life. But that's the way it worked out. You can choose your hero who'll save the world. We don't see that in movies too often, do we?"<sup>23</sup> Critics, however, often viewed such sentiments with a critical eye. Writing with *Independence Day* and *Twister* specifically in mind, Louis Menand might be referencing several of the 1990s disaster films in his description of what he terms "the team concept," which he sees largely based on economic and cultural calculation:

"The team concept is attractive for several reasons besides helping to save the expense of a superstar salary. For one thing, it generates buddy stories—sitcom-style vignettes about odd couples who learn that with a little grit and a sense of humor, darn it, we just might pull through this thing—which is the one aspect of most of these films that, on Hollywood's calculation of such matters, might plausibly appeal to women. The team format also helps to immunize against a certain kind of criticism: it permits every kind of stereotype, because in the great team gestalt, the stereotypes all cancel each other out."<sup>24</sup>

This aversion to public backlash against stereotyping may have influenced to the disaster film revival in another way. Eric Lichtenfeld notes two social phenomena that made the portrayal of on-screen villains problematic in the 1990s: the end of the Cold War and the ascendancy of political correctness. The first meant that "America would no longer have any national enemy against which to define a national 'us,'" while the second had the effect of nullifying (or at least complicating) the kind of racial and ethnic coding that Hollywood films often used in the past when creating and casting villains.<sup>25</sup> The central threats of disaster movies, meanwhile, provided a de-politicized solution to this issue, as disaster proved largely void of the kinds of

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<sup>23</sup> Weinraub C14.

<sup>24</sup> Louis Menand, "Hollywood's Trap," *The New York Review of Books* Sept. 19, 1996, 27 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1436>>.

<sup>25</sup> Eric Lichtenfeld, *Action Speaks Louder: Violence, Spectacle, and the American Action Movie* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007) 192.

stereotypes that may provoke a public backlash. This is not to say that the films' visions of disaster and its ramifications was without political and social content; indeed, some critics have focused upon little else in their analysis of these films. Whether these resonances were intentional or not on the part of the filmmakers, the genre provided them a certain amount of plausible deniability. This extended to the audience, who could cheer on the defeat of monsters, comets, or tornados without the sense of unease that might accompany, say, rooting for the death of a Muslim extremist. Once again, Devlin factored this into his comments on the positive public reception of *Independence Day*, a film whose political ramifications were nevertheless dissected by parts of the critical community at the time of its release: "With aliens, you could still have some of that fun back. Nobody cared about hurting the feelings of a bunch of Martians."<sup>26</sup>

The genre also gave those tasked with marketing these films an advantage, as disaster films provided often-straightforward concepts (reflected in such "to-the-point" titles as *Volcano* and *Twister*) that rely heavily upon simple, recognizable imagery. The poster for *Volcano*, for example, tells a potential viewer the basic plot of the film through a single image: the titular object rising out of the ground and spreading lava over a darkened Los Angeles. The punchy tagline drives home the point: "The Coast is Toast." Advanced special effects often enhance the appeal of these advertisements, as a certain dazzling, CGI-enhanced image of mass destruction can be what separates a disaster film from others in the minds of viewers. *Deep Impact*'s city-demolishing wave proved to be such an image when the film was released in the summer of 1998, the destructive swell was featured in every major

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<sup>26</sup> Shone 233.

trailer for the film, as well as the film's main poster. Though certainly not the only genre whose films produce particularly marketable imagery, disaster films tend to produce the type of massive and unsettling moments that can prove particularly intriguing.

Once again, *Independence Day* provides an ideal example in its prominent use of a scene in which the alien spacecraft blows up the White House. It is an image both spectacular and culturally-charged, and multiple articles noted that audience members would often cheer at the end of the film's trailers when the image was shown. The film's creators believed in the image's mystique even as they wrote the screenplay, and would only sell their script to a studio who agreed to support their conception of the film's marketing. "We pitched them [the studios potentially purchasing their screenplay] the idea of this teaser and at the end of the teaser the White House blows up," Devlin reflected. 'Earth take a good look—it could be your last.' We had this catch line 'The world ends July 4<sup>th</sup>.'<sup>27</sup> So crucial was the notion of the film's marketing that Devlin added in a reference to the film's final battle taking place on July 4<sup>th</sup> into a major character speech to further convince 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox (the studio distributing the film) to release the film on the Fourth of July: synthesizing filmic content, market positioning, and advertising to attain maximum economic and cultural impact.<sup>28</sup>

And as with any genre or filmmaking trend, Hollywood studios may have revived the disaster genre because they saw one or two such films succeed at the box office, and naturally wanted to produce a similar product in the hopes of attaining

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<sup>27</sup> Shone 234.

<sup>28</sup> Shone 239.

similar economic results. It's not difficult to imagine that after *Independence Day* and *Twister* made enough at the domestic box office to place them at number one and two for the year (both film's combined domestic and international grosses amounted to over one billion dollars), Hollywood became far more likely to pour large amounts of money into a new generation of disaster movies. However, if the successes of these films bolstered their confidence in the genre, it's clear that several disaster films were already in various stages of development within Hollywood studios. Three days before *Independence Day*'s July 2 opening, an article in *The Los Angeles Times* noted the return of the genre and included *Volcano*, *Dante's Peak*, and *Deep Impact* among eight disaster films that were on various studios' front-burners.<sup>29</sup> The various reasons listed above all perhaps did their part in contributing to the upswing in disaster movies made within Hollywood. And as King notes, often studios will often duplicate one another's ideas: "Hollywood is an incestuous place and it is not surprising or unusual for similar ideas to hover somewhere in the atmosphere at different studios at the same time."<sup>30</sup>

As for why *Independence Day* and *Twister* both struck such a chord with audiences, author and screenwriter David Pirie proposed that—after being dormant for almost two decades as the modern action film absorbed and overtook it in box-office popularity—the disaster genre offered something relatively fresh to audiences. In an article published in the September 1996 issue of *Sight and Sound*, Pirie posited that Hollywood operated as "a slightly inefficient mass-audience machine where event films are being released so cleverly and so irresistibly that any prevailing form

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<sup>29</sup> David Kronke. "Commentary; Disaster Just Waiting to Happen," *The Los Angeles Times*, 30 June 1996: 25.

<sup>30</sup> King 160.



is milked completely dry before people get a glimpse of something else. And when by chance something else arrives as a kind of fluke... there is a stampede.”<sup>31</sup> By their sheer absence from the market, according to this theory, disaster films had an advantage of appearing fresh and different from other cinematic product of the moment. As noted above, this sense of “freshness” (achieved by films that mixed cutting-edge effects and appealing ensembles with older genre cues from earlier disaster, action, and science-fiction films) was already in the midst of becoming a verifiable production trend within the industry.

There is also the issue of to what extent sociological and cultural factors influenced the rise of disaster film production in the mid to late 1990s. Certainly, the notion was present in articles surrounding the genre’s reemergence, with particular attention given to the idea that disaster films (particularly those with an apocalyptic focus) reflected broader, pre-millennial fascination with the end of the world. “We’re coming up upon the new millennium,” *Volcano* screenwriter Jerome Armstrong told *Entertainment Weekly*. “Apocalyptic elements are in the air.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the notion of popular culture reacting to free-floating millennial fears could be found (perhaps more clearly) in other mediums, particularly television, where documentaries and specials about asteroids, volcanoes, and other natural disaster had been aired with increasing frequency throughout the mid to late 1990s. Paul Arthur describes how these programs both incorporated vaguely spiritual elements to bolster their import and fit into other culturally significant events invested in the notion of millennial conspiracy: “On the spectrum of millennial entertainments, the commercial packaging

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<sup>31</sup> David Pirie, “Wave Theory,” *Sight and Sound*, Sept. 1996: 26.

<sup>32</sup> Svetkey and Wells.

of violent storms and celestial hubbub is just a stone's throw away from the Heaven's Gate computer cult and 'The X-Files.'<sup>33</sup> Clearly, then, there was a presumed audience at the time for entertainments surrounding the end of the world.

Given this climate, it may be fair to say that Hollywood studios saw the potential for capitalization upon ideas and imagery that had taken on increased prominence within the cultural discourse of the time. King points out that, while the actual beliefs of many right-wing millennialist groups would prove far too extreme for mainstream Hollywood product, there are overlaps in their concerns and that of the disaster film: "Millennialist sects and the audiences for Hollywood blockbusters share, for example, a certain delirious investment in the destruction of the metropolis, a key image in fundamentalist religious rhetoric, survivalist literature, millennialist groups and the disaster film."<sup>34</sup> If these groups and their beliefs began to gain some visibility within national culture, then disaster films portraying either the end of the world or the demolition of major American cities (as seen in most of the 1990s disaster cycle) might gain an extra bit of cultural resonance for audiences paying to see the films and/or media sources potentially covering their production and release. Disaster movies also had the somewhat unique potential to simultaneously stoke millennial fascinations through the potent visualization of destructive (if not apocalyptic) forces, while ultimately providing a narrative solution that keeps the terror at bay. *Volcano* director Mick Jackson put it in Sontag-esque terms when he said that "...Movies like *Volcano* are a kind of therapy. It's working through a sort of

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<sup>33</sup> Paul Arthur, "Unnatural Disasters," *Film Comment*, July/Aug. 1998: 74.

<sup>34</sup> King 158.

wish-fulfillment parable. The worst, most cataclysmic event happens and yet somehow it all comes out all right in the end.”<sup>35</sup>

However, there is a decided difference between a studio agreeing to financially support a film, in part, because it might—through the proper presentation to the public through marketing—resonate with other cultural popular cultural products at the time, and making films based on the influence of an amorphous cultural *zeitgeist*. If the latter was the case, then it would be safe to assume that such influences made it into the formal and narrative qualities of the films themselves. An asteroid movie made to truly tap into pre-millennial fervor, for example, would surely reflect millennialist ideas of divine retribution and cleansing through apocalypse. Both *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon*, however, present cinematic universes primarily peopled with good-natured and likeable characters who, though flawed, are striving bravely to thwart unexpected (and underserved) doom. The two volcano movies, as Arthur notes, work largely the same way: “The besieged communities of *Dante’s Peak* and *Volcano* are riddled with conflicting interests and a measure of willful blindness, yet they are hardly the stuff of Sodom and Gomorrah.”<sup>36</sup> While *Volcano* does gesture more forcefully toward the notion of natural disaster in response to human failure than Arthur says (particularly in its opening sequence, which cuts back and forth between images of shallow, sun-tanned self-absorption on the surface and churning, glowing lava beneath), such a choice proves an anomaly within the 1990s disaster cycle, and ultimately is subsumed beneath a narrative that, as Jackson indicates, ends happily. Hollywood studios would not—and did not—tap directly into

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<sup>35</sup> “Lava is a Many-Splendored Thing.”

<sup>36</sup> Arthur 74.

any millennial fears if they felt that the resulting narratives would prove disconcerting to audiences and lead to shaky word-of-mouth and poor box-office returns.

Before exploring the narrative and formal characteristics of these films and how they specifically framed disaster, it's worth remembering that filmmakers will often tell (and studios will almost always financially support) the cinematic stories they feel the public will accept. The financial risk is often too great to do anything else. Without delving too deep into the sort of cultural *zeitgeist* rhetoric that we have already seen to be unreliable at best (and taking into account that Hollywood nevertheless does produce many films that audiences reject for any number of reasons), it might nevertheless be safe to assume that the spending choices of audiences at the box office somehow indicated to Hollywood studios that a film that framed disaster as both visual spectacle and catalyst for adventure and action would be accepted by the viewing public as inoffensive, and even pleasurable. Indeed, in a cultural moment where large-scale urban destruction remained but an intriguing notion to much of the public, filmgoers seemed excited about the idea of seeing their inner fears and curiosities surrounding widespread devastation enacted with such visual pizzazz on screen. Once this interest became reignited by films like *Independence Day*, the aforementioned industrial and economic factors then began to click into place, ultimately producing what became the 1990s disaster cycle.

### **Narrative Elements, Structure and Characterization**

#### ***The Disaster Source***

To achieve this brand of high-stakes, high-fun disaster, filmmakers utilized narrative and formal choices that cued the audience to read disaster as dangerous,

thrilling, and spectacular, but ultimately controllable by the endeavors of the films' protagonists. This begins with the framing of the disasters themselves. Almost every film begins by giving the viewer a narrative and/or visual cue as to the type of disaster approaching. *Volcano* opens with the aforementioned cross-cutting between surface vapidly and fiery subterranean menace. *Dante's Peak* begins with an aerial view of a gray volcano top that explodes into a mass of smoke and ash, out of which the film's title appears. A narrator tells at the start of *Armageddon* of the asteroid that struck the planet millions of years ago, and that the occurrence of a second collision is a question of when, not if. In all these situations, the threat is clearly demarcated to the viewer, giving them an omniscience that places them ahead of all the other characters on the hierarchy of knowledge (many of these films' titles point us in the right narrative direction as well). While this knowledge builds suspense within the viewer (as we try to anticipate when and how the disaster will first rear its head), it also provides the viewer with a certain set of generic expectations that will be met throughout the narrative. As a result, seeing the disaster is not an overwhelming or unexpected experience, because we know—on some level—what's coming.

Two aforementioned aspects of the central catastrophe in the 1990s disaster films additionally frame the impending disaster as a spectacular event, seen mostly in terms of its massive size and dazzlingly destructive potential. The first is the choice by most filmmakers to de-couple the origins of the disasters themselves from a strong degree of malignant human involvement. Historically, this has not always been the case; 1970s disaster films often explicitly framed the disaster as a kind of mass cleansing that swept/burned/washed away the malevolent aspects of society and left a

band of inherently good (or at least redeemed) survivors in its wake. Some see the 1990s disaster cycle as engaged in a similar ideological project. In an editorial, *The New York Times* reads films like *Deep Impact* as telling stores of societal regeneration through cataclysm: “The whole edifice is flawed, and so it takes a colossal threat to restore perspective or the destruction of the edifice itself in order to clear room for a new beginning.”<sup>37</sup> It’s true that disaster films, particularly those dealing with destruction on a worldwide scale, inevitably deal with the notion of a societal restructuring: either in the visualization of characters piecing their lives back together after a disaster or in larger themes of social restructuring as dramatized through allegorical characters. However, there is a difference between films showing the reconstitution of communities forged in the fire of common calamity and the implication—expressed through formal choices—that the society somehow created the disaster now being inflicted upon it and, by extension, deserve to be collectively punished.

Most films made during the 1990s cycle simply do not express this in a meaningful way. The natural cataclysms that befall society are either seen as random, as in both asteroid movies, or exceedingly unlikely, as in *Dante’s Peak*. *Volcano*, again, implies through its opening juxtapositions that Los Angeles’ vanity-obsessed culture is a somewhat worthy target, though even this is ultimately framed more as light satire than a true fire-and-brimstone condemnation. Even *Godzilla* downplays the notion of its titular creature as a product of nuclear side effects. Certainly, the film does not hide this fact, as seen in the grainy, discolored footage of mushroom clouds and unsuspecting lizards (set to an ominous, bombastic score) that makes up the

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<sup>37</sup> “Flirting with Disaster [Editorial],” *The New York Times*, 3 June 1998: A24.

film's opening credit sequence. However, the monster's insidious origins are placed within the narrative as occurring decades ago. His resulting rampage through Manhattan is further determined to be because he is looking for a suitable spot to lay his gigantic eggs. When taken together, this framing of the disaster assumes that human actions resulted in Godzilla's existence, but separates the protagonists from these actions both by placing them in the past and by defining the monster's current destructive visit as ultimately unconnected to human behavior. In this way, these films do not cue the viewer to see these cataclysms as indicative of an explicit social or political commentary, and therefore do not lead the viewer to detach themselves from the cinematic universe to engage in self-reflection or social criticism. The disaster remains a largely uncontextualized and apolitical event, with the destruction it causes viewed primarily in terms of its spectacle and its effects upon the principal characters.

The second previously-discussed aspect of the 1990s disaster film that works to position the viewer in this way is the wide scope of the disaster. Clearly, this depends upon the type of film; by their very nature, asteroid movies like *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon* have the potential to tell a more global story than movies that focus upon more inherently localized disasters, like volcanoes or tornados. That being said, the 1990s cycle seems marked by a particular narrative fluidity, in which the films either guides the viewer around several different locations affected by the disaster or through various locations within a defined endangered space (such as a large city). Both *Independence Day* and *Deep Impact* weave together several plot strands involving characters scattered throughout the United States, as well as brief glimpses

of worldwide reactions to the films' respective cataclysms. Though focusing mainly upon the central locations of the NASA command center and the asteroid itself, *Armageddon* also contains several sequences that either showcase the destruction of major cities not directly connected to the narrative or cut between various undefined locations around the globe to heighten the sense of collective anxiety surrounding the asteroid's imminent impact. Even films like *Volcano* and *Twister* move effortlessly between locations: the former through different parts of Los Angeles to focus upon different aspects of the containment effort; the latter between various towns and plains within its Midwestern milieu. This narrative strategy of defusing viewer interest over a range of locations gives the viewer an omnipotence that emphasizes the scope of the catastrophe's impact over focusing lengthily upon specific instances of its effect. This twists the popular 1970s formula of focusing upon a small band of disparate individuals as they struggle to survive a geographically-contained catastrophe: emphasizing the cataclysm's scope across the city, country, or world while also allowing insight into how various individuals have been affected or choose to fight back. We understand the disaster as a mass event that is then focalized through several characters, as opposed to staying with one set of characters and experiencing the impact of the disaster as they do. Our fairly wide range of knowledge creates suspense in that we know more than the characters do, and we wait for the moment when our levels of knowledge even out.

### ***Media Imagery***

Filmmakers often connect these various locales through the inclusion of media sources within the narrative. Indeed, one of the most common images within these



films is that of the news reporter, standing in front of a camera near the site of imminent destruction and commenting upon the threat's size, public reaction to it, plans to contain it, etc. On a practical level, this inclusion provides filmmakers with a convenient and plausible way of visually connecting spaces: cutting from a reporter at the site of cataclysm to a character at another location watching the live news report on a television; or from one character watching the news report to another character at another location watching the same broadcast. It also provides an efficient way for filmmakers to convey narrative information to the viewers and the characters simultaneously, helping to maintain the often-brisk narrative pace by efficiently moving from the information presented by media sources to the protagonists reacting to that information. Indeed, the advantage of television news footage as a swift conveyor of expository information has made it a staple of the action and thriller genres as well.

On another level, however, the use of media sources within the narrative reflects the way in which viewers will often experience real-life tragedies: as images and sound clips on broadcast television news. It might very well stretch the bounds of verisimilitude to not have some sort of media presence within the narrative. Taking this one step further, King argues that the presence of mediated imagery within the narrative (footage explicitly shot through news cameras, for example) makes the disaster more real to the viewer by contrasting the television camera's limited visualization and the more expansive—and therefore more visceral and real—view possessed by the camera operator and, by extension, the viewer.<sup>38</sup> Accepting King's argument, does this narrative choice contradict the notion that 1990s disaster films

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<sup>38</sup> King 163-164.

worked to downplay the messy realities of mass cataclysm to greater enhance the viewer's fascination and pleasure with spectacular disaster imagery? Certainly, it provides a moment to reinforce the notion that filmmakers were not attempting to completely sever their films from any sense of reality. Part of the inherent appeal of disaster films in the first place is their ability to conjure up a believable vision of mass destruction for the viewer, and strategies like the inclusion of media and mediated imagery work to emphasize the cinematic world as a recognizable and relatable one.

That being said, 1990s disaster films were not structured to leave viewers stranded in a jarring and hopelessly chaotic universe, but to allow them to experience the awe and horrific splendor of disaster before guiding them to its containment and resolution. Moments like the one described by King allow this. The contrast between the mediated and actual imagery allows the viewer a greater sense of verisimilitude: both because of the familiar media presence that echoes reality, and in their ability to go beyond its limitations to experience the full destructive tumult. However, media sources are largely tangential figures within many of these narratives. Even in *Godzilla*, where two of the main characters are an aspiring reporter and a cameraman for a news station, they quickly move from chroniclers of the monster's rampage to participants in its resolution. In the majority of these films, the viewer is ultimately aligned with characters that are actively pursuing the end of the disaster through advanced knowledge and expertise unknown to the public. We ultimately follow them through the disaster, whose actions stand in marked contrast to the static on-lookers who make up the media presence. In this way, these films allow us to experience the

disaster as more than a helpless by-stander by pulling us into the action-driven world of the problem-solving protagonist.

### ***The Expert Protagonist***

But who are these “experts” who are so fundamental to the framing of disaster in the 1990s cycle? Put simply, they possess a fundamental understanding of the disaster at hand. In cases of natural disasters, they may possess scientific knowledge of the catastrophe itself: why it begins, how it operates, and (most crucially) how to stop it. *Dante’s Peak*’s Harry Dalton (Pierce Brosnan) is an example of such a character, having accrued intrinsic knowledge of volcanic activity after years of field work and study. Such a character is easily transferable to films involving alien invasions or monster attacks. In these cases, the heroes know—through research and evidence—where the monster or aliens have come from, what their intentions are, and how to effectively end their rampage and/or plans of destruction. Both David Levinson (Jeff Goldblum) in *Independence Day* and *Godzilla*’s Niko Tatopoulos (Matthew Broderick) fit this mold, though generic conventions alter their position within the narrative. While Dalton’s work in natural settings leads to a rugged persona based equally in intelligence and physicality, both Levinson and Tatopoulos must adapt their more “nerdy” pursuits (David works as a cable repairman; Niko studies the effects of radiation on worms) to the intergalactic or monstrous threat in the narrative. Fundamentally, however, all three protagonists possess a key understanding of the threat that triggers action against the disaster. When they do not have the scientific and/or technological background to understand the cataclysm, heroes in these disaster movies may also fall into the category of the hyper-efficient

catastrophe manager, who possesses the technical know-how and practical experience to lead an initiative to contain and/or defeat the present danger. *Volcano*'s Mike Rourke (Tommy Lee Jones) particularly embodies this persona, in a manner that will be discussed momentarily.

This alignment with expert protagonists generally frames the narrative as one of proactive progression towards a disaster's end. The protagonists possess the knowledge and skill needed to end or at least contain whatever destruction is being wrought. Despite any character flaws they might have (often involving obsessive work habits that deter from their domestic relationships), these characters are positioned within the narrative as trustworthy and authoritative in their understanding of the disaster, which gives them the ability to act responsibly and effectively. The viewer becomes aligned with them both through a partaking in their knowledge and an understanding that they will use this knowledge for noble ends. This narrative position allows the viewer a certain sense of security, in that we understand the parameters of the disaster (no matter how intimidating or intense) and are aligned with characters whose actions work toward tangible reductions of the disaster's impact. Therefore, while the disaster and its complications produce suspense and even surprise, the viewer interprets these events through a protagonist whose understanding of the disaster produces ideas for recovery and action, and not merely a blind struggle for survival.

Narrative alignment is made stronger by the specific way in which disaster films define the expert protagonist as actively engaged in ending the disaster. As in the action and thriller genres, these films make a crucial distinction between their

“expert” protagonists and the ineffectual intellectuals or inflexible bureaucrats that often populate the narrative and who will reflect back some of the protagonist’s abilities in the distorting manner of a funhouse mirror. In both of these cases, these supporting characters possess a certain amount of knowledge with regards to the disaster itself or how to handle disastrous scenarios. However, they lack the quick thinking, creativity, and hands-on effort that distinguish the expert protagonist of a disaster film as more than simply a repository of information, but as a source of action and heroism in desperate times. (Such a character has been seen throughout film history, from Zorro and Robin Hood in the 1920s and 1930s to *Die Hard*’s John McClane.) King describes the actions of Rourke along these lines, although he could be describing the characteristics of several 1990s disaster film protagonists when he writes that “Rourke can be in the middle of trying to analyse the situation, debating what to do next, and can still break off to pull a man clear of the lava flow, get trapped himself and be rescued in the nick of time...He can be both boss and engaged in manual labours, implying no unbridgeable gulf between the two.”<sup>39</sup> Juxtaposing the protagonist with these supporting characters allows the film to underline the hero’s aforementioned ability to synthesize information and action that pushes the narrative forward.

With such a protagonist placed within the type of disaster scenario previously discussed, complications arise from three main sources: the disaster itself; other characters, whose knowledge and/or motives prevent effective measures from being taken; and internal self-doubt with regard to their own skills or motives. While the first and third are relatively self-explanatory and usually connected (the disaster

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<sup>39</sup> King 149.

creates unexpected problems and the protagonist wonders if they can effectively handle them), the second ties back to the aforementioned supporting characters. They question and even attempt to defuse the protagonist's unorthodox ideas on how to manage or end the disaster, provoking the protagonist to transgress official orders to effectively handle the situation. This is not unique to the disaster genre; bureaucracy-defying renegades have been a staple of action films for decades, particularly such 1970s rogue-cop films as *Dirty Harry*. However, placing this conflict within the disaster genre not only creates narrative tension in its own right, but it does so in a way that places the focus upon the reaction to the disaster, rather than the disaster itself. It becomes another way in which the expert as protagonist centers audience interest upon how the disaster will be ultimately stopped. In all of these conflicts, however, the films make clear that the protagonists' fundamental knowledge and mission are correct, and that what is usually required to overcome them is more of the innovative thinking that led them to become "experts" in the first place.

While framed as self-reliant leaders who trust their well-honed gut instinct above all else, the expert protagonists of the 1990s disaster are not therefore personally cut off from other protagonists or the disaster itself. As previously discussed, disaster films almost always concern themselves with the (re)formation of communities, as individuals take part in a collective struggle against a malignant external force. Through their common struggle against catastrophe, therefore, the protagonist is aided by supporting characters that both prove their own heroism by integrating their own knowledge and skills into the collective effort and come to see the protagonist in a new light through their performance (often literally) under fire.

Like many Hollywood narratives, these disaster films work to tie the resolution of more “personal” subplots to the large-scale narrative. However, they do so in a way that focuses the viewer’s attention on the manipulation and expansion of the expert’s knowledge and ability to control and defeat the catastrophe.

*Volcano* provides an example of this narrative strategy. Rourke’s skill as an expert protagonist is largely unquestioned throughout the narrative, but to effectively understand the volcano’s nature and catastrophic potential, he relies upon the advice of Amy Barnes (Anne Heche), a scientist whose investment in stopping the unexpected eruption are both professional and personal (her friend was burned to death while she and Amy were in the Los Angeles sewer system, investigating the disruptions caused by the volcanic activity). The professional and personal dovetail here: though initially wary of one another, Rourke and Barnes’s personalities synthesize as their skill sets do. By film’s end, this joining of expertise has led to both the containment of the lava and the potential for romance between them. Rourke is also given a personal investment in stopping the volcano. His sullen teenager daughter, Kelly (Gaby Hoffman)—who earlier complains that his work obsessions prevented him from fulfilling his role as a father—is with him when the volcano first hits, and is sent to the hospital after receiving a minor burn. After being treated, Kelly helps care for the young children separated from their parents and becomes a crisis manager like her father, albeit on a smaller scale. This implicit appreciation for her father’s profession turns rather explicit when Rourke saves Kelly and the little boy she’s been protecting as an apartment building collapses behind them. This rescue also ties Rourke’s professional and personal obligations together, as he

simultaneously saves his daughter and ends the threat to the city (the collapsing building creates a channel that guides the lava to the ocean).

Finally, by closely intertwining the protagonists' identities to their jobs and expertise, some (though not all) of the 1990s disaster films frame disaster as a kind of professional adventure for the main characters, in which encounters with disastrous situations become (in part) sources of heady excitement and opportunities to exercise their professional aptitude. Examples of this include the team of wisecracking drillers at the center of *Armageddon*, Steven Hiller (Will Smith) and his fellow fighter pilots fighting against the alien spacecrafts in *Independence Day*, and especially the band of scientists tracking the titular atmospheric disturbances in *Twister*. Though placed within differing narrative contexts, these three groups all mingle a sense of professional duty to controlling and/or defeating a central disaster with a feeling of mirthful camaraderie and good-natured hubris. Such a narrative set-up works to frame disaster (at least temporarily) as a kind of high-stakes exercise in professional showmanship, albeit one whose ultimate seriousness is understood and whose sober consequences are often brought home by the tragic death of one or more of the teammates.

These lighter sequences are made possible through two strategies. The first is an extension of the fluidity of movement discussed earlier in the chapter. Just as the viewer often moves from one space to the other, surveying responses to cataclysm and gleaning new information, so too do characters often possess the ability to move relatively unimpeded when dealing with the disaster. There is little sense of entrapment or enclosure due to the disaster's consequences in many of these films.



Whether seen in Rourke's free movement throughout lava-riddled Los Angeles or Tatopoulos and company's traversing through the Manhattan streets, the protagonists of these films possess an ability to carry out their expert plans with a degree of mobility—and, by extensions, a sense of control—that remains largely unquestioned throughout the film. This proves especially key within *Twister*, as Jo (Helen Hunt), Bill (Bill Paxton) and their rock-and-roll loving, ramshackle band of scientists chase after a series of tornadoes in an attempt to launch their new, twister-tracking device into its funnel. Unlike any other disaster film of the 1990s, *Twister* is about people who actively pursue the disasters that endanger them. While the film frames their pursuits as rooted in serious professional and personal reasoning (when she was young, Jo's father was killed by a tornado that the family had little time to prepare), the high-energy score, sweeping aerial shots of the crew driving towards their target over seemingly endless Midwestern fields, and general sense of ribald merriment seen on the team's faces as they move toward their target unquestionably convey the sense that this job is also an opportunity for risky excitement. Their ability to freely move about the countryside is a given within the narrative, but it proves essential to the film's spirited, energetic tone.

As perhaps inferred by the previous description, the other strategy utilized within these instances (and generally found throughout not just the 1990s disaster films but within most mainstream action and thriller films from the 1980s onward) is a strong sense of comedic self-awareness, as seen in the characters' knowing and even flip reactions to the awe-inspiring disasters that lie before them. This juxtaposition of event and reaction works to mitigate potentially unsettling reactions

within the viewer by undermining the disaster's ability to incite fear in the protagonist, as does the quick-witted banter that flies between team members as they work. Such a strategy is used on a grander scale throughout these films for the similar purpose of alleviating some of the tension intrinsic to the disaster narrative.

Specifically, these humorous interludes are often tied to an awareness of recent pop culture, and especially cinema. Shone writes about *Independence Day* being populated by “people who act, not as if they are facing the end of the world, but with the levity levels of people watching a movie about a bunch of people facing the end of the world,” but he could be writing about a number of self-aware disaster film ensembles.<sup>40</sup> This tendency comes out in multiple ways within these films: from *Independence Day*'s Hiller joking that he “can't wait to get up there and whoop E.T.'s ass;” to *Twister*'s demolishing of a drive-in movie screen showing *The Shining*'s famous “Here's Johnny” sequence; to the squabbling caricatures of film critics Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel—framed rather bizarrely as the mayor of Manhattan and his advisor, respectively—in *Godzilla*. As Shone suggests, the characters and the audience drink from the same collective pop cultural well. By reminding viewers of movies and movie-related elements seemingly beyond its immediate concerns, the films remind the viewer of its fundamental position as a fictional cinematic work, distancing us from the would-be deadly seriousness of the narrative's mass cataclysm.

Despite the heavy use of this brand of self-reflective humor, Ken Feil detects a balance between the self-aware and the earnest within many of these films, alternating “from camp to sincerity, or from blithely sadistic pleasure to serious

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<sup>40</sup> Shone 244.

themes and character sympathy.”<sup>41</sup> If labeling the pleasures the viewer gets from these films as “sadistic” might be a bit strong (as discussed below, the pleasure comes more from a balance of large-scale spectacle and momentary, visceral intensity), his general point correctly identifies the ultimate sincerity of these films. Though utilizing formal strategies that deemphasize the messy realities of the catastrophes they present, the 1990s disaster film nevertheless cues the viewer to sympathize with the characters, their struggles and losses in the wake of the disaster, and their ultimate triumph over adversity. Given that much of this chapter argues that these films place distance between the cataclysm and its horrific effects in order to better highlight its spectacular elements, it’s worth remembering that a similar distance is not usually placed between the principal characters and the viewer. In this way, these films provide both the queasy thrill of widespread, spectacular chaos and protagonists whose well-being the viewer can care about.

### **Formal Elements within Disaster Sequences**

Thus far, the focus has primarily been upon the overarching narrative strategies that define the 1990s disaster films and their framing of disaster as a fundamentally controllable spectacle to be enjoyed by the viewer. Thinking about how the eruption of the disasters themselves are visualized, however, provides a chance to both see how these aforementioned strategies play out at these crucial moments within the films and focus more intently upon some of the other formal choices (editing, camera movement, sound, etc.) that characterize the 1990s disaster cycle. When thinking about how these films allow the viewer to focus specifically

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<sup>41</sup> Ken Feil, *Dying for a Laugh: Disaster Movies and the Camp Imagination* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005) 64.

upon the visual spectacle of cataclysm, perhaps the most straightforward device used by many (though not all) of these directors is to simply remove the protagonists from the principal disaster site. By doing this, neither the directors nor the viewer has to focus upon their well being during the catastrophe. Such a strategy is seen in the three asteroid impacts in *Armageddon*, most of the titular monster's first rampage through Manhattan in *Godzilla*, and the initial destruction of the major American cities in *Independence Day*. (*Deep Impact* utilizes this strategy to a point but ultimately ties the disaster specifically to protagonists directly in its path.) Even in films where the principal protagonists are present—*Volcano* and *Twister*—their status as trained experts are quickly established through their skilled maneuvering through the disaster scenario. The viewer does not worry about their fate in the same manner as we would if the scenes focused upon less-skilled civilians.

That being said, many of the aforementioned scenes lacking the presence of a main character are filled with nothing *but* frightened civilians. How, then, does the focus stay upon the disaster's spectacular qualities? Surely, the mass swarms of people running for their lives from chunks of falling debris or massive walls of fire or water can evoke a certain amount of pity within the viewer; the *New York Times* editorial on disaster films points to this as the reason "why disaster-movie makers love the scene in which the whole population, fleeing the city, causes a traffic jam the size of New Jersey. The audience is asked to imagine in each stalled auto the flicker of personal fear."<sup>42</sup> "Flicker," indeed, is the right word to describe what these filmmakers are after: the brief hint of human suffering that grounds the disaster in some sort of tangible reality. Mostly, however, these disaster scenarios frame the

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<sup>42</sup> "Flirting with Disaster [Editorial]" A24.

masses as spectators of sorts for the disaster itself. One of the most common formal techniques is the intercutting between extreme long shots of the disaster itself—to fully encompass both the destructive source and the destruction it leaves in its wake—with medium or medium close-up shots of random people on the streets staring at wreckage and chaos with eyes bulging and mouth agape. As Lichtenfeld writes of *Independence Day*, “this intercutting is characteristic of the entire sequence, and of the 1990s’ disaster films in general: the filmmakers stress not just cataclysm, but also the characters’ reactions to it... The characters’ reverence for destruction seems intended to cue the audience’s reverence for the special effects.”<sup>43</sup> By focusing viewer reaction upon non-characters within the narrative, we ultimately view them less as endangered civilians than as proxy witnesses to the stunning terrors on the screen. Sometimes minor characters are placed within these scenarios as well. However, these are almost always either caricatures that the film established not moments earlier (the feeble old fisherman in *Godzilla* or *Armageddon*’s whining Asian tourists) or are supporting characters framed as unimportant to the narrative. In both cases, they simply serve to add a dash of comedy to the scene. And when all of these aforementioned figures begin to run away in terror and are subsequently blown away/crushed/lost in the flames, the viewer’s experience of their death is both minimized by the rapid editing seen in almost of all these sequences and viewed within the context of the cruelly beautiful, CGI-enhanced disaster that just finished them off.

This interplay of momentary, visceral impact and more distanced—if still intense—contemplation of the disaster as a whole is further intensified by other

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<sup>43</sup> Lichtenfeld 193-194.

formal choices made by the filmmakers. Filmmakers often employ a shaky camera when filming at the “ground level” of the disaster to convey the chaotic atmosphere. While pans, tilts, or tracks are utilized, many shots lingering upon the cataclysm itself or framing the reactions of those about to be engulfed within it do so without much ornate camera movement. The focus is upon the disaster itself. When there is movement, it serves to follow the disaster’s path, such as the low-angle pan as an asteroid flies across the sky in *Armageddon*. The camera only follows individuals when they are protagonists whose their actions are important to narrative progression. Otherwise, static, high-angle long shots will often capture fleeing crowds or jammed streets. If the static camera is often employed for the purposes of gazing upon the destruction as a whole, it is also used for one of the most explicit strategies for visceral audience impact. In almost all of these scenes, there are at least a couple of shots in which the viewer either literally takes on the perspective of a by-stander in the crowd or adopts a point-of-view that is assumed to be. A huge object slowly hurls toward the camera, flying closer and closer until the impact turns the screen black and the next shot is cut to. The still camera creates a sense of awed entrapment, as the viewer gawks helplessly as the mass flies toward them. However, the next cut allows for a quick escape, usually into a wider shot of the cataclysm or its impact.

As previously mentioned, these scenes are also marked by a rapid editing style that will often juxtapose extremes in shot length, creating this bifurcated perspective. Such an editing style is presented explicitly in these visceral moments, which King deems as part of an overall “impact aesthetic,” in which “the viewer is assaulted by a succession of high volume ‘in your face’ sequences in which a constant stream of

objects and debris fly towards the camera.”<sup>44</sup> However, this pattern is utilized throughout the scene, and it serves the larger aim of the viewer gaining a sense of chaos and destruction over lingering on the details. Sound works in a similar manner. The sonic focus remains largely upon the disaster source itself (whether it be whizzing meteors, roaring fire, whipping wind, etc.) and its effects upon the landscape (usually, explosions, twisting metal, and collapsing concrete), although nondiegetic score can be used either to build-up to the cataclysmic moment or throughout the scene to heighten the overall chaos. Pedestrian screams work their way into the soundtrack to emphasize their mass movement away from the catastrophe. Mostly, though, all of these sounds create a kind of chaotic blanket over the scene, continuing the tumult without much differentiation. This contributes a sense of the scene as a whole, and highlights the moments of focalization—in which sound will place emphasis upon a certain element in the landscape—before returning to the general chaos.

This partially accounts for the use of well-known cities with famous landmarks as settings for mass disaster: particularly New York, which is devastated in four out of the seven film under consideration here and Keane categorizes as “the modern metropolis par excellence, its skyline instantly recognizable and the Statue of Liberty facing out to sea the indication that this is very much the gateway to America.”<sup>45</sup> The instant associations the viewer has with the locations of the disasters—particularly their status as symbols of American success and prosperity—inject scenes of their destruction with an extra amount of excitement and adding

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<sup>44</sup> King 168.

<sup>45</sup> Keane 82.

import to the disaster itself. Even though the protagonists themselves are not being directly endangered, the viewer understands the disaster's impact through the loss of these major, symbolically-charged cities. The destruction of the landmarks within these cities (the Statue of Liberty, the White House, etc.) produce a similar effect. As Miranda Banks writes, "the viewer, aware of the ideals for which the monument stands, reads the image as a signal that not only is the city at risk but the national body and the nation as well."<sup>46</sup> However, visualizing the destruction of monuments and the cities that contain them fit well within the 1990s disaster films' overall designs. Terror and chaos are implicit in the loss of these sites and their corresponding associations with the destruction of American society. And yet, they are ultimately abstracted and amorphous fears that act primarily as a challenge to the expert protagonist who returns to the narrative fully after their destruction and must decide how to use their skills and insights to defeat the threat and rebuild society.

Of course, there are myriad small exceptions and contradictions to these generic principles within the films themselves. *Twister's* disaster-chasing protagonists and rural setting results in flying cows and decimated small towns over exploding urban landmarks. *Deep Impact* ultimately focuses upon the personal and national processes through which the United States would prepare for a massive apocalyptic event, while also providing sequences of spectacular destruction and expert protagonists committing acts of self-sacrificial heroism. *Dante's Peak* provides a particularly good example of this, as it corresponds to the aforementioned generic guidelines in many respects: Dalton, incredibly skilled at his job and possessive of

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<sup>46</sup> Miranda J. Banks. "Monumental Fictions: National Monument as a Science Fiction Space," Journal of Popular Film & Television Fall 2002: 138.



intuitive understands of volcanoes, warns the titular town of an impending eruption. He is doubted by his fellow scientists (who nevertheless form a kind of dedicated team of friends who view eruptions as both professional obligations and sources of communal bonding and pride) until the volcano blows and the town must be abruptly evacuated. The disaster scenes themselves conform to many of the techniques previously mentioned—rapid editing; mixture of POV close-ups and long shots of the collapsing buildings and flowing lava— with a particular emphasis upon rubble from collapsing buildings flying at the camera. Lichtenfeld notes that Donaldson “must enjoy it; he does it over twenty times in less than ninety seconds.”<sup>47</sup>

However, the crucial difference comes from the film’s direct placement of the protagonist within a disaster scenario that cannot be managed or controlled, but merely withstood. Dalton, along with mayor Rachel Wando (Linda Hamilton) and her young children must escape the volcano’s deadly path, and the film emphasizes their struggle to move from one place to another in scenes like the crossing of a highly acidic lake in a metal boat being quickly eaten away by the toxic water. Because the disaster is personalized, the film tends to linger upon the specific physical costs of the struggle for survival: the charred stumps where an old woman’s legs once were (the children’s ornery grandmother), or the bone that splits through Dalton’s skin after rocks collapse on his body. These usually-elided details give *Dante’s Peak* a darker and more brutal tone; there is little humor in the film’s disaster-laden second half not laced with sadness or desperation. This is reflected visually in the disaster itself: particularly during the boat ride, where lighting produces a harsh, strobe-like effect that disorients the viewer. Ultimately, Dalton’s expert skills lead to their rescue, as he

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<sup>47</sup> Lichtenfeld 204.

activates professional equipment that sends out a signal that his team eventually receives. Even here, however, the focus is upon the recovery of Dalton, Wando, and her family by others, not the active defeat of the menace or the salvation of a city or nation. The film ends on a relatively upbeat and traditional note, as the cataclysm binds Dalton and Wando together as a romantic couple and leads to the creation of a new family. Still, as they fly away on a rescue chopper, the camera simultaneously watches them fly away and lingers upon the wreckage of the former town.

These variants of the 1990s disaster conventions point perhaps the need to aesthetically differentiate *Dante's Peak* from other disaster films being released at the time, especially the overlapping *Volcano*. However, they also underline how the disaster genre can be used in a flexible manner, highlighting the spectacle of massive cataclysm but doing so in a manner that is less explicitly presentational and more interested in drawing the viewer into the visceral experience of surviving the devastation. As viewers, we may initially experience the volcanic blast as a wondrous and terrifying image unto itself, but we soon come to see its specific and frightening effects upon protagonists whom we have come to care for. Drawing on aspects of the horror genre in its strobe-lighting effects during the eruptions and grisly close-ups of injuries, Donaldson engages the viewer on a more gut-wrenching level, tying us to the increasingly desperate experiences of the central characters even as he continues to highlight the visual glories of the eruption. This balance of visually-entrancing disaster spectacle and intensified focus upon disaster's ghastly personal consequences will become perhaps the principal issue for post-9/11 disaster filmmakers, and its

presence here speaks to the genre's ability to present narratives and images as viscerally gripping as they are aesthetically marvelous.

**Case Study: *Independence Day***

Still, the majority of 1990s disaster films fell within the dominant narrative and stylistic confines established earlier, and perhaps no film represents this more than Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day*. From the very beginning of the film, *Independence Day* cues the viewer to understand its cinematic world as both menacing and lighthearted: first creating dread and then undercutting it with wink-wink humor. The opening credits suggest the coolly assaultive nature of the forthcoming alien threat. Metallic gray letters compress together in the center of a black screen with a metallic clang, stay sedentary for a moment, and then burst apart with a small explosive sound as the next set of credits swoop in. After the brief credit sequence (identifying only the studio, director, and title and therefore downplaying the presence of any single actor), the screen bursts into white, accompanied by a muffled explosive sound before fading into a grainy, black-and-white image of the American flag planted on the moon. This "flash cut" technique occurs frequently throughout the first third of the film; here, like the credits, it signals the narrative intensity to come through the use of King's "impact aesthetic." The grainy picture dissolves into the present day as the camera slowly tracks back and tilts down to reveal the plaque left by the first American astronauts to land on the moon. Their crackly radio transmission mixes with the film's low-key score as the camera pushes into the plaque, which identifies both the moon landing's date—July 1969—and the intentions of its participants: "We came in peace for all mankind." This move from

past to present (bridged by the visual transition and connected through the radio transmission) paints the site of the moon landing as a continual source of national pride and goodness, and both the slow camera movement and leisurely pace of the shot visualize it as a serene and safe place. This also establishes a key motif: the use of well-established landmarks (both physical and cultural) as benign symbols of America.

As the score darkens, the film dissolves to a rightward tracking shot of the lunar surface, which has preserved the original footprints left by the astronauts. This marker of American (and human) accomplishment begins to disappear, however, as the surface mysteriously starts to rumble and the footprints quickly fade away. We dissolve again to a long shot of the lunar surface, with the abandoned spacecraft and American flag in prominent view, as a large, threatening shadow passes slowly over the ground, moving from the background of the frame to the foreground. Before the viewer even sees the alien spacecraft in the following shot as it moves towards Earth, we understand the enormity of the menace through the simple contrasts within the sequence: the brightness of the lunar landscape versus the creeping darkness of the spacecraft's shadow; the stillness of the landscape versus the rumbling of the alien's approach; the size of the alien ship versus the relatively puny equipment left by the astronauts. The sudden disappearance of the footprints, in particular, is framed as both a direct affront to human (and specifically American) progress, and a sign of how easily and dispassionately that progress is literally wiped away. The final shot tilts up from the lunar surface to frame the Earth, which is then physically blotted out by the enormous metallic bottom of the spacecraft floating toward the planet. This

visual erasure, established early on, will take on far more spectacularly destructive life later in the film. In summary, however, this first scene establishes the elemental menace to the world (and specifically to the United States) the aliens pose.

Incidentally, it also places the viewer in the privileged position of being both aware of the alien threat before any other characters and (by implication) that they are undoubtedly hostile.

Lest the mood become too somber, however, the next scene moves the narrative forward while giving the viewer an array of jokes and gags. A flash cut brings us to the exterior of the S.E.T.I. (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence Institute, as we are told by the text on screen), where the viewer faintly hears the strains of R.E.M.'s "It's the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)" coming from a radio. The song immediately helps to defuse the dread caused by the previous scene's actual threat of annihilation through the insertion of an up-tempo pop song that cheerfully defies apocalyptic doom. As we move inside, the camera leftward tracks from behind a panel of equipment to reveal a scientist with large glasses and a gaudy Hawaiian shirt listening to the music as he casually taps golf balls on a roll-out putting green. A rack focus (which Emmerich employs throughout the film) follows the man's golf ball travelling from his putter to the hole. As the ball enters the hole, an alarm sounds off-screen, prompting an immediate cut to a flashing light on the side of the wall. The camera rack focuses again from the flashing light in left foreground to the scientist looking up in right midground. The visual equivalence given to these two very different moments reflects the lackadaisically comic nature of the scene. Even when the alien's presence is determined by the scientist, the jokes

don't stop. He calls his boss, who is awakened by the call and makes a crack about hanging up unless the caller is "an incredibly beautiful woman." When he hears the alien signal over the phone, he rises quickly out of bed and smacks his head, leading to another bit of comic business as the scientist gets back on the phone to talk about the signal and only hears his boss muttering profanities. And when the boss enters the room and begins to investigate the signal, he almost trips on the stray golf balls. The scene ends on a more ominous note, as the mysterious alien signal dominates the soundtrack and the camera tracks into the black speaker from which it is emanating. However, this smattering of visual and verbal jokes—occurring in rapid succession after the menacing opening scene—typifies the sudden shifts in tone that dominate the film and allow it to give the viewer both a glimpse of cataclysmic terror and the reassurance that it can still be laughed at.

The film quickly establishes its four central locations—Washington, D.C.; Manhattan; Imperial Valley, California; and Los Angeles—by introducing each through a series of flash-cuts that center upon well-known landmarks. This strategy is particularly used for Washington and New York: the former is identified by both a shot of the Iwo Jima memorial (heroically backlit by the rising sun) and the White House, while the latter denoted through aerial shots of the Statue of Liberty. Here, the flash-cuts highlight these important, symbolically-charged landmarks for both thematic and practical reasons. Their prominence furthers the motif of landmarks as symbols of American goodness and strength, and establishing this through impactful editing makes their later destruction all the more sobering. However, the flash-cuts also allow the viewer to become situated as the film quickly cuts between its multiple

locations, providing a moment for the viewer to acknowledge where they are (this may account for why this technique disappears after the film's first half hour, as the presence of individual characters cue the audience as to where they are). More generally, this establishment of multiple locations once again places the viewer in an omniscient narrative position, as we are aware of the invasion's effects within multiple places. This expanded level of awareness emphasizes the scope and grandeur of the invasion and subsequent attacks, rather than place the viewer within one main location and experience the invasion from a more limited point of view.

Within each space, we are introduced to a variation on the expert protagonist, one whose skills have been dulled by personal and/or systematic obstacles. President Thomas Whitmore (Bill Pullman) is a recently-elected Gulf War fighter pilot whose youthful appeal and ambition have been dulled by an administration mired in indecision and paralysis. In New York, David Levinson is criticized by his father, Julius (Judd Hirsch), for both his lack of professional ambition—he works as a “cable repair man” after attending MIT for eight years—and inability to move on from his three-year-old divorce from Constance (Margaret Colin), who left him to become an advisor to Whitmore. Russell Case (Randy Quaid) was a combat pilot in Vietnam who now works as a crop-duster when not nursing his alcoholism and raving about his alien abduction a decade earlier. In comparison, Steven Hiller seems to lead a relatively content life as a fighter pilot with his longtime girlfriend, Jasmine (Vivica A. Fox) and her young son, Dylan (Ross Bagley) in Los Angeles. However, his dreams of being a NASA astronaut seem far from a reality, in part (it is implied) due to Jasmine's occupation as an exotic dancer. In all four cases, their skills remain

unquestioned within the narrative; what's questioned is their ability to transcend the situations that prevent their full usage. More specifically, this full usage must come, not from previous experience (as it does with protagonists facing natural disasters) but from a combination of innate skill and instincts when dealing with this wholly new threat.

As the smaller alien ships begin to enter Earth's atmosphere, Emmerich places the focus upon passive "looking" to connect multiple locations through a mutual feeling of awe and dread of the approaching spacecrafts. Emmerich employs televised news coverage to create this collective anxiety, often cutting from one set of characters to another by having them watch the same news broadcast. These broadcasts sometimes provide plot information (as when it informs the characters and the viewer of the locations of the ships worldwide, or of the doomed plan to visually communicate with the spacecrafts through light patterns) or a dash of humor, as when a Los Angeles news anchor warns residents to not fire guns at the alien ships ("You may inadvertently trigger an interstellar war"). Mostly, though, they provide a visually simple and economic way to communicate nationwide anxiety and disperse plot information to the film's disparate characters. Once the spacecrafts come closer to the film's principal locations, however, Emmerich moves from mediated imagery to the mass public reactions of city-dwellers as the ships finally become fully visible. He heightens this sense of collective dread through the use of the creeping shadow of the ship that engulfs many of the landmarks established earlier through the flash-cuts, emphasizing the size and power of the alien threat. Much like the intercutting utilized in the actual disaster scenes, Emmerich lingers upon the awed reactions of a wide



swath of pedestrians as they stare offscreen in wonderment. As Lichtenfeld notes, the scene showing the arrival of the spaceship in New York “comprises more than a dozen shots, but only three features the ship. The rest show jaw-dropped citizens and car accidents among distressed motorists. Emmerich makes sure to show a variety of people united in their awe. In one shot, the camera dollies in on several street kids, who are then joined by a businessman...”<sup>48</sup> Once the ships place themselves over the city completely, Emmerich alternates between low-angle shots of the ship as seen through buildings and medium and long shots of pedestrians gawking or screaming. This image of the awed onlooker not only creates a sense of mass fear, but focuses the viewer’s attention upon the spectacle of the effects themselves.

It’s an image Emmerich has clear fondness for. Even after the ships are revealed in their fullness, he still makes room for the singular reaction of Steve, who has slept through the initial entrance of the ship. As he distractedly reads the newspaper outside of Jasmine’s house, the camera framing him in left profile, Emmerich utilizes rack focusing and subjective sound to convey Steve’s slow realization that others around him are frantically discussing travel plans as they hurriedly pack their cars. He turns his head right and the camera racks from his head in the foreground to the frenzied neighbors next door, whose conversations suddenly dominate the soundtrack. The off screen sound of a helicopter flying overhead prompts him to follow its trajectory, and Emmerich cuts to a POV shot as the camera tilts down from the helicopter to the massive spacecraft floating over Los Angeles. A fast track-in to a medium shot of the stunned Steve emphasizes the sudden impact of the ship’s presence, further heightened by Jasmine entering the shot with coffee,

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<sup>48</sup> Lichtenfeld 194.

attempting to talk to Steve for a moment, and only then following his look offscreen and reacting with a gasp. Even here, however, humor is interspersed, as the scene ends with a shot of Dylan popping out between their legs with a toy gun and yelling “Bang bang!” as he points it in the direction of the ship.

It’s worth reiterating the viewer’s own broad knowledge of the aliens provided by the film. Besides the first ominous scene, Emmerich allows the viewer to see the alien menace in space two more times before the smaller ships come to Earth. In the first, we get a sense of the sheer size of the mothership in one lengthy take, as a satellite zooms past the stationary camera and hurtles toward the massive, dark-gray side of the ship before exploding inconsequentially upon impact. Minutes later, the camera is placed inside the mothership and looks out as dozens of smaller, circular ships float in formation toward Earth’s atmosphere. Our knowledge of the alien threat, then, is thoroughly established and reinforced within the film’s first twenty minutes. When the ships themselves come to Earth, then, the viewer more or less knows what to expect visually. Viewer interest moves from the surprise of seeing the alien spacecraft to the pleasure of watching both the massive, detailed, CGI-enhanced behemoths from a multitude of angles and viewpoints—as well as the pleasure of seeing the characters’ entranced reactions as they first lay eyes upon them.

Emmerich’s emphasis upon the passive awe engendered by the spacecraft’s presence also works to either underline the protagonist’s paralysis or to separate their purposeful action from the mass inertia and fear of their surroundings. After placing the viewer briefly the Northern Desert of Iraq as the first ship enters the atmosphere—and whose geographic distance from the principal narration allows for a

more intensified appreciation of the fiery, smoky cloud that appears in the darkened skies—the film returns to the Oval Office, where Whitmore and his advisors watch grainy televised images of one of the ships as it glides toward Moscow. Though Whitmore decides to stay within the White House to maintain a sense of national unity and calm, his relative lack of decisive action is underlined through he and his staff's reliance upon televised imagery to inform them of what is occurring. This motif is established earlier in the film, when Whitmore first gets out of bed to the sound of television news pundits complaining of his disappointing lack of assertive leadership (“They elected a warrior and they got a wimp!” carps one talking head). Even when Whitmore attempts to steady the nation through a televised address, the message is undermined both by the fuzziness of the image itself and the immediate cut after Whitmore's insistence on orderly evacuation to a shot of New Yorkers frantically throwing things out their windows and stuffing things into their cars. In comparison, David immediately begins to use his technological skills to crack the alien communication code. His physical movements are visually contrasted with the stasis of the rest of his office, who collectively sit and watch the television coverage. Furthermore, when he discovers that the ships are planning to attack, he and his father race to Washington to warn Whitmore of the forthcoming massacres. Steve, too, chooses to report to his base, El Toro, after discovering the alien presence. This action on the part of David and Steve differentiate them from the panicking, gawking masses, and once Whitmore is made aware of the aliens' true intentions, he, too, rouses his staff to quickly exit Washington on Air Force One and attempts to evacuate the cities.

This traversing of space has both thematic and practical implications. On a broader scale, moving characters out of their disparate geographic spheres and into the same space visualizes the notion of national reformation in the face of mass calamity that is the central thematic thrust of the entire film (and one of the genre's as well). However, by placing Steve en route to a distant army base, Russell on the move in the desert in his RV, and David and Whitmore on Air Force One (along with other key supporting characters like Constance, Julius, etc.), it removes the principal characters from the sites of impending catastrophe. With no protagonists to worry about with any sense of urgency, the viewer can more readily engage in the spectacle of destruction about to be unleashed.

Before the attack begins, Emmerich utilizes intercutting between the opening of the spaceship and bystander reactions to position the viewer as a spectator to the forthcoming catastrophe. Unlike the entrance of the ships into Earth, the viewer is theoretically unaware of how the ships will go about attacking the city (although anyone who came into contact with the film's relentless advertising campaign was treated to prominent images from this central disaster sequence). Therefore, we are aligned with the general desire to gaze upon the opening ship, if not with any of our fellow spectators up on the screen. We first see the ship open over the Los Angeles basin which, though not as instantly recognizable as the other locations over which the ships has positioned themselves (the White House and the Empire State Building), has a unique zigzag light pattern on its roof that distinguishes in high-angle aerial shots. The bottom of the ship unfurls like a metallic flower, with individual panels blossoming out to reveal a central axis and interior walls emitting a glowing green

light. Emmerich cuts between a gaggle of partiers staring from the roof of the basin (including Jasmine's fellow stripper, Tiffany, defined earlier in the film as relatively shallow and irresponsible) and POV shots from the top of the roof of the ship opening. They are bathed in green light and shot from a high angle, emphasizing their entranced reaction to the oddly beautiful image of the ship's unfurling. "It's so pretty," a hypnotized Tiffany whispers to herself, and it's hard to disagree. Sound and music emphasize this reaction; the score takes on a sweeping tone, while the opening of the ship itself mixes a high-pitched swishing noise as it first opens with a lower, more guttural rumble similar to the roar of a lion.

The scene soon expands to encompass both the reaction shots of those on the Los Angeles streets and those in New York (signaled by the presence of the Empire State Building), where bystanders gaze at the same image in rapid shots lasting no more than two to four seconds. In both of these scenes, Emmerich lingers upon one particularly distinctive figure in the crowd, to some a certain degree of personalization to the masses. However, the viewer is not meant to invest emotionally with these figures, as they are not followed by the camera, and are quickly forgotten once the attack begins. They continue to be intercut with the ship itself, which is often shot in low angle to emphasize how its unfurling sides encompass and dwarf the buildings they're about to demolish. Central figures are not forgotten completely throughout this scene. Indeed, our cue as viewers to know when the ships will attack is when we see David's countdown clock reach zero, and he whispers, "Time's up." But recognition of their presence and endangerment are saved until the end of the sequence, when the initial wave of destruction has been thoroughly visualized. The

score reaches a crescendo and then falls after the countdown clock ends, so aural focus is solely upon the ship's laser and the high-pitched noise it emits as it "powers up." The scene remains without musical accompaniment until principal characters reappear, placing the sounds of destruction (twisted metal, breaking glass, exploding concrete) and its reactions (screaming, running, etc.).

Emmerich also establishes the juxtaposition of visceral sensory impact and distanced aesthetic appreciation within the opening moments of the attack itself. We return to the top of the Los Angeles basin, where Tiffany and the others continue to gaze at the open ship as strands of wavy green light begin to coalesce in its center. When the beam of energy finally shoots down at the building, it also shoots down at the camera, placing us momentarily in the doomed position of the partiers. However, after a brief cut to Tiffany and the others recoiling in fear, the camera cuts to a distanced shot of the top of the building exploding into a column of fire before moving to a low angle shot that emphasizes the fire's speedy path down the building. The destruction of all three major buildings are shot in such a way: beginning with a longer straight-ahead shot of the eruption of flames followed by either a cut-in to a specific section's destruction or a low-angle shot emphasizing both the building's height and the speed in which such a tall building is then demolished. These moments of symbolic destruction are spaced out over the course of the scene, allowing each to be focused upon fully by the viewer. Such moments prove particularly important, both because they offer a particularly spectacular moment of devastation and because they add importance to the scene's fiery tumult. Their destruction is more than simply the collapse of a building, but signifies the devastation of national strength by a

coolly unfeeling alien force. Emmerich frames the massive fire wall that emanates from this central destruction as all-encompassing and inescapable; it completely fills the frame in almost every shot in which it's featured, and is most often seen barreling toward the camera. The nighttime setting of these attacks only further emphasizes the power of the wall of flame, as cars and other detritus is hurled into the air and crash down upon stalled traffic and fleeing pedestrians.

The pedestrians themselves are critical to the scene's overall effect, but only as a mass, screaming collective and not as individuals. They are shot mainly in groups, in either high angle long shots that emphasize the number of bodies fleeing the destruction or in medium and medium long shots taken from the ground level and sometimes tracking with a group. However, no pedestrian is ever followed for more than a couple of seconds. The emphasis is upon mass hysteria in relation to overwhelming catastrophe. As seen in the build-up, Emmerich will occasionally focus briefly upon an individual, as he does when a lone man in an office building looks out the window as a huge wall of fire comes barreling toward him. The largely undifferentiated soundscape used throughout much of the sequence (a mixture of collapsing buildings, roaring fire, and screams) quiets momentarily as the viewer shares his subjectivity. The sound grows and the man is blown out of the frame as the fire enters through the windows, but Emmerich immediately cuts away to the entire building being consumed and the scene regains its tumultuous sonic character. There is an awareness of human cost without a lingering upon it: a point emphasized in moments like these, but indicative in the overall rapid editing pace, which emphasizes both the chaos of the scene and offers a variety of perspectives on the catastrophe.

This ability to detach before the gruesome consequences is even used for humor at one point. When the scene switches to New York, the camera lingers on Marty (Harvey Fierstein) stuck in traffic as the wall of fire barrels towards his car. Earlier, the film framed Marty as a simpering, hysterical (and clearly homosexual) character, desperately talking with his mother and, later, his therapist when he hears of the imminent attack. Having been marked as a caricature not to be taken seriously, he now gawks as the deadly wave of fire—seen in a POV shot that frames the fire between rows of buildings, further guiding the eye and underlining its inescapability—barrels toward him. His reaction, however (“Oh crap”) defines his death as a mordant joke, not a tragedy. This is underlined by Emmerich’s choice to have the viewer share his point of view as a car smashes into his windshield. By having the car “impact” by hurtling toward the camera, we at once experience a moment of visceral terror while knowing, based upon the pattern of editing established, that the next cut will take us elsewhere.

As the scene moves toward its conclusion, Emmerich refocuses the viewer upon the fates of the characters still partially in the path of destruction. We return to Air Force One as it’s about to take off from a runway near the now-destroyed White House (earlier, a helicopter filled with other White House was unceremoniously consumed in the flames), cutting between the exterior of the plane as it races to outrun the walls of fire behind it and medium close ups of Whitmore, David, and others as the lights of the plane flicker and the walls begin to shake. After a few tense moments, the flickering desists and we know they have made it out all right. The scene ends in a similarly personalized—and decidedly more dynamic—fashion.



Emmerich reincorporates the score in this final movement as his camera remains in one place for the lengthiest time in the scene. It tracks forward shakily and pans right to focus on Jasmine, who the film established earlier as being stuck in Los Angeles traffic. As she, Dylan, and their dog, Rover, sit in traffic within a tunnel, she spots the people fleeing and sees the flames in her rearview mirror. Emmerich's formal choices decidedly intensify our personal involvement with the already sympathetic Jasmine: rapid intercutting between her frantic looks and the ever-closer wall of fire; melodramatic music that underlines the tension; pathos-inducing close ups of both Dylan and Rover; and the brief use of slow motion that captures Jasmine in a moment of seemingly hopeless entrapment in the tunnel. Jasmine and Dylan eventually escape into a secure room in the side of the tunnel—joined by Rover after a death-defying jump away from the oncoming flames—and the dim bulb illuminating the room extinguishes to end the sequence. By ending the sequence with so personalized (and localized a moment), Emmerich underlines both the protagonists' safety at disaster's end and finishes a sequence of chaos, destruction, and mass death on a cautiously hopeful note.

The following day finds almost all of the principal characters displaced or in transit (*Independence Day's* triptych structure places the invasion and attack on July 2, and the remainder of the film occurs on the following two days). Air Force One and its occupants remain in the air; Russell and his children drive through the desert with other families; Jasmine, Dylan and Rover wander through the wreckage of L.A., picking up survivors in a large truck. Though the "July 3" portion of the film opens with a forlorn shot of a ruined Manhattan—a fallen Statue of Liberty in the right

foreground and smoldering World Trade Center in the left midground, with the alien ship dominating the skyline—*Independence Day* does not spend much time on the aftermath of these cities' destruction. Los Angeles is the only city the viewer spends any significant time in, and even then the emphasis is upon those that have survived, and not those that have died. The film never established any strong narrative links between the cities and the chief protagonists who, as previously mentioned, become more defined by their movement away from them. Without homes to return to, however, the remainder of the film pushes all of the characters toward a common location, where a new community of survivors from both coasts focus, not upon the revival of fallen metropolises, but on the defeat of a full-on planetary extermination. This common location ends up being the fabled Area 51, which the film defines as an actual site containing information on the invading aliens. King argues that this movement echoes back to the grander myth of the frontier with American culture, in which the inertia and ambiguities of the metropolis gives way to decisive action and moral clarity of the wilderness: "Abandoning the metropolis for a showdown launched from the New Mexico desert, the central characters move from an alienated state to a form of elemental combat that enables them to prove themselves in a break from dull or oppressive routine."<sup>49</sup> Such imagery as the caravan of RV's moving through the desert, King and others point out, only add resonance to this idea. (It should be noted that King's theory resonates with this film as well as *Twister*, which he makes explicit links to within his writing,, but ultimately feels limited to those two films, as later movies in the cycle will often either stay within a central metropolis or town—

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<sup>49</sup> King 19.

*Volcano*, *Godzilla*, *Dante's Peak*—or continue to move across various urban and rural spaces, as seen in *Deep Impact*.)

The idea of characters coming together to fight the threat as a unified whole ultimately proves true, though it requires further revelations regarding the aliens' history and intentions. Continuing his earlier penchant for unveiling even when the viewer has seen the object previously, Emmerich often stages these scenes by having elements literally appear from behind close doors or revealed through the lifting of barriers. For example, the viewer has already seen both the alien fighter ship and the aliens themselves close-up when Steve forces one to crash after a massive air battle and punches out the alien driver when they rise to meet him. Nevertheless, both of these things are presented with revelatory flourish when shown to Whitmore and company at Area 51. Even when not surrounding the disaster, the film still places a premium upon the visual spectacle of the alien threat. It also requires a series of failures and tragedies that underline both the personal cost of the disaster and the elements that must be discarded to defeat the alien threat. Whitmore, in particular, proves a key character in this regard. His wife, who was in Los Angeles on business, is found in the wreckage by Jasmine but ultimately dies in Whitmore's arms when she arrives at the Area 51 hospital. Additionally, after a brief telepathic link with one of the aliens in containment reveal the full destructive potential of the aliens' plan, he takes the advice of his trigger-happy secretary of defense and launches an ultimately ineffective nuclear attack against the alien ships. This attack, it should be noted, returns Whitmore to passive watching a series of screens within a contained area, echoing his earlier ineffectiveness in the White House.

Despite these emotionally-heavy plot points, *Independence Day* retains an overall lightness of tone through the continual juxtaposition of sincerity and self-aware humor. Though defined by increasingly fewer spaces, the film nevertheless cuts constantly between moments of sadness with moments of comedy. After his friend and fellow pilot Jimmy (Harry Connick Jr.) is killed by the aliens in an air battle, Steve engages the remaining alien fighters in a high-speed chase through a desert canyon before forcing one to crash and, as previously mentioned, punching its driver out. The quick pace of the film allows the viewer to rapidly move on from his death to the excitement of the desert pursuit. “Now that’s what I call a close encounter,” Steve cracks after he knocks out the alien and lights up a cigar: both calling attention to the science-fiction influences evident throughout the film and humorously comparing the current intergalactic threat (and his own bluntly violent response) to the more benign visitors of the Steven Spielberg film. Indeed, once the film moves past the initial destruction of the cities, its indebtedness to films in other genres becomes increasingly clear. Both the dogfights between the alien and human fighters and the climactic infiltration of the alien mothership, for example, clearly recall similar scenes in *Star Wars*, and Emmerich makes little attempt to cover up the comparison. So constant and widespread is the borrowing within the film that some critics claim that *Independence Day* almost seems to defy classification as a true disaster film, at least in the more traditional sense. Keane, for example, argues that because the protagonists survive and move on from the first disaster to then avert the larger one, “only the first half of the film could be said to follow the 1970s formula, with a much more proactive solution driving the rest of the narrative.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, most

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<sup>50</sup> Keane 66.

of the films do not follow the more geographically contained models of earlier decades, opting for genre hybridity as a way to both expand the narrative possibilities of the genre and to capitalize on the financial success of other genres: primarily science fiction and action-adventure, as well as elements of horror and even combat films.

In its ultimate focus upon the formation of community and, specifically, on the intuitive and unorthodox manner in which the film's expert protagonists work together to defeat the alien threat, *Independence Day* does very much fit within the disaster genre, and specifically the 1990s cycle of disaster films. David's plan to infect the mothership with a computer virus and therefore disabling the protective shields of the smaller ships on Earth both comes from an unlikely comment by Julius and reflects his own ability to adapt his expert knowledge to new circumstances (in contrast to Area 51's wild-eyed Dr. Oaken, whose messy appearance and insensitive comments about how "exciting" the arrival of the aliens to Earth have been marks him as technically accomplished but ultimately impractical). The plan accomplishes not only the full flowering of David's talents, but those of Steve—who pilots the alien craft he and David take to the mothership and finally achieves his goal of flying in space—and Whitmore, who not only regains his assertive status by participating in the final aerial, but gives an inspiring, improvised speech to his fellow pilots that nullifies his ineffectual television address earlier in the film. Romantic plotlines fall into place as well. Jasmine and Steve are married before the final battle, while David and Constance reunite as a couple (visualized by her switch from stuffy business wear to loose flannel that matches David's). Even the drunken Russell sobers up to

participate in the final dogfight, and who redeems himself in the eyes of his family by driving straight into the center of the alien laser as it's about to attack Area 51: sacrificing himself but destroying the ship and saving the base's inhabitants. After both the mothership and smaller ships are destroyed, all gather in the desert to watch the skies (yet again). What falls now, however, are the pieces of the alien spacecraft. The camera tilts up from the group to watch the flaming chunks fly harmlessly through the sky: a final example of Emmerich's focus upon the watching of visual spectacle that doubles as a triumphant return to the national tradition of Fourth of July fireworks.

Both at the time of its release and in later writings, critics sometimes question the validity of *Independence Day*'s final vision of community, particularly its reliance upon a number of fairly broad stereotypes with regards to woman, Jews, homosexuals, African Americans, etc.<sup>51</sup> Even critics who take a more formalist and/or industrial approach to film studies cannot help but notice some of the film's more ungainly assumptions. Lichtenfeld muses that, "despite its politically correct leanings, *Independence Day* may well be the most sexist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic movie about world unity ever made."<sup>52</sup> Keane looks upon the film with a slightly kinder eye, but ultimately sees similar elements as Lichtenfeld: "In introducing a wide variety of representative characters and proceeding at such a quick

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<sup>51</sup> Notable writings that focus specifically upon of the film's depiction of race, gender, and sexual orientation include: Pat Dowell, "Independence Day," *Cineaste*, Volume 22, Number 3: 39-41; Amy Taubin, "Playing it Straight," *Sight and Sound*, Aug. 1996: 6-8; and Chapters 4 and 5 of Michael Rogin, *Independence Day* (London: BFI Publishing, 1998): 41-72.

<sup>52</sup> Lichtenfeld 198.

pace, *Independence Day* does trade in stereotypes, but they are stereotypes that come to life in the film's subsequent action."<sup>53</sup>

I do not contest much of the relatively large amount that has been written on this aspect of the film. However, I feel it's important to address two aspects of these arguments. One comes from the film itself. Though many critics decry (with some justification) the film's ultimate dismissal of its female characters as nothing more than love interests, I do find the film's treatment of Jasmine's career as a stripper to be surprisingly open and nonjudgmental. One could cynically argue that Emmerich and Devlin wrote the character as such merely to have a brief and largely unnecessary scene of Jasmine at work (accompanied by the comically threadbare justification of her saying afterward, "I cannot believe I got talked into working tonight!"). However, the scene when Jasmine speaks with First Lady as she tends to her wounds is written and performed so it's the First Lady who appears out-of-step for her assumptions regarding Jasmine. When Jasmine tells her she's a dancer, the First Lady dreamily assumes "ballet." "No," says Jasmine with a smile and a raised eyebrow. "Exotic." The First Lady looks away and quietly apologizes, but Jasmine unashamedly and gently tells her that the pay is good and that having that money to take care of Dylan is worth it. It's a small and rarely-discussed moment of liberal-leaning tolerance within a narrative defined by many as essentially conservative by nature.

More generally, it's worth noting that this focus upon the assumptions behind the film's community formation—and the film's more general political leanings—proved to be the major sticking point for critics who disliked the film. Otherwise, mainstream reviewers largely embraced the film's dazzling special effects, genre

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<sup>53</sup> Keane 70.

assemblage, and mixture of wink-wink self-awareness and unabashed patriotic sincerity. *Variety*'s Todd McCarthy affectionately deemed the film an "airborne leviathan [that] features a bunch of agreeably cardboard characters saving the human race from mass extermination in a way that proves as unavoidably entertaining as it is hopelessly cornball."<sup>54</sup> Lisa Schwarzbaum at *Entertainment Weekly* went so far as to deem the film "adorable" and paraphrase Rodgers and Hammerstein when she added that the film was "corny as Kansas, high as the flag on the Fourth of July. And if you'll excuse the expression I'll use, it's intrinsically American fun."<sup>55</sup> This seemingly indulgent critical tone in these and other reviews painted the film as ultimately good-natured and silly, while also providing some dazzling special effects sequences. Needless to say, little was said about the film's treatment of its central disaster: its eliding of gory details; its almost-flip treatment of choice character deaths. Ultimately, the film's overall tone and generic trappings made these elements not only excusable, but beside the point. As Janet Maslin wrote with tongue seemingly only somewhat in cheek, "Anyone appalled that movie audiences can enjoy such widespread catastrophe can be assured that "Independence Day" is really about togetherness and catharsis..."<sup>56</sup> Such was the tone within the coverage of the film's astonishing financial success as well. *Independence Day* grossed \$100 million domestically in six days, beating *Jurassic Park*'s previous record by three days.<sup>57</sup> By year's end, its total worldwide earnings reached north of \$800 million. A *Los Angeles*

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<sup>54</sup> Todd McCarthy, "'Day': B.O. Mother Ship Lands," *Variety*, 1 July 1996-14 July 1996: 34.

<sup>55</sup> Lisa Schwarzbaum, "Independence Day," *Entertainment Weekly* July 12 1996, 20 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,293279,00.html?print>>.

<sup>56</sup> Maslin C16.

<sup>57</sup> Andrew Hines, "Worldwide B.O. in Orbit; 'Day' Sets New Record in U.S.," *Variety* 9 July 1996: 1.



*Times* article commenting on the film's success quoted Devlin, who speculated that the film's light tone helped make the apocalyptic scenario go down easier. "Because a film about the end of the world can be pretty depressing, we made hokum, comedy and the human spirit a part of the mix," Devlin said, again underling the general reaction to the film's lighthearted take on mass annihilation.<sup>58</sup>

Needless to say, such a reaction to 1990s disaster films would not last, least of all amongst film critics. However, while post-9/11 critics rejected many of the film's fundamental narrative and formal premises, those reviewing the films in the latter part of the 1990s disaster cycle seemed more weary of the genre's mere existence than anything else. As Keane notes, this exhaustion was not hard to understand, given many of the similarities between the films themselves, particularly the pairs of volcano and comet films released between February 1997 and July 1998. "Although there are differences in tone and approach," Keane writes, "the argument here is that they came to use up all the possible options: whether justified in terms of narrative or not."<sup>59</sup>

The 1990s disaster cycle unofficially ended with the July 1998 releases of *Armageddon*. It was not necessarily for a lack of box office potential; all three disaster films released that summer grossed north of \$100 million domestically, with *Armageddon* ranking number one in worldwide earnings for 1998 (it ranked number two domestically behind *Saving Private Ryan*). None of these films' numbers, however, came close to matching *Independence Day*'s domestic or international earnings. Simultaneously, production costs for these films had risen dramatically.

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<sup>58</sup> Elaine Dutka and James Rainey, "Conquered; 'Independence Day' Captures Money, Crowds and American Psyche," *The Los Angeles Times* 7 July 1996: 1.

<sup>59</sup> Keane 81.

While *Independence Day*'s reported budget came in at \$75 million, *Armageddon*'s nearly doubled that amount (\$140 million). Financially, then, these films were deemed successes but far from the mammoth cultural events that those films that began the cycle had been viewed. And, to reference the aforementioned "wave theory" of genre success, new cycles of genre popularity were beginning to push out the disaster genre, which was seen as tired within the eyes of critics and mass media. For example, *There's Something About Mary*, the surprise smash hit of the summer of 1998, led to a revived interest in the gross-out comedy. Put simply, Hollywood utilized the disaster genre throughout the mid to late 1990s, and once it began to wane in economic and cultural popularity, it turned toward duplicating other commercially successful films.

Two pre-9/11 disaster films of sorts did appear on the marketplace before September 11<sup>th</sup>, but they no longer seemed to follow the generic conventions seen in the earlier films. Wolfgang Peterson's *The Perfect Storm* (2000) followed the true story of a fishing boat caught in a historically dangerous tempest. Despite the crew's valiant efforts, they were all lost at sea. Though featuring an eclectic cast (including George Clooney and John C. Reilly) and marketed with the image of the massive, CGI-enhanced title wave that ultimately capsizes their vessel, the film's geographically-limited setting, largely sober tone, and tragic ending seemed to place it more in the realm of the nautical adventure than the most recent manifestation of the disaster film. The other was the aforementioned *Pearl Harbor* (2001), a film whose combination of visceral World War II combat scenes, historically-set tragic

love triangle, and “greatest generation” nostalgia seemed more influence by *Private Ryan* and *Titanic* than *Volcano* or *Twister* or even Bay’s own *Armageddon*.

But if the 1990s disaster cycle has effectively run its course within Hollywood studios, the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> would revive them within public discourse—in a manner that would question not only the films themselves, but the fundamental appeal of the disaster genre as a whole.

## Chapter Two

### How Did the Disaster Genre Initially Respond to the September 11 Attacks?

*“You were able to do it and be awed by it. Now you can’t do it without thinking about the consequences of it, because we’ve really seen it happen”*

- Dean Devlin, on the post-9/11 disaster film.<sup>60</sup>

The 1990s disaster cycle unofficially ended over three years before the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. And yet, when bystanders, pundits, and even reporters attempted to describe the horrific and unprecedented events they witnessed that day, many inevitably turned to films from that cycle (as well as action movies from the same decade) for a viable comparison. Such a reaction did not necessarily come from a place of callousness or disconnection from human suffering. Exploding skyscrapers, screaming urban masses, sudden chaos: the most experience that many Americans had previously had with the images that define 9/11 was when they paid the price of admission to see them at the movies. Fantasy became the ground upon which people stood, at least until reality solidified.

No sooner had these comparisons become a cultural cliché, however, than critics and commentators began to consider their thornier implications. Had the American people really become so inundated with imagery of spectacular destruction that the recollection of filmic disaster became their reference point in the face of an awful reality? This question—with its implicit accusations of insensitivity—lost some

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<sup>60</sup> Tom Shone, Blockbuster: How Hollywood Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Summer (New York: Free Press, 2004) 300-301.

relevance within the national discourse as the remarkable outpouring of goodwill and charitable contributions by a wide variety of citizens toward the victims of 9/11 showed that people seemed to indeed know the difference between fictional representation and factual event. Blame then shifted from the American people to the American film industry, as the penchant of Hollywood studios for producing and packaging spectacle-driven disaster movies came under heightened scrutiny and critique. Why, commentators wondered, did we ever find scenes of urban destruction entertaining? More pointedly, why does Hollywood insist on making films that encourage audiences to take pleasure in stories about mass death and devastation? All kinds of violent movies became symbols of the decadence and detachment that 9/11 had supposedly jarred the country out of, but no other genre or type received more consistent or withering public dismissal—if not outright condemnation—than the films of the 1990s disaster cycle.

These concerns extended beyond media commentators and film critics. Studio heads, filmmakers, and other prominent industry leaders expressed worry and fear over the product they produced, in responses that mingled personal grief, economic strategy, and cultural sensitivity. They publically commented on the relative frivolity of film in a time of national crisis, and vowed to reconsider the use of violent imagery within mainstream cinema. For fear of jangling the public's already-frayed nerves, they pushed back, re-edited, or re-marketed several finished films with potentially upsetting content (while simply throwing out many projects in development). In a time of national crisis, no studio wanted to be seen as callous or disrespectful, and

disaster films were seen by many as indulging in the sort of blithely violent spectacle now assumed to be as financially risky as it was morally dubious.

Yet, despite these seeming shifts in public taste and standards of sensitivity, the disaster genre did not go away. By the time the first anniversary of the attacks had come and gone, one major studio had already completed principal production on a disaster film, while another was gearing up to begin shooting before year's end. While not a distinct trend of American cinema post-9/11, the disaster genre nevertheless remained a product that Hollywood studios felt confident enough in to risk significant amounts of capital—not to mention the potential wrath of both critics and filmgoers, both of whose comfort level with filmic depictions of mass urban devastation remained unclear. Why did Hollywood studios continue to see economic and artistic value within a genre so maligned after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks? And how did filmmakers frame disaster and its consequences in a manner that conformed to perceived cultural standards while still providing the viewer with the sort of entertainment that proved so popular before 9/11?

This chapter will begin with an examination of where the disaster genre stood in the eyes of both public commentators and industrial leaders in the aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, with a specific focus on what elements of the 1990s disaster cycle seemed to incite particularly strong disapproval from pundits and critics. Following this, I will provide some reasons as to why Hollywood studios and filmmakers chose to return to the disaster genre after 9/11, despite the fierce criticisms brought against it in the aftermath of the attacks. The remainder of the chapter will be a consideration of the two major disaster films that were in production

within a year after 9/11: *The Core* and *The Day After Tomorrow*. I will analyze the formal and narrative strategies each film used to portray filmic disaster, arguing that *The Core* largely represents an intensification of certain generic strategies seen throughout the 1990s disaster cycle, while *The Day After Tomorrow*, while utilizing many of the same strategies, works to alter their form and/or content to produce a more sober and serious-minded work of disaster cinema. I will also comment on their markedly different box-office reception, and offer possible explanations for their failure or success, respectively.

### **The Disaster Genre in a Post-9/11 World**

When thinking about the specific reactions to the disaster genre post-9/11, it's important to remember that they existed within a larger backlash to both violent entertainment and the industry that produced it. As footage of the falling towers and stories of the missing and dead dominated media coverage, critics and commentators cast a scornful eye upon those pre-9/11 entertainments that framed violence and chaos as high-octane fun, divorced from the sobering and messy consequences that now seemed so glaringly apparent. Modern action films like *Die Hard* and *Air Force One* (both of which admittedly contain 9/11-linked disaster imagery like an exploding building or a hijacked plane) became examples of the type of entertainment whose simultaneous mirroring of and disconnection with recent tragic events felt obtuse and dated at best, cynical and numbing at worst. Writing in *Film Comment*, Larry Gross cautiously questioned the post-9/11 popularity of the "the hyper-violent PG-rated film," whose aesthetically-pleasing carnage perpetuates the harmful notion that "nothing is humanly at risk if the audience never has to complicate their identification

with those who perform violence or are the objects of it.”<sup>61</sup> Other critics hoped for their swift demise in a still-harsher tone. “If only we could believe that, a few months from now, all the cheap violence in entertainment—and all the merely banal crap that helps narcotize us to the violence—will still seem as meaningless, offensive, and crass as it does right now,” wrote Chris Willman in *Entertainment Weekly*, who mixed such blunt pronouncements with pleas for local movie theaters to temporarily replace current releases with thoughtful classics like *Sullivan’s Travels* and *The Sorrow and the Pity*.<sup>62</sup> And still other commentators expanded their critique to an indictment of Hollywood itself, which *Los Angeles Times* columnist Patrick Goldstein berated as “a soulless popcorn machine, creating mindless dreck designed to pay off at every stop on the global gravy train, from movie theaters to cable TV to DVDs.”<sup>63</sup> In comparison, *Los Angeles Times* film critic Kenneth Turan seemed downright generous when he wrote that such films might not be intrinsically harmful, but rather were made under a different set of expectations that could not take into account the possibility of an event like 9/11. These films “let us down, not because they didn’t prepare us for the enormity of a terrible reality (they didn’t, but that really wasn’t their mandate) but because they were counterproductive. For, watching these movies made us feel, erroneously as it turned out, that we’d had a whiff of what the real thing would be like.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Larry Gross, “Letter from Hollywood: Larry Gross Considers the Implications of Real-Life Death and Destruction for the Film Industry,” *Film Comment*, Nov./Dec.2001: 23.

<sup>62</sup> Chris Willman, “Armed Conflict,” *Entertainment Weekly*, Sept. 14, 2001, 21 Jan. 2009 <<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,174967~1~0~whyviolententertainmentsould,00.html>>.

<sup>63</sup> Patrick Goldstein, “The Big Picture: The Time To Get Serious Has Come,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 18 Sept. 2001: F1.

<sup>64</sup> Kenneth Turan, “Renewed Respect for Power of Images,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 17 Sept. 2001: F1.



This sense of unpreparedness begins to get at the heart of the criticisms of the disaster genre post-9/11, and particularly its 1990s incarnation. To fully understand this issue, however, it's helpful to go back and briefly re-examine the much-quoted claim that watching the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> unfold was akin to watching a movie, specifically a modern-day disaster or action movie. As Geoff King points out, if the principal event of the day seemed reminiscent of disaster movie scenarios, the “shaky camerawork, dodgy focus or awkward zooms” signaled a decided and unsettling departure from the sort of choreographed destruction audiences were used to seeing in the movies. Furthermore, even the most heroic acts singled out by the media for public commendation could not obscure the fact that the attack itself was not the linear, compartmentalized narrative seen in disaster movies, in “which we would expect melodramatic sequences, focused around central individual characters to whom we had been introduced in advance, depicting tragic and heroic encounters inside the twin towers.”<sup>65</sup> Rather than cutting away at the moment a fireball was to scorch an anonymous pedestrian, we watched as that anonymous pedestrian leapt helplessly from the upper floors of the Twin Towers. Rather than knowing that the comet shower had stopped or the alien laser had permanently ceased, we fretfully kept our eyes to the sky, with no nondiegetic score to warn us of when the next attack might come. What occurred for many individuals was not so much the enactment of a Hollywood horror show, but a kind of cognitive dissonance between the cataclysmic event itself and the chaotic context (or lack thereof) within which it was seen. The issue was not just that we had seen this before, but that we had seen this through

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<sup>65</sup> Geoff King, “‘Just Like a Movie’?: 9/11 and Hollywood Spectacle,” The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to ‘Reality’ TV and Beyond, ed. Geoff King (Portland, OR: Intellect, 2005) 50.

several margins of narrative and formal barriers that, when confronted with the actual event itself, all seemed to fall away with distressing speed. Perhaps Nick James said it best in his despairing editorial in the November 2001 issue of *Cineaste* when he wrote:

“...But surely it is the very difference between the way events unfolded and the way a Hollywood blockbuster presents itself that made the footage so heartbreakingly real?...Surely what matters about the sweep of a video camera up from a street grating to accidentally catch the impact of the first plane is that its juxtaposition of the mundane and the cataclysmic was clumsily unplanned? Surely it’s the way our imaginations were sent reeling in the awful long period of staring at the towers, after the impact of the two planes but before they collapsed, that was the essence of what was happening? Surely it is the knowledge that, thankfully, you could not film what happened to those inside as the buildings collapsed that made our imaginations work out the horror for ourselves?”<sup>66</sup>

For critics like Turan, an acknowledgment of the tragic gap between blockbuster fantasy and sobering reality was enough, perhaps with an added wish that Hollywood will think twice about the implications of detonating a skyscraper in next summer’s mega-budget spectacular. For others, though, this disconnect between filmic representations of disaster and the tragic actuality of 9/11 proved more than merely saddening: it was infuriating. For them, 9/11 exposed that the wormy underbelly of disaster movie pleasures: that, on some level, the entertainment was predicated not only on the suspension disbelief, but the denial of empathy. Of course, as previously discussed, the disaster films of the 1990s were particularly adept at creating margins of safety and distance for the viewer, placing them firmly within a fictive context that allowed for spectacular pleasure and terror to be had from mass destruction without lingering upon the gorier details of such events. It’s

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<sup>66</sup> Nick James, “Editorial: It’s the Real Thing,” *Cineaste*, Nov. 2001: 3.

unquestionable that this unspoken generic understanding between filmmaker and viewer received a sizable jolt on 9/11, with all sides pausing to acknowledge that even the most fantastical of filmic representations can have startling and unexpected reverberations when placed against a wholly new and horrific reality.

However, the harshest post-9/11 critics saw this as a sign that the entire genre was inherently disreputable and corrupt in its insistence that viewers can ever gain pleasure from mass destruction and death, no matter the formal or narrative contexts. wrote Gene Seymour in *The Los Angeles Times* noted that, in the past “the more outrageous or frightening the circumstances depicted on the big screen, the cozier audience seemed to feel with watching the Empire State Building blasted to bits in ‘Independence Day,’” adding that “the whole notion of making entertaining spectacle out of mass destruction now seems trivial and indulgent at best, insensitive and tasteless at worst.”<sup>67</sup> *The New Yorker*’s Anthony Lane may have been most explicit in his vision of the genre wilting away when pushed into the glaring light of recent tragic events: “If the disaster movie is indeed to be shamed by disaster, we would do well to remember the exact moment of its defeat. It came, I think when the cameras began to pick up moving dots in the steel grid of the towers: people waving for help that would never arrive...The aesthetic habit had cracked, and there was no going back.”<sup>68</sup> For these critics, 9/11 broke through filmic disaster imagery so thoroughly as to permanently alter the manner in which viewers would interpret on-screen devastation.

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<sup>67</sup> Gene Seymour, “Scenes of Mayhem Are Too Close to Home,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 21 Sept. 2001: F10.

<sup>68</sup> Anthony Lane, “This Is Not a Movie: Same Scenes, Different Story,” *The New Yorker*, 24 Sept. 2001: 80.

With such sentiments flowing through newspapers and magazines at a rapid speed, it's little surprise that Hollywood's reaction to 9/11 proved to be a somewhat jumbled mix of quasi-apology and sobering rumination. The media's sudden spotlight on the disconnect between big-studio sponsored violent spectacles and real-life tragedy resulted in an outpouring of statement from studio executives, filmmakers, etc., all publically reconsidering what was appropriate to portray on screen—and most crucially, what audiences would accept. “The world changed profoundly on Tuesday and clearly some of what we thought was entertaining yesterday isn't today, and won't be tomorrow,” Columbia Pictures chairwoman Amy Pascal told *The Los Angeles Times* in an article published three days after the attacks.<sup>69</sup> Producer Gregg Davis put it more bluntly: “I mean, does anyone want to see aliens blow up the White House now that someone on this planet made a real effort last Tuesday to do just that?”<sup>70</sup> These general remarks sometimes came coupled with personal ambivalence about working within the entertainment industry at a time when other, more pressing issues seemed to be occupying everyone's mind. MGM vice president and COO Chris McGurk admitted that, “Everyone feels guilty. Nobody wants to talk deals. Nobody wants to pitch movies. It all feels so small and unimportant.”<sup>71</sup> Perhaps this confluence of personal culpability and professional worry is no more acutely felt than in the comments of Joe Viskocil, the explosives expert whose work includes the detonation of the White House in *Independence Day*, a moment much cited (and derided) in the days after 9/11. “I felt guilty about making my work look so good,” he

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<sup>69</sup> Claudia Eller, “Hollywood Executives Rethink What is Off Limits,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 14 Sept. 2001: A36.

<sup>70</sup> Jeff Jensen and Benjamin Svetkey, “Script Check,” *Entertainment Weekly* Sept. 21, 2001, 21 Jan. 2009 <[http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,175677\\_5,00.html](http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,175677_5,00.html)>.

<sup>71</sup> Jensen and Svetkey.

said, “and I feel like shit... I started thinking maybe I did my job too well, and I might have been the nucleus of an idea for somebody to say, ‘Hey, let’s crash a plane into the White House,’ I thought ‘Oh my God, what have I done?’”<sup>72</sup>

Accompanying these and other public statements, Hollywood studios carefully scrutinized both upcoming releases and developing projects for imagery, narrative content, or general mood that might turn off audiences that might not want to see anything too violent or upsetting. Films like the Arnold Schwarzenegger terrorist-themed thriller *Collateral Damage* were pushed back months, while others, like the fantasy action film *The Time Machine*, were re-edited to take out more explicit images of urban destruction. With hindsight, of course, some of these alterations seem examples of what Tom Shone deems the studios’ post-9/11 “back-breaking displays of inoffensiveness.” “The Denzel Washington cop drama, *Training Day*, was pulled on the grounds that it featured a corrupt cop, the Heather Graham romantic comedy, *Sidewalks of New York*, on the grounds that it featured New York and jokes, and the Gwyneth Paltrow comedy, *View from the Top*, on the grounds that it featured flight attendants and jokes.”<sup>73</sup> However, it’s also not surprising that studios reacted in sometimes premature or even nonsensical ways when trying to read the public’s reaction to film post-9/11, as most of the general public was still far from sure how they felt about it themselves.

Complicating matters further was the growing feeling that audience tastes might not have been as permanently altered as some commentators and critics (and perhaps audience members themselves) may have initially thought. Certainly, the

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<sup>72</sup> Shone 294-295.

<sup>73</sup> Shone 297.

American public remained interested in going to the movies. The weekend after 9/11, box-office receipts totaled a respectable \$54.1 million, with many theaters owners noting that the only significant shift they saw was a decline in Friday business, most likely due to the designation of September 14, 2001 as a national day of mourning.<sup>74</sup> These trends generally continued throughout the remainder of the year, with domestic box-office receipts totaling more than \$8.4 billion, an almost 10% increase over the previous year. (While these numbers are reflective of a strong year overall, it is additionally worth noting three of the top five highest-grossing movies domestically were released after 9/11, including the only two that grossed north of \$300 million.) Such financial success in the aftermath of national upheaval is not a historical anomaly; as Rick Lyman noted in *The New York Times*, “movies have almost always done well in times of crisis, as they have maintained their position as one of the most available and least expensive forms of mass entertainment.”<sup>75</sup> Still, such unquestionable financial successes must have helped to ease any general doubts studios had about the continuing viability or validity of their product.

As several commentators and industry leaders predicted, many of the most popular films in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 were fantasy films, comedies, and animated family films: *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, *Ocean’s Eleven*, *Monsters, Inc.* How much of this is reflective of an altered national mood and/or set of tastes and how much is indicative of the sizeable market advantages all four films had to begin with (big-names stars; recognizable franchise brands; multi-million dollar, year-long marketing campaigns)

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<sup>74</sup> Claudia Eller, “Americans Take Refuge at Movies,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 17 Sept. 2001: C1.

<sup>75</sup> Rick Lyman, “Moviegoers are Returning, Even to Action Thrillers,” *The New York Times*, 1 Oct. 2001: E3.

remains a question. However, several other films that industry leaders worried might prove too violent or upsetting for filmgoers ended up performing quite well when released into the market. The aforementioned *Training Day*—pulled due to its unflinching portrayal of police violence and corruption in Los Angeles—grossed north of \$75 million domestically. *Don't Say a Word*, an abduction thriller released less than three weeks after 9/11, took in a respectable \$55 million. Fox and Columbia's decision to push forward the release dates of war films *Behind Enemy Lines* and *Black Hawk Down* also paid off—particularly for Columbia, whose intensely graphic movie grossed over \$100 million despite (or perhaps due to) the presence of American troops in Afghanistan. Finally, it's worth remembering that, though within a fantasy context, *The Lord of the Rings* showcases several extravagant and prolonged battle sequences. Within certain narrative contexts, it seemed, on-screen violence remained an acceptable and even desirable part of filmic storytelling.

Video and DVD rentals in the immediate aftermath of the attacks also provide intriguing insight. In the days following the attacks, renting a movie proved an appealing alternative for those who wanted an escape from the 24-hour news coverage of the attacks; *The Wall Street Journal* noted that video-rental chain Blockbuster saw an increase in rentals as quickly as the afternoon of September 11.<sup>76</sup> More telling than the amount of videos rented, however, is the type of films individuals went for. Ken Feil notes that, according to an article in *Entertainment Weekly*, some New York-based Blockbuster stores reported rentals of films like *Die Hard*, *Armageddon*, and *The Siege* (which prominently features acts of New York-

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<sup>76</sup> Bruce Orwell and Joe Flint, "Americans Return to Movies; Rentals Soar," *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 Sept. 2001: B8.

based terrorism) rising by almost fifty percent just two days after 9/11.<sup>77</sup> Such numbers must be placed in context. A *New York Times* article reported that Karen Raskopf, a senior vice president at Blockbuster, characterized the increase in demand for disaster and terrorism-related films post-9/11 as not amounting “to more than hiccup among the larger numbers of new releases flying out of the stores.”<sup>78</sup> Still, the fact that a notable increase occurred at all indicates that audiences remained intrigued by 1990s disaster and action films, if for a variety of reasons and within a profoundly altered context. Feil sees the apparatus by which individuals view these films as connected to their increased disrepute, noting that “only the privacy of the video format allows audiences to indulge those politically incorrect pleasures of disaster movies.”<sup>79</sup> Stephen Keane proved more charitable in his analysis of why people would turn to these films post-9/11, seeing within them the potential for both heady escape and uneasy contemplation: “the various aliens and asteroids providing for distance in terms of cause but the numerous exploding and collapsing buildings providing for a certain degree of reflection.”<sup>80</sup> Regardless of reasoning, however, such consumer decisions seem to reflect a desire to not abandon those forms of entertainment that might conjure up 9/11 imagery.

This even expressed itself within current releases, albeit in a somewhat odd way. In addition to shifting release dates and editing scenes and scripts, many Hollywood studios chose to digitally remove the Twin Towers from several

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<sup>77</sup> Ken Feil, *Dying for a Laugh: Disaster Movies and the Camp Imagination* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005) 204-205.

<sup>78</sup> Rick Lyman and Bill Carter “In Little Time, Pop Culture Is Almost Back to Normal,” *The New York Times*, 4 Oct. 2001: B10.

<sup>79</sup> Feil 205.

<sup>80</sup> Stephen Keane, *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006) 91.



upcoming releases. As Steven Jay Schneider comments, this decision “resulted in a fairly broad, fairly vehement critical backlash, one that received a measure of support from audiences in Manhattan even if it did not have a noticeable (or at least a calculable) negative impact on box-office returns.”<sup>81</sup> People went so far as to boo in screenings of films like *Zoolander*, released in the last weekend of September, when the Manhattan skyline appeared with the notable absence of the World Trade Center. Though the basis of these reactions partly lies in the raw emotions of the time regarding the loss of the Twin Towers (particularly amongst New York audiences), it also expresses an oddly bifurcated desire on the part of viewers to not be shielded from reality by entertainment, while simultaneously allowing the fantasy of the Towers’ existence to remain for just a while longer, if only within the filmic universe.

This ability that viewers possessed—to consciously choose to enjoy the fantasy on-screen while being fully aware of a reality incongruent with the cinematic image—seemed to be something studios and pundits quickly forgot in the days after 9/11, and only slowly recalled as the dust literally and figuratively settled. Indeed, both Hollywood figures and media commentators began to slowly recall this fact as the days wore on, albeit cautiously and with respect for recent events. While Peter Griffiths, who co-wrote *Collateral Damage* with brother David, believed that delaying the release of their thriller was indeed the right thing to do, he did not buy the notion that 9/11 would lead to a moratorium on Hollywood violence. “...Right now there’s a real hysterical conservatism in the air,” Griffiths told Patrick Goldstein (who himself had derided Hollywood violence one week previous) of *The Los*

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<sup>81</sup> Steven Jay Schneider, “Architectural Nostalgia and the New York City Skyline on Film,” *Film and Television After 9/11*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004) 38.

*Angeles Times*. “But that’s going to be short-term. Violence is apart of our world, as is sex, and you can’t rule it out forever. You can be absolutely confident that people at the studios will be saying something completely different a month or two from now.”<sup>82</sup> Author Andrew Klavan concurred a couple of weeks later in a *New York Times* Op-Ed piece, arguing that “violence, along with sex, is a part of entertainment because it is part of human experience” before admitting that, when he thought back to the “warm sense of certainty” he felt towards triumphant action-movie heroes pre-9/11, he “would like very much to feel certain of that again—if only for a couple of hours.”<sup>83</sup> And David Kissinger, president of the U.S.A. Television Production Group, went so far as to deem previous statements by heads of the television and film world premature. “Each of us were blithering, terror-stricken shocked people, and we shouldn’t be held accountable for much of what we said that week.”<sup>84</sup>

If Kissinger’s comment seems like backpedaling, it’s most likely because it is. However, given the sheer number of conflicting signals given to Hollywood by post-9/11 audiences, critics, commentators, and even industrial leaders, it comes as little surprise that Kissinger and others were re-thinking their previous statements on violence, spectacle, and audience wants and desires—all uttered in raw moments of personal and societal unease and fear. As more temporal and psychological distance was placed between studio decision-makers and 9/11, however, a couple of points seemed somewhat clear. The first was that audiences remained interested in a wide variety of movies: some fantastical and comedic, some brooding and serious, and

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<sup>82</sup> Patrick Goldstein, “The Big Picture: A Turn of Events, A Change of Plot,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 25 Sept. 2001: F6.

<sup>83</sup> Andrew Klavan, “At the Movies, Losing Our Fears,” *The New York Times*, 5 Oct. 2001: A27.

<sup>84</sup> Lyman and Carter: A1.

even some violent and gritty. Furthermore, audiences would not immediately reject scenes of violence—even scenes of intense violence—when handled in a manner they did not feel were distasteful. The second point, therefore, soon became that Hollywood had little sense of what was tasteful and distasteful to a post-9/11 audience yet, and that any film dealing with material remotely reminiscent of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks had to be handled with a good deal of sensitivity. The intense media reactions post-9/11 to scenes of cinematic destruction seemed to indicate that any film deemed exploitative by critics and commentators would not receive a free pass. And while the average American audience member might not immediately snub a film that received a scorching review from Anthony Lane, a general media consensus identifying a film as abusing 9/11-esque imagery meant both the filmmaker and the studio risked public disgrace and financial failure. A fine line had to be tread by all involved in the production and distribution of post-9/11 films: one that had no rulebook and potentially disastrous consequences.

Given these risks, then, the question begs: why would any studio want to risk making a disaster film at all? Perhaps more than any other, the disaster genre would have critics and audiences particularly alert for any sort of exploitative or tasteless imagery within them—not to mention those who would simply reject the genre entirely post-9/11, regardless of what alteration may have been made to form or content. In fact, very few disaster films were made in the immediate time after September 11. The aforementioned risks of offending public sensibilities and losing money on what had become a very expensive genre to produce proved sufficient enough to keep most studios away from the genre entirely. Those filmmakers and

studios who did decide to invest artistic energy and financial resources into the production and release of post-9/11 disaster films, then, presumably both saw potential aesthetic and/or economic merit in making these films and utilized narrative and formal strategies to contend with the altered public perception of the genre.

The remainder of this chapter will focus upon the aesthetic characteristics and industrial contexts of the two major disaster films that were released between September 11 and the end of 2004: Jon Amiel's *The Core* in March 2003 and Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* in May 2004. While both films received similarly lukewarm reactions from critics, *The Core* was largely perceived as a box-office disappointment, while *The Day After Tomorrow* went on to become one of the top-grossing films of 2004. How much can industrial and/or cultural contexts account for the disparity between the films' receptions, and how much has to do with the ways in which each film did (and did not) alter pre-existing disaster genre formulas to fit the post-9/11 era? Though both contain contradictory elements, I will argue that *The Core*'s failure came from a combination of an unfortunately-timed release date and an intensification and/or alteration of familiar 1990s disaster cycle tropes that did not satisfy audience's changed expectations, while *The Day After Tomorrow* succeeded due the confluence of sophisticated marketing strategies and buzz-generating subject matter, as well as alterations to established genre formulas that signaled a new, more serious tone within the disaster film.

### **The Core**

At first glance, the production history of *The Core* is almost confounding in its seeming denial of potentially altered audience expectations or desires post-9/11.

Though it heavily incorporates elements from the science fiction and action genres within its plot, *The Core* is unquestionably a disaster film, featuring prominent scenes of mass urban chaos and devastation (including the destruction of both the Golden Gate Bridge and the Coliseum in Rome). Nevertheless, Paramount Pictures ensured that *The Core* would—to quote a *Daily Variety* article—be “one of the few studio films prepping for starts before year’s end.”<sup>85</sup> Amiel signed on less than two weeks after September 11 to direct the film, and leads Aaron Eckhart and Hilary Swank were cast before the end of October.<sup>86</sup> The rest of the cast—including such respected characters actors as Stanley Tucci, Alfre Woodard, Bruce Greenwood, and Delroy Lindo—was soon filled in, with production scheduled to begin on December 1, 2001.<sup>87</sup>

Those involved in the film’s production often framed *The Core* as an old-fashioned, character-driven disaster film where disparate individuals—played by a group of talented actors—band together to save the planet for imminent destruction. “The underlying message of the movie is that by pooling our resources, by working together, we can pull the world back from catastrophe,” Amiel told *Entertainment Weekly* in an article published on March 28, 2003, the film’s release date.<sup>88</sup> While not the most original sales pitch, this emphasis upon the “old-fashioned” nature of the film’s story implies that the film itself was seen by both the filmmakers and Paramount as a throwback to an earlier, more innocent time for disaster films, placing

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<sup>85</sup> Michael Fleming, “Eckhart Heads to Earth’s ‘Core’ for Amiel and Par,” *Daily Variety*, 01 Oct. 2001: 5.

<sup>86</sup> Eric Lichtenfeld, *Action Speaks Louder: Violence, Spectacle, and the American Action Movie* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007) 228.

<sup>87</sup> “Film Production Chart,” *Daily Variety*, 05 Oct. 2001: 16.

<sup>88</sup> Jeff Jensen, “Apocalypse? Now?,” *Entertainment Weekly* Mar. 28, 2003, 21 Jan. 2009 <<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,435097,00.html>>.

the focus on escapist fun and off any potentially uncomfortable contemporary resonances. *Daily Variety* reported that “Amiel said he and Par are aiming for a smart but fun adventure story with science-fiction elements that can have family appeal,” with Amiel adding that, “Paramount and I have been going to fairly extraordinary actors to make that come to life.”<sup>89</sup> Focusing upon the talent of his actors and the goal of “smart but fun” entertainment, Amiel deemphasizes *The Core*’s reliance upon scenes of mass destruction and frames the film as both intelligent and escapist, providing a satisfyingly familiar fantasy for the viewer. Any distance placed between *The Core* and 9/11-related criticisms of the disaster genre remained largely implicit, though Eckhart admitted that he “was very depressed about 9/11...I really wanted to make a movie that people could feel good about—about how things could go wrong, but we can prevail.”<sup>90</sup>

Still, Paramount could have most likely funded a sci-fi action film that did not contain any epic scenes of mass devastation. The fact that they chose to go ahead with *The Core* so soon after 9/11 indicates that they assumed an appetite for on-screen destruction—albeit contained within an escapist narrative that did not overly stress it—remained within American moviegoers. At the very least, they assumed it would return by *The Core*’s original release date of November 1, 2002. Indeed, the reason the film was pushed back five months was so Amiel had the time and additional funds to add further visual spectacle to the film’s showpiece disaster sequences. Rob Friedman, chief operating officer and vice-chairman of Paramount’s Motion Picture Group, told *Daily Variety* that, “It’s important to make the best possible film, not a

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<sup>89</sup> Michael Fleming, “Swank Centers On ‘Core,’” *Daily Variety*, 23 Oct. 2001: 3.

<sup>90</sup> “Movie Preview: ‘The Core,’” *Entertainment Weekly* Aug. 15, 2002, 21 Jan. 2009 <<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,337572,00.html>>.

release date.”<sup>91</sup> The “best possible film,” then, would be one in which the melting of the Golden Gate Bridge and the fiery decimation of the Coliseum would be cinematically rendered with greater, CGI-enhanced splendor. (Both of these images were featured prominently in the film’s trailer, as well.)

Paramount undoubtedly also took comfort in the box-office success of another of their releases, Phil Alden Robinson’s *The Sum of All Fears*, which was released in May 2002 and grossed almost \$120 million domestically. Though not a disaster film (and therefore not encompassed within this study), the film does feature a relatively restrained but nevertheless upsetting scene of urban chaos, when a nuclear bomb is detonated during a football game in Baltimore. Filmed prior to 9/11, the scene has a sober tone unlike the more spectacular acts of cinematic destruction from the previous decade. What effect it had upon the film’s financial success is unclear; the film had the advantage of big-name stars like Ben Affleck and Morgan Freeman, a prime summer release date, and a recognizable franchise name in the character Jack Ryan. However, the fact that such an explicit moment of urban devastation did not explicitly hinder audiences must have comforted Paramount as they offered Amiel more time and funds to further develop his film’s disaster imagery.

Such imagery inevitably recalls the 1990s disaster cycle. As we shall see, *The Core* owes much to the narrative structures and formal strategies of these films. However, Amiel seemed more ambivalent about drawing connections between his film and those earlier disaster films, seemingly for artistic as much as economic reasons. He dismissed *Armageddon* as seemingly “made for people with attention deficit disorder” and said that he “wanted the actors [in *The Core*] to become

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<sup>91</sup> Marc Graser and Dave McNary, “F/X Par’s ‘Core’ Issue,” *Daily Variety*, 2 Oct. 2002: 3.

involved with their characters, and I wanted the camera to stay on them long enough [for the audience] to identify with what they're feeling."<sup>92</sup> Signaling an increased focus upon character and relationship over spectacle frames his film as still high-octane fun while separating it from certain expectations set by the 1990s disaster cycle. (This proves especially ironic given how similar, in some respects, the narrative structure of the two films are.) Nevertheless, when asked in the same interview about how he felt scenes of urban devastation would play to post-9/11 audiences, Amiel's response seemed more or less in line with the distancing formal strategies utilized by 1990s disaster cycle directors when portraying destruction:

“I could blow up a mountain range, but it doesn't have the same effect as seeing a beloved city destroyed. Yet we were very careful about images of human suffering. There's no blood in the film. There's no evisceration. We were careful to tell our story in a way that hopefully maximized the poignancy of the event but minimized the images of human suffering.”<sup>93</sup>

The use of culturally-resonant locations to increase the import of destruction, the focus upon mass chaos over individuated tragedy, the elision of gory details: in many ways, Amiel could be describing a scene in *Independence Day* or even *Armageddon*. The difference seems to be his emphasis upon “the poignancy of the event,” which feels different from Emmerich and Bay's goals of unabashed enjoyment of CGI-enhanced spectacle.

This, in a sense, defines the parameters within which Amiel and Paramount were operating in framing *The Core* as a post-9/11 disaster film. The financial successes and built-in audience recognition of the 1990s disaster genre meant that *The Core* would operate within several of the 1990s cycle's conventions, trusting that

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<sup>92</sup> Jensen.

<sup>93</sup> Jensen.



audiences had not grown averse to them post-9/11. However, the film also shifts some of the emphasis within these conventions. Those elements of the 1990s disaster cycle that viewers would find potentially comforting and familiar—like clearly-defined expert protagonists and the nobility of sacrificing oneself for the greater good—were not only kept, but intensified. Meanwhile, the more-complicated issues of portraying catastrophe resulted in disaster scenes that allowed the viewer to still find fascination and pleasure in the destruction of urban landscapes and monuments through a lack of direct involvement by protagonists and a greater emphasis upon certain smaller, unsettling details of destruction. However, the broad caricatures and slickly-ironic humor incorporated into many of the 1990s disaster scenes were excised, so the viewer would not feel the film did not take seriously the deaths caused by disaster and therefore reject it entirely. This balancing act came through in the way the film was discussed and sold within the media, and it can be seen within the formal and narrative characteristics of the film itself.

As *The Core*'s script—written by Cooper Layne and John Rogers—was produced prior to September 11, one must be careful to not graft meanings onto structural choices within the narrative that have nothing to do with post-9/11 mores and everything to do with writing a disaster screenplay that will make for a viable artistic and commercial product. That being said, I believe it is legitimate to speculate on what Paramount, Amiel, and anyone else who signed up to make the film saw within this script that they thought might resonate with a post-9/11 film audience. Furthermore, examining *The Core* provides an opportunity to look at how a

filmmaker visually interprets disaster genre material written before a major national tragedy, and how his formal decisions potentially alter the original intent of the script.

Many critics have likened the narrative structure of *The Core* to *Armageddon*, and the comparisons prove useful in analyzing how *The Core* utilizes and alters certain aspects of the 1990s disaster cycle. Despite the obvious difference in the specific type of disaster—*The Core* revolves around the sudden deceleration of the Earth's inner core, while *Armageddon* imagines a Texas-sized meteor hurtling toward the planet—both films frame the central cataclysm as an amorphous international threat that provides a wide range of geographic possibilities: both for urban destruction and placement of characters. When not tied to a specific location, scenes of destruction can take place anywhere in the world, offering up a multitude of options for the filmmaker. However, locating the source of the disaster within the complex inner workings of the Earth's crust instead of barreling toward the planet from space also allows the film a greater variety of destructive methods to choose from. Among the effects of the core's deceleration showcased within the film: the sudden malfunctioning of pacemakers; deadly lighting superstorms; sudden holes in the ozone producing deadly beams of unfiltered sunlight; and crazed bird attacks. While not questioning the scientific probability of such happenings, it's fair to say that because the slowing down of the earth's core is not a widely understood phenomenon, it allows the filmmakers to essentially include whatever combination of disaster scenarios they would like. This flexibility helps *The Core* to differentiate itself—both artistically and commercially—from *Armageddon* and other single-disaster blockbusters of the mid-to-late 1990s.

Like *Armageddon*, *The Core* follows a professional team who is hired by the United States government to travel to the source of the would-be catastrophe and solve it. Because they travel to the source of the issue, both films' protagonists remain separated from the scenes of urban destruction, which are interspersed throughout the narrative to first establish the global threat and then to intermittently act as a reminder of its growing seriousness. These teams are defined by their professionalism, and must overcome both the monumental challenges that accompany their planet-saving task and internal divisions within the team itself, in which individuals of differing temperaments and personal backgrounds have been placed together because of the remarkable nature of their individuated skill sets. The internal conflicts seen within each film, however, differ due to the way each film constructs the group.

*Armageddon* pairs a group of highly-skilled but rowdy rough-neck oil drillers, whose raucous interpersonal dynamics and irreverent manner of working contrasts with the sober-minded, NASA-trained astronauts accompanying them to the asteroid surface. The team assembled within *The Core*, on the other hand, consists of professional scientists, astronauts, geophysicists, etc. who travel to the center of the Earth in order to jump-start the core through a series of massive nuclear explosions. Though internal divisions exist regarding personal demeanor and attitudes toward their mission, they are uniformly cohesive in their academic and/or scientific skills. The very make-up of these two teams reveals the fundamental difference in attitude that each filmmaker has toward the notion of the intellectual or academic as hero. While Bay ultimately places audience trust in the rough-hewn skill intuition of the drillers over the scientific training of the astronauts, Amiel draws no such distinction: to be a scientific

expert is (in most cases) to have the ability to use this knowledge in practical scenarios. This unabashed respect for the inherent value of scientific and technical expertise, and the desire to represent it through characters as brainy as they are heroic, lay at the heart of co-screenwriter John Rogers decision to write *The Core*. Eric Lichtenfeld, who notes the film's "respect for the intellectual" as the key difference between the films, quotes Rogers as that "the approach I took was [to emulate] a 1960s movie like *Fantastic Voyage* and *Andromeda Strain*, where square-jawed scientists solve the problem and save the day. I wanted to write the kind of movie that [as a kid] made me want to be a scientist."<sup>94</sup> It should be noted that such an explanation also places *The Core* amongst others from a less-complicated era of science-fiction/fantasy films: suggesting a more benign form of cinematic adventure that might have comforted studio executives leery over the prospect of a post-9/11 disaster movie.

Besides these throwbacks to the 1960s (and earlier; critics noted the obvious *Journey to the Center of the Earth* parallel), *The Core*'s characters continue the tradition of such characters as Harry Dalton in *Dante's Peak* or *Twister*'s Jo and Bill Harding: skilled scientific researchers whose value comes both from their expansive knowledge and their ability to utilize this knowledge in productive, hands-on ways in the face of catastrophe. However, professional skill is more than a character trait within *The Core*. It defines the protagonists as individuals almost exclusively, something not seen to such an extent in the earlier cycle. After establishing their protagonists as experts and using the characteristics that accompany this distinction as narrative context for how they will go about solving the crisis, many 1990s disaster

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<sup>94</sup> Lichtenfeld 227.

films place ultimate narrative focus elsewhere: specifically, the constitution (or reconstitution) of a romantic and/or familial unit through the process of solving or surviving the crisis. Jo and Bill reunite as a married couple at the end of *Twister*, for example, while Harry assumes the position of husband to Rachel Wando and father to her children. In *Armageddon*, meanwhile, both the romance between A.J. and Grace and Harry's gradual acceptance of A.J. as a suitable partner for his daughter (not to mention a viable stand-in for the son he never had) motivate one of the central plot points within the film: Harry's self-sacrifice, ensuring A.J. and Grace will be together. Professionalism remains encoded within these characters, but their actions either stem from or result in changes to their personal and/or romantic futures.

In contrast, *The Core* has little time for romantic or familial entanglements. With the exception of Serge's (Tchéky Karyo) wife and children—who remain off-screen throughout—none of the main characters interact with or discuss any family members. Romance is suggested with some quasi-flirtatious moments between Rebecca and Josh Keyes (Eckhart), but their sole kiss comes not from a moment of personal intimacy, but as a by-product of professional excitement. The conflict that sometimes emerges in disaster films between personal relationships and professional responsibilities, then, cannot exist when all characters' sole focus remains upon the details of their mission. In almost every case, the film introduces the viewer to a new character through an explicit showcasing of their expertise: Rebecca Childs' (Swank) skillful maneuvering of her malfunctioning space shuttle into the Los Angeles River to avoid a crash-landing; the advanced laser technology of Ed Brazzleton (Lindo); the disreputable yet nevertheless astounding computer hacking skills of Theodore "Rat"

Finch (DJ Qualls). Even Conrad Zimsky (Tucci)—the preening celebrity scientist who inadvertently helped to cause the initial deceleration of the core and whose inflated sense of self-importance leads the crew to commit some critical errors—is framed as nothing less than intellectually gifted.

This might seem to imply that *The Core* is an emotionally cooler film than *Armageddon*, with its focus upon extravagantly talented professionals pooling their vast internal resources to solve a world crisis. However, *The Core* focuses more intensely than many of the 1990s disaster films on dramatizing (at times quite emotionally) the limits of technical skill and the ability to match intellectual gifts with adherence to higher notions of self-sacrifice and communal goals. As the group burrows further into the Earth, they encounter a range of unexpected geological elements that cause increasing malfunctions and damage to their ship. Within these moments, characters will sometimes run up against their own limitations as professionals. Two separate scenes features a principal character with tears streaming down their face as they try and fail to solve a problem before them; though the often life-or-death stakes of the moment itself justifies their effusive response, it's telling that *The Core* finds some of its most emotionally-charged moments when showcasing the relationship between characters and their work. At other moments, characters must couple their technical skill with a sometimes painful sense common purpose, sacrificing emotional well-being and even their lives for the good of the mission. Rebecca, for example, refuses to save a fellow crew member in a malfunctioning deck of the ship, as facilitating his escape would jeopardize the safety of the ship. Similarly, the death of Brazzleton comes from both his ability to save the ship and his

willingness to enter the broiling hot crawl space within the ship, sealing his fate. Even Zimsky—whose cowardice and self-regard creates the most tension within the largely-amiable crew—ends up sacrificing himself for the good of the mission (and, in his final moments, sees the folly of his own preening personality when he laughingly tosses away the tape-recorder on which he has logged his pompous musings throughout the journey).

On some level, these moments exist to provide dramatic and emotional involvement to a narrative that admittedly paints itself into a bit of a corner. After all, the film focuses upon a group of individuals largely devoid of personal lives, placed within a cramped space that they rarely ever leave, with the exception of a brief foray into a vast diamond canyon beneath the surface. Furthermore, the visual landscape within which they travel proves largely undifferentiated throughout (several critics noted that the visualizations of the earth's various layers quickly grew monotonous). Dramatic tension, then, largely comes from the ship itself (through internal malfunctions or external damage), interpersonal dramas (mainly between Zimsky and the rest of the crew), or inner conflict (seen in both the shortcomings of protagonists' skills and the difficult, self-sacrificial decisions they are forced to make). Still, these narrative concerns dovetail with the film's thematic obsessions with the value of professionalism and the importance of communal responsibility, as emotional self-sacrifice occurs for the sake of the mission, and remains largely distanced from personal motives (unlike Harry's sacrifice, which both saves the world and ensures his daughter's happiness). It's no accident, then, that the film concludes, not with emotional reunions or tearful good-byes, but with the global recognition of those

team members who gave their scientific expertise and, ultimately, their lives for the sake of the world's safety. Public acknowledgment of their professional worth carries greater currency within the world of *The Core* than romantic clinches.

As a film, however, the tone of *The Core* is not particularly bleak. Though it emphasizes the emotion of the aforementioned character deaths, etc., the film undeniably treats its characters' central mission as an adventure story, with all the one-liners that often follow a thrillingly close-call. The film's humor, it should be noted, does differ from some of the 1990s disaster films in that it relies more upon diegetic situations than extratextual film and/or pop culture references, a la *Independence Day* or *Godzilla*. Faced with a seemingly insurmountable technical and/or physical obstacle, characters will trade rakish smiles and say things like "Oh, is that all?" Such jokes underline the enormity of the disaster while simultaneously reminding the viewer of the protagonists' skills and talents. They also underline the insularity of the film's narrative: characters would not make jokes about anything other than their mission because the film does not present anything else than the progress of the mission. As previously mentioned, the film largely restricts the viewer from any knowledge of the world outside of the group; even when the film leaves the team to highlight the small-scale disasters resulting from the core's deceleration, the viewer is made aware either before or just after the destruction that it has been witnessed by at least one protagonist via television. Events occurring outside the bubble of the group exist solely in relation to how they affect the mission. This combination of concentrated narrative focus and highly-skilled protagonists provides the audience with the aforementioned level of comfort that allows them to invest in



the suspense and emotion of the group's mission without any accompanying dread or terror that might have resulted from, say, a focus upon survivors of the film's cataclysmic sequences. By prominently showcasing the group's extreme expertise and sealing them off from the threat of interacting with the scenes of urban destruction, *The Core* places the viewer in a safe space where heroes only perish when they choose to sacrifice themselves for the greater good of the mission: a throwback to the hard-working camaraderie of the disaster-solving teams found in the 1990s cycle.

From the perspective of post-9/11 filmmakers and film studios, many of *The Core*'s narrative and thematic elements would seem to fit nicely into a strategy of escapist entertainment, highlighting adventure and disaster spectacle while both downplaying viewer connections to 9/11 and defusing accusations of insensitivity. Like several other disaster films of the 1990s, chief protagonists are not placed within the disaster scenario, allowing for some empathetic distance between the event and the viewer. Undoubtedly, any scene of urban destruction may very well place a viewer on edge, if not turn them off entirely. However, given that one of the main characteristics of 9/11 as a disaster was its largely localized nature, the film's ability to quickly enter and exit a scene of catastrophe allows viewers to detach contemporary echoes from the filmic image and to partake in the spectacle of destruction with less guilt or unease. Furthermore, the assigned cause of the central disaster sidesteps any potentially prickly associations with current political or environmental issues by having the core's deceleration tied to a wayward military experiment carried forth by one of the film's least likeable characters. This simple

explanation acts as a mild critique of weaponry build-up within the United States, but it functions mainly as a narrative device that handily ties the cause of disaster to suspect American military elites, defusing potential connections an audience member might make to anything from international tensions to ecological problems. Unlike *The Day After Tomorrow*, which will explicitly—if somewhat shakily—tie its central disaster to issues of global climate change and governmental inertia, *The Core* locates the cause of the disaster in a couple of shady individuals, ensuring audience focus remains on the mission to save the planet. Finally, the film's buoyant yet sincere tone—with its emphasis upon stalwart, heroic professionals calling upon their vast skills and higher ideals to save the planet—would seem to fall in line with the post-9/11 notion of a retreat from certain types of ironic detachment seen within film and television. (Whether this ultimately proved true is debatable, but it was a popular notion at the time of that Paramount greenlit the film.)

For Amiel, however, the question of how one goes about cinematically constructing disaster sequences in a post-9/11 world remained. His film owes clear debts to the formulas and strategies of the 1990s disaster cycle, but many scenes of destruction within those earlier films emphasized elements that may be troublesome to post-9/11 audiences, such as their reliance upon the destruction of well-known urban landmarks and their use of caricatured, quickly-eviscerated figures within the catastrophic scene. As his earlier statements indicated, Amiel did not seem willing to sacrifice the reaction that blowing up a well-known building elicits from an audience (though the only landmark to be destroyed in the U.S. is the Golden Gate Bridge, an notable but less symbolically-charged choice than, say, the Empire State Building or

the White House). Furthermore, many of his formal choices within these disaster sequences remain relatively recognizable to any viewer familiar with 1990s disaster conventions: a combination of lengthier long shots to establish the scene or draw attention to a particularly spectacular moment of chaos interspersed with shorter, tighter reaction shots; rapid editing that conveys the frenzy of being placed within the devastation; fluid movement between multiple figures and spaces within the scene as each are affected by some element of the destruction. Aurally, the scenes mix a bombastic score with a soundscape of pedestrian screams, crunching stone, shattering glass, melting steel, etc. Overall, Amiel does not seem interested in reinventing the way in which the viewer experiences cinematic disaster.

He certainly shies away from almost any trace of intentional humor within the disaster sequences. This begins with who what individuals he chooses to primarily focus upon during the scenes themselves. The bird attack in Trafalgar Square, for instance, largely follows a young family throughout the scene, and particularly the terror of a small boy. The melting of the Golden Gate Bridge, likewise, is seen largely through the perspective of a man within his car as he is burned by one of the sunbeams and looks on in horror as the bridge slowly melts around him. The viewer does not stay with him exclusively, allowing for the spectacle of the bridge's slow collapse to be appreciated in shots outside of the man's car. Nevertheless, the viewer is privy to the man's growing confusion and fear as his surroundings begin to melt away, and the camera remains within the car as a massive cable smashes toward his windshield. By prolonging the anonymous man's screen time, allowing us access to his limited optical viewpoint, and treating his terror sincerely (rather than as a campy

joke), Amiel denies the potential for a sadistic laugh that might have been available had he—like those before him—chose to either only use the man as a prop to be blown away or make him into a grotesque caricature whose death has no emotional impact. That being said, of course, the interplay between this more limited perspective and the wider shots of the overall collapse allows the viewer to momentarily feel for the man while also taking pleasure in the spectacular collapse of the bridge itself. This interaction between cataclysmic spectacle and empathy for the suffering largely define *The Core*'s disaster scenes.

What may separate these scenes the most from some of their earlier predecessors, however, is the way in which Amiel seeks to underline—in brief but stylistically overt instances—the horror of the disaster. Through small formal flourishes, Amiel allows the viewer a glimpse of the specific devastations being wrought by the large scale disaster he's portraying. These do not overpower the general tone of the disaster scenes, which are similar to earlier films in their general focus upon showcasing spectacular destruction in a manner that invites the viewer's mixture of terror, awe, and appreciation. Their presence, however, allow for disaster sequences that both gesture toward the changed reality outside of the film and tentatively explore variations upon well-established formal strategies.

This can be seen early on—even before the film's first scene of widespread urban catastrophe—in the film's opening scene, which shows the sudden malfunctioning of pacemakers throughout an area of Boston. The viewer knows something is amiss even before the scene begins, when Amiel slowly fades from the swirling of magma to the top of a spinning carnival ride with a swirl pattern.

Disembodied screams and creepy organ music come over the soundtrack as the swirl continues to dominate the screen, its origin ambiguous until a cut reveals a small carnival taking place of “Green World Day.” Amiel makes the viewer aware of an ominous current pulsing underneath the seemingly innocuous festival even before the scene’s main action takes place. The scene follows a cocksure businessman and his associates in a nearby office building as he begins to make his sales pitch before suddenly falling dead on the glass table. The shock of the moment is visually underlined by a sudden cut to a low-angle shot beneath the table as the man slams down onto it, a sickening thwack accompanying his collapse. The visceral cut, extreme angle and sharp sound effect all underline the moment’s sickening surprise. This is only enhanced by the fact that the viewer does not yet know the cause of his death, which is explained by Josh in a subsequent scene (yet another example of how *The Core* places its focus upon the interpretive intellectual powers of its scientist protagonists). As fellow workers examine his body, the camera begins an extended tracking shot that travels from outside of the office’s window and cranes over the surrounding area, which is now a mess of crashed cars and screaming pedestrians. The tumult caused by this unseen disturbance is not viscerally presented to the viewer, but rather viewed at a distance, stressing the extent of the chaos and the viewer’s position as an empathetic observer who registers catastrophe without recognizing its cause. The aural combination of the ever-intensifying score and the nondiegetic sound of a ticking clock underline this combination of disturbing emotional immediacy and unspecified, dread-laced mystery. Amiel’s formal decisions convey the first effects of the film’s central disaster (as is done within many films of

the genre), but do so in a manner that balances visceral appeal and eerie uncertainty. The scene's ultimate effect feels more closely linked to the opening of a horror film in its refusal to identify the cause of these multiple and mysterious deaths.

These moments in which formal choices briefly come to the fore to enhance the emotional intensity of the scene are seen within the disaster scenes themselves, albeit weaved within more traditional visual and aural aesthetic decisions. Within the Trafalgar Square bird attack, for instance, Amiel establishes the presence of the family's handheld video camera, through which the viewer first sees the family. Later, when the birds have gone mad and begin swooping around pedestrians, the family runs through the square with the video camera, desperately holding onto one another within the swarm of frantic people. Suddenly, Amiel cuts from a medium long tracking shot that follows the family as they flee to a nine-second long take seen through the violently shaking video camera. The hordes of fleeing pedestrians coupled with the instability of the visual apparatus itself only produce a chaotic blur at first. However, Amiel steadies the camera long enough to catch a brief glimpse of a woman wailing as she walks, her hand clasped over what appears to be a bloody eye. The image then returns to the more frenzied movements from before, accompanied by off-screen screams and birds flapping, as well as the score. In a sequence largely notable for its emphasis upon the scale of the chaos that it captures, this shot is notable for its brief zeroing in upon a specific moment of human suffering. Furthermore, the use of extremely shaky handheld camera work capturing hundreds of city dwellers fleeing and screaming in terror unequivocally recalls similar imagery from September 11. Video camera have been seen in disaster sequences during the

1990s cycle, but they largely were wielded by professional cameramen to purposefully capture the film's central catastrophe (as seen in *Godzilla*). By contrast, Amiel makes the footage more haphazard and pedestrians, using the aesthetics of real life tragedy to give this sequence (which, though intense, falls squarely within the aesthetic strategies of the 1990s disaster cycle) an extra jolt of poignancy. And though it is but one shot, it is a shot whose nine-second running time stands out in a scene in which shot length rarely rises above two seconds once the attack begins. As a viewer, one gets the sense that Amiel feels most liberated within these sequences, relishing in the challenge of crafting visually enticing scenes of spectacular destruction that simultaneously fulfill viewer desire for aesthetically-charged destruction while remaining cognizant of potentially altered standards of acceptability within filmic depictions of catastrophe.

Based upon *The Core*'s lukewarm reviews and middling box-office, however, it's fair to say that critics and audiences were not particularly interested in the balances Amiel and company were attempting to strike within their film. Most critics simply dismissed the film as a campy return to various disaster and sci-fi formulas from the 1990s and 1960s, with the kinder reviews pointing to a comforting familiarity that could be found within its reliance upon well-worn clichés. "If *The Core* finally has to be classified as a mess, it is an enjoyable one if you're in a throwback mood," Kenneth Turan noted in his *Los Angeles Times* review.<sup>95</sup> *The New York Times*' Elvis Mitchell, too, deemed the film harmlessly forgettable, writing that, "the brazen silliness of *The Core* is becalming and inauthentic, like taking a bath in

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<sup>95</sup> Kenneth Turan, "Movie Review: At Its Center, 'The Core' Is a Fun Ride," *The Los Angeles Times*, 28 Mar. 2003: E1.

nondairy coffee creamer.”<sup>96</sup> Others saw such qualities as decidedly less endearing (*Entertainment Weekly*’s Owen Gleiberman dismissed it as “a schlockier *Armageddon* crossed with *Fantastic Voyage*, minus the fun”).<sup>97</sup> Moviegoers, meanwhile, couldn’t be bothered to sort out whether *The Core* was a light romp or a lugubrious trip to nowhere: the \$60-million film opened with a paltry \$12 million, ranking third place behind new comedy *Head of State* and the four-week-old *Bringing Down the House*. The film quickly plummeted down the charts, never losing less than 45% of the previous weekend’s grosses in its first month in theaters. Domestic grosses totaled a little over \$31 million, with slightly-better international returns pushing the film’s total box office receipts to around \$73.5 million: barely covering its production costs (which did not include its marketing budget).

It’s tempting to relate the film’s failure partially to altered audience standards of disaster in a post-9/11 world. Feil, for example, alludes to audience “fears of transgressing the politically—and tastefully—correct discourse of disaster incited by 9/11 and the subsequent period of war” as one reason behind *The Core*’s dismal box office performance, implying that audiences may have wanted to attend the film and enjoy its familiar elements of spectacular destruction but did not due to changed social standards.<sup>98</sup> As this was the first major disaster film post-9/11, such an impediment to audiences cannot be discounted, nor can the possibility that some viewers simply did not feel prepared and/or interested in seeing disaster spectacularly represented. However, it’s worth noting that there was little connection made within

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<sup>96</sup> Elvis Mitchell, “Film Review: Trying to Jump-Start the Earth’s Heart,” *The New York Times*, 28 Marc. 2003: E1.

<sup>97</sup> Owen Gleiberman, “The Core,” *Entertainment Weekly*, Apr. 11, 2003, 22 Jan. 2009 <<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,440702,00.html>>.

<sup>98</sup> Feil 140.



the press coverage of *The Core* between the film and the events of September 11. Similarly, while some critics took note of potential generic changes due to 9/11, their reactions feel more ruminative than accusatory. *Variety*'s Todd McCarthy, for example, notes that, "watching a disaster movie isn't what it used to be; it's too difficult to invent scenes of calamitous catastrophe that don't somehow produce the uneasy feeling that such things could actually happen."<sup>99</sup>

Real-world events did indeed contribute *The Core*'s ultimate box-office failure. Rather than 9/11, it was a combination of the Space Shuttle Columbia crash and the beginning of the War in Iraq that potentially complicated audience reaction and/or interest in the film. In addition to its disaster sequences, *The Core* also features a scene early on in which Rebecca safely lands her space shuttle in the Los Angeles River after effects from the core's deceleration causes the ship to go into freefall. Being an important narrative moment within the film that simultaneously highlighted the film's visual effects, the crash scene was also prominently featured within the film's trailer. When the Columbia space shuttle disintegrated during re-entry into Earth's surface on February 1, 2003, Paramount removed the film's trailer from theaters and conducted a review of the film's advertising campaign overall, though the film's release date remained the same.<sup>100</sup> Besides both a potential loss in public exposure and additional marketing costs, having to pull the trailer publically identified *The Core* as containing a scene reminiscent of the Columbia disaster. Though the result is obviously different, audience associations between so recent a tragedy and the film itself could not have been a boon to its potential popularity.

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<sup>99</sup> Todd McCarthy, "The Core," *Daily Variety*, 24 Mar. 2003: 13.

<sup>100</sup> Dave McNary, "Par Pulls 'Core' Trailer After Shuttle Disaster," *Daily Variety*, 3 Feb. 2003: 5.

More generally, *The Core* had the unfortunate luck (as did other films in March and April of 2003) to open during the first days of the Iraq War, in which the United States officially began combat operations on March 20, 2003. Sobering international events, of course, can sometimes be a boon to box office, as audiences flock to theaters to distance themselves from current events with escapist entertainment. This, however, did not prove true in the opening weeks of the Iraq War; the weekend that *The Core* opened, overall domestic grosses were down 23% from the same weekend in 2002, though that previous weekend also fell on Easter.<sup>101</sup> Some pointed to the fact that some people remained watching the constant television coverage of the Iraq War instead of going to the movies. Potential moviegoers looking for a break from the news, meanwhile, might not have known what was coming out, as increased coverage meant less airtime for film advertisements and other publicity material.<sup>102</sup> And those who finally did choose to go to the movies seemed most intrigued by lighter entertainments, such as comedies *Head of State* and *Bringing Down the House*, and the musical *Chicago*, which has won the Best Picture Academy Award earlier that week and expanded to 2,701 nationwide. It seems as if *The Core* suffered from all of the negatives of this box-office situation (reduced public exposure, a national public focused upon national events) and none of the positives (its action-oriented plot and disaster spectacle may have felt decidedly less escapist with real-life explosions, etc. seen in television war coverage). Attempts by Paramount to co-opt the war did not seem to help matters; *The New York Times* reported that Paramount had sent an e-mail to journalist promoting *The Core*'s use of

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<sup>101</sup> Lorenza Munoz, "Box Office: War Is Keeping Crowds Home, or Is It the Choice of Movies?," *The Los Angeles Times*, 31 Mar. 2003: E4.

<sup>102</sup> Carl DiOrio, "Embattled B.O.," *Daily Variety*, 31 Mar. 2003: 1.

the aircraft carrier *Constellation*, which was then being used in the Persian Gulf. “The e-mail message read something like a military propaganda sheet... but did little to elaborate on the movie’s story,” the article skeptically reported.<sup>103</sup> Such disconnection between the film’s plot and the highlighting of the *Constellation* is no coincidence; rather, it reflects the somewhat strained nature Paramount’s attempt to connect a film they largely framed largely as an escapist adventure with real-life events.

Ultimately, however, what may have sunk *The Core* more than anything else was the very sense of generic familiarity, seen within the film itself and pointed out by critics that helped guard it from accusations of post-9/11 insensitivity. As a film, *The Core* emphasized certain narrative and formal elements from the 1990s disaster cycle that viewers would see as potentially familiar and comforting (strong, professional heroes; noble self sacrifice) and carefully modulating others that could remain pleasurable with alterations (particularly the disaster sequence itself, which continued to allow a certain amount of emotional distance through a separation from protagonists’ actions but which kept the disaster somewhat more serious both by briefly showcasing smaller moments of terror or dread and de-emphasizing caricature and dark humor). This re-working of known formulas, however, ended up not being of particular interest to audiences, who had seen these elements elsewhere within the 1990s cycle. The larger question, then, becomes whether this is simply an example of genre fatigue—in which audiences reject the revival of well-known generic formulas—or whether this fatigue is tied into post-9/11 audience expectations. Did

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<sup>103</sup> Laura M. Holson, “Hollywood Toning Down Ads and Froth During War,” The New York Times, 1 Apr, 2003: C8.

audiences merely not want to go to disaster movies? Or did they not want to go to a disaster movie that felt like a pre-9/11 retread?

In some respects, one would imagine *The Day After Tomorrow* to be an even-harder sell than *The Core*. Like *The Core*, it inevitably contends with ever-fluctuating assumptions concerning audience tastes and altered standards. However, *The Day After Tomorrow* risks a far more specific set of criticisms from both potential viewers and media commentators by having its principal disaster site located in none other than Manhattan. By the time the film is released, American moviegoers would not have seen New York City decimated in a film since 2001's *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, and that film was a futuristic science-fiction fable that imagined the city underwater hundreds of years from now. Wrecking havoc upon Manhattan for the first time since September 11, the film risks turning off audience members who, even if they quickly readjusted to on-screen violence and even filmic destruction post-9/11, may not want the associations that come with destroying that particular space. Even beyond these concerns, however, *The Day After Tomorrow* runs into another potential problem that involves the intersection of cinematic entertainment and national issues. As in *The Core*, the film imagines a mysterious planetary disturbance that results in various disasters across the planet. The root of this disturbance, however, is not a highly improbably geologic shift caused by overreaching military ambition, but something potentially more realistic (depending upon one's beliefs) and definitely more divisive: global climate change. And while the film does not put forth a particularly systematic or detailed critique of the human causes behind this highly-contentious phenomenon, it comes down with little ambiguity on the side of the

environmentalist movement, even going so far as to write in a villainous character whose physical appearance and dismissive rhetoric echo global warming-skeptic and then-Vice President Dick Cheney. Given the number of viewers potentially turned off by the very mention of this issue (within a summer popcorn blockbuster, no less) why take the additional risk?

Nevertheless, once Roland Emmerich and Jeffrey Nachmanoff made their script available for potential studio buyers in late April of 2002, “a ferocious bidding battle” between Universal, Fox, and Paramount ensued.<sup>104</sup> Fox eventually won the auction, and planned to begin production before the end of the year.<sup>105</sup> From the beginning, Fox exuded confidence in the project, framing the film as a big-budget blockbuster with an original twist that still delivered the special-effects goods. This optimism translated into the practicalities of the project as well: Fox budgeted *The Day After Tomorrow*’s production at \$125 million before marketing. (Compare this to the respectable but relatively middle-of-the-road \$60 million budget that Paramount assigned to *The Core*.) Furthermore, Fox scheduled the film to open over Memorial Day weekend, traditionally one of the highest-grossing weekends of the entire year. Once again, a comparison to *The Core* proves instructive. That film was originally scheduled for early November (not a slow box-office position but three weeks ahead of the very lucrative Thanksgiving weekend), before being pushed to late March (a traditionally middling time for film grosses except for select periods, like Easter or President’s Day weekend). Clearly, Fox had enough faith within the film’s box-office

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<sup>104</sup> Michael Fleming, “Global Warming Sci-fier Has H’wood Overheated,” *Daily Variety*, 2 May 2002: 1.

<sup>105</sup> Michael Fleming, “It’s A Big ‘Day’ at Fox,” *Daily Variety*, 6 May 2002: 1.

potential to not only battle it out with fellow studios, but position the film financially and temporally to earn a potentially huge amount of money.

Many of the reasons behind these decision echo back to earlier discussions of why studios in the 1990s decided to greenlight a significant number of disaster films. Indeed, Fox Filmed Entertainment Tom Rothman effectively summed up these reasons when discussing the project with *Variety*:

“...The star is Roland and what he puts on the screen. There’s no need for star casting, and that was one of a number of appealing factors which made so many studios want it. This ain’t a sequel, it ain’t a remake, and while there are plenty of those being made, we feel audiences are going to want new experiences. It was a terrific script that’s ready to go right away. It’s a big idea with an excellent producer and a filmmaker who does this kind of movie par excellence.”<sup>106</sup>

Like some many of the 1990s disaster films, the allure of cinematic destruction rendered in the most cutting-edge visual effects remains the chief appeal of this project. Given the relative paucity of such films in theaters even before September 11, audiences might be interested to see what technological advances (showcased in other genres, such as science fiction and fantasy) will affect the sorts of images seen on screen in disaster films. These scenes, too, could be hinted at through marketing that isolates a single evocative image or clip from the disaster, defining the film’s destructive potential while leaving the audience with an incomplete picture of the cataclysm’s full power and force. Unlike *The Core*—whose previews featured snippets of the disaster scenes but whose posters focused more upon the general destruction of the planet through an image of molten lava working its way up through the Earth—*The Day After Tomorrow* seized upon specific images of New York City, either buried in snow or about to be engulfed by water. Two other posters show the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

Statue of Liberty in similar situations, with the snow posters featuring two indistinct specs in the bottom third of the poster representing survivors approaching the frozen city. Needless to say, this is somewhat dicey ground; though Manhattan technically is not destroyed in the posters, it is shown in an incredibly isolated and precarious position. However, Fox banked upon the singularity of the image to stand out with viewers. (recalling a slightly tamer version of the decimated White House in the previews for *Independence Day* or the wall of water prominently featured in *Deep Impact*'s advertising). This would prove especially important because, as Rothman pointed out, the film lacks certain pre-sold elements found within a sequel, remake, or franchise, and lacked superstars to make up for that. The film is not without well-known talent, most notably Dennis Quaid (who experienced a minor career renaissance in 2002 thanks to critically acclaimed performances in *The Rookie* and *Far From Heaven*) and Jake Gyllenhaal, known at that point for smaller, more character-driven films, particularly the cult hit *Donnie Darko*. Still, the focus needed to remain around both the somewhat unique concept and its spectacular execution, and these posters worked to foreground just that.

Indeed, the only individual highlighted with the poster is Emmerich himself, framed as “the director of *Independence Day*.” This prominent placement of Emmerich within the advertising works to ensure viewers that the film will be both comforting and fresh. The choice to associate the film with *Independence Day* plays upon audience nostalgia for that earlier mega-hit, and implies a repeat of that highly-entertaining film. By placing it within the context of the film's largely sober poster (grey skies, minimized human presence, a tagline that inquires the viewer simply:

“Where will you be?”), however, the viewer is also aware that this film will lack some of the fast-and-loose humor and ironic pop cultural references of that earlier film. Here, Emmerich returns to the genre he helped to resurrect in the 1990s, but in a more somber, post-9/11 mood.

From the very beginning, Emmerich’s attachment to *The Day After Tomorrow* seemed crucial in attracting major studio support. His financial track record within commercial Hollywood filmmaking alone would most likely have led any studio to invest in his next film: from *Independence Day* through *The Day After Tomorrow*, not one of his films had grossed less than \$100 million domestically, and not less than \$200 million when international grosses were added in. However, Emmerich’s work within the genre throughout the 1990s disaster cycle (producing what could arguably be deemed its peak and nadir, respectively, in *Independence Day* and *Godzilla*) proved that he possessed a working understanding of the genre’s current conventions: which ones might still work; which ones might be jettisoned; how they might be tweaked without losing their appeal. Certainly, Emmerich expressed concerns about the genre post-9/11 along with everyone else, albeit in more practical and less moralistic terms than most (he told *Entertainment Weekly*, when it came to deciding whether or not the Statue of Liberty remains standing at film’s end, he left it intact, adding that he “didn’t want to destroy it so much anymore—probably because of September 11”).<sup>107</sup> However, his experience with these films and penchant for translating their generic elements into financially successful product with vast marketing potential surely proved a plus. Indeed, the fact that only he and producer

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<sup>107</sup> Gillian Flynn, “Flirting with Disaster,” *Entertainment Weekly* June 04, 2004, 21 Jan. 2009 <[http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,643155\\_4,00.html](http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,643155_4,00.html)>.



Mark Gordon received profit participation deals from Fox is a tangible example of the trust the studio placed in Emmerich's vision and judgment.<sup>108</sup>

Even the global warming angle provided opportunities for framing the film as both a highly enjoyable summer entertainment and a movie with something to say (or at least gesture to). As Fox co-chairman Jim Gianopulos put it, "We've never avoided the content of the movie. We simply wanted the thought-provoking aspects of the film to be experienced in an entertainment context, not as a political debate."<sup>109</sup> Of course, any film with this wide a release dealing with this hot a topic is bound to drum up some supporters and detractors from within the political world, and *The Day After Tomorrow*'s opening became an opportunity for liberal political action groups, mainly MoveOn.org, to publicize their environmental messages. The group hosted a "town hall" meeting a few blocks from the film's Manhattan premiere to discuss the effects of global climate change, and signed up 8,000 people to hand out pro-environmentalist leaflets at screenings during opening weekend (not to be outdone, conservative group RightMarch.com also planned to distribute leaflets that read: "Don't let radical left-wing environmentalists fool you... Act NOW—Because the day after tomorrow, radical leftists may have wrecked America's economy."<sup>110</sup>

While such politically-charged publicity always has the potential to alienate certain audience members (either due to their political views or expectations of a Hollywood disaster film's content), this additional press seemed only to raise the film

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<sup>108</sup> Fleming, "It's A Big 'Day'..."

<sup>109</sup> Patrick Goldstein, "The Big Picture: Man of Action, Activism," The Los Angeles Times, 25 May 2004: E1.

<sup>110</sup> Gabriel Snyder, "Activists Plan to Make 'Day' Eye of the Storm," Daily Variety, 24 May 2004: 26. For additional reportage on political action groups' efforts to use the film to advance political goals, see: Gabriel Snyder, "'Day' Debate Warms Up," Daily Variety, 12 May 2004: 5, and Sharon Waxman, "Global Warming Ignites Tempers, Even in a Movie," The New York Times, 12 May 2004: E1.

higher in terms of public awareness. Additionally, in the midst of both a divisive election year and a summer that saw the successful release of Michael Moore's blistering anti-Bush documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the film's pro-environmental stance and thinly-veiled critiques of President Bush and particularly Vice President Cheney may have attracted left-leaning viewers who would otherwise have dismissed a big-budget disaster flick. This classing up of a genre picture by including topical content is nothing new, but it feels particularly relevant after the public beating the genre took after 9/11. And this leads to the final reasons why having global warming at the center of the film's disaster. In the past, the indiscriminate and widespread nature of the films' deaths all occurred due to a highly implausible central disaster (a volcano erupting from Los Angeles, aliens invading the Earth). The lack of plausibility behind these mass deaths can add to their flip nature, as they remain dissociated from the viewer's actual concerns. When the disaster becomes an issue that does have modern-day resonance, it can give the film weight and import. Global warming, in particular, proves useful in this respect because disaster derives from the planet's rebellion against humanity's mistreatment of it. The viewer cannot dismiss the film quite as easily, as it connects widespread chaos and death with present unsustainable living practices. We have seen the enemy, and it is ourselves (or at least our short-sighted, irresponsible national leaders). Such a move helps to defuse certain threads of post-9/11 genre critique that might be launched against the film.

But if global climate change helps to frame the film within the marketplace as a spectacular, special-effects driven blockbuster with a social conscience, how does it affect the structure of a disaster narrative? Like *The Core*, the global reach and

myriad of potential cataclysms housed under the umbrella of “atmospheric disturbances” provides the film with a wide range of options for the type of destruction it chooses to inflict and the location: hail storms in Tokyo, multiple tornadoes in Los Angeles, giant tidal waves and instant freezes in Manhattan. But a crucial distinction is made between *The Day After Tomorrow* and many earlier films in its ultimate insistence on the characters’ inability to stop the disaster at hand. In the 1990s cycle, disaster sources were often tangible sites whose destruction solved the crisis. Even when this was not true (the tornados in *Twister* or the titular menace in *Volcano*), expert protagonists found a way to control them to a point, allowing them to predict their arrival or to minimize the damage caused by their presence. *The Core* very much returned to this narrative structure: team of experts travel to source to avert cataclysm. Having the Earth’s atmosphere as the central source of catastrophe seems to preclude such a direct plan, although one could imagine screenwriters inventing a narrative twist to allow the protagonists to fix the atmosphere through some scientific creation. By defining the disaster as fundamentally beyond the control of the protagonists, the film both establishes its relatively somber tone by underlining the seriousness of the global warming threat itself (which, the film implies, will not be solvable by human actions after a certain point) and structures the narrative around acts of survival and small-scale heroism over grand plans of world salvation. Stephen Keane sees this narrative construction as “a return to the old-fashioned peril and straightforward melodrama of the 1970s,” adding that, in apparent contrast to the 1990s cycle, “there are no action men this time round, no military intervention, and no space shuttles armed with nuclear warheads.”<sup>111</sup> This also recalls the more

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<sup>111</sup> Keane 95.

survivalist disaster films of the 1990s period like *Dante's Peak* and *Deep Impact*, the latter of which does indeed have humans ultimately solving the meteor crisis but whose emotional climax comes from the pathos-heavy impact of the first, smaller meteor.

This altered set of expectations with regards to the solvability of the disaster alters the characteristics of the disaster film protagonist. The film focuses primarily upon paleoclimatologist Jack Hall's (Quaid) attempts to warn the government of the oncoming ice age and, later, to rescue his son, Sam (Jake Gyllenhaal) from the catastrophe in Manhattan. In some respects, Jack Hall (Quaid) is set up as the quintessential expert protagonist. An expert paleoclimatologist, Jack is first shown to us working with his two-man crew in Antarctica when the Ice Shelf upon which they are all working begins to crack apart due to the first signs of climate change. He places professional obligation over personal safety by leaping across a large crack in the ice to retrieve collected data, almost dying in the process. From the beginning, the viewer not only connects Jack with the generic mixture of professional intelligence and roll-your-sleeves-up work ethic, but identifies him as possessing firsthand knowledge of the dangerous effects that the atmospheric shifts will have upon the Earth. This both strengthens his stature as a protagonist and makes it all the more frustrating when he is repeatedly doubted, dismissed, or mocked by Vice President Becker (Kenneth Walsh) while trying to warn the administration of the forthcoming atmospheric changes. However, the film also places great emphasis upon the toll that Jack's international scientific research trips have taken on his family. Though never stated, it is assumed he and his wife Lucy (Sela Ward) are at least separated, if not

divorced. Sam, meanwhile, sees his father as a largely distant figure. The two men share both an intellectual tenacity and a willingness to stand up for their thoughts (Jack cannot help but approve when Sam tells him that the reason he failed calculus was that he knew his teacher was wrong), but their lack of comfort or emotional rapport haunts Jack. This need for renewed familial connection increases the resonance of his quest to rescue Sam, and frames his long trek across the snowy tundra that forms between New York and Washington, D.C. primarily as an act of self-sacrificial, fatherly devotion.

It also reflects the nature of the disaster itself and its impact upon a hero like Jack. As skilled a scientist as he is, Jack can do nothing to stop the destructive atmospheric changes once they begin. The most we can do on a large scale is warning the president to evacuate all of the southern states to save as many lives as possible from the oncoming ice age. Given the sheer scope of the disaster, Jack's role can ultimately only be as an advisor. Therefore, the focus of any heroic actions he takes must be narrowed in scope so that the viewer can follow the film's hero attempt to achieve a tangible, personal goal. At times, the film lightly attempts to connect Jack's mistakes as a father with the larger errors in judgment that led to the global catastrophes. He says as much to his assistant, Jason (Dash Mihok), when reflecting upon the ways both he and the world must correct past judgment errors. Additionally, the eventual (and largely unexplained) healing process that the atmosphere begins at the film's end occurs narratively in close proximity to Jack and Sam's reunion. Perhaps this paralleling of personal and global crisis is not pushed as far as it could have been, as it seems somewhat incoherent to tie the fatherly inadequacies of an

environmentally-minded scientist with the pollution of the earth. However, the parallels that do occur help tie the audience's emotional engagement with the father-son dynamic to the larger, more amorphous effects and eventual resolution of destructive climate change.

This balance between the plight of the individual and awareness of the global impact of the atmospheric disturbances proves critical to the film's sober-minded focus upon what individuals and governments do when faced with a seemingly unstoppable and planet-changing event like the forthcoming ice age. The film emphasizes this balance through an unrestricted narration that allows the viewer emotional access to a range of people attempting to survive under these new, harsh conditions. Though New York and Washington, D.C. act as the film's principal locations, the film shuttles between multiple locations, including Scotland, Mexico, India, Antarctica, and outer space. Part of this structure is practical. The atmospheric fluctuations that accompany the disasters within the film are invisible and therefore not particularly engaging in and of themselves. By visualizing and explaining these changes within weather stations located in Washington, D.C., Scotland, and outer space (which the film will often rapidly move between in moments of before a new threat is about to occur), the film provides these changes with visual energy and urgency, as well as underline the relative helplessness of humanity's scientific prowess against this atmospheric onslaught. As Keane writes, "from the developing hurricane in the Pacific to the tidal shift in the North Atlantic, all the experts can do is communicate with each other and not prevent the impending superfreeze."<sup>112</sup> Moving between different spaces within which people attempt to survive the disasters

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<sup>112</sup> Keane 98.

occurring around them underline the communal plight that the disturbances have inflicted upon all people. The film's multiple locations also provide for less personalized context as to how the atmospheric disturbances are upending the world politically and geographically as well. Perhaps most pointedly, thousands of Americans are shown fleeing across the Rio Grande into Mexico to escape the deadly northern cold, reversing the trends of human migration that so trouble United States-Mexico relations. Such large-scale consequences are not explored with much depth within the film; however, their introduction and continued presence within the narrative (mostly through the use of news reports and media coverage placed with spaces like Lucy's hospital, etc.) allows the viewer to see the film's world as a realistic one, in which the practical implications of global disaster inform the experiences of those principal characters whom the viewer is following. It provides a greater sense of detail and authenticity to the experience, as it allows the viewer to reflect upon what real-life governments would do should such a crisis occur. And on a practical level, in a narrative in which no character can do anything to stop the disaster, highlighting unusual and politically-prickly consequences of disastrous global climate change provides another strategy through which to keep viewer interest piqued.

The individual scenes of human survival, meanwhile, prove unique for their focus upon individuals whose chief narrative function is either to survive in a contained space or accept death. The principal example of this is the group of survivors from the Manhattan tidal waves—including Sam and his friends—who hole up in the abandoned New York Public Library and burn books to keep warm. With

the film defining the characters as essentially mobile and attempting to stay alive, narrative focus turns to character relationships (particularly Sam's hidden romantic feelings for Laura (Emmy Rossum)) and to questions on a society and culture undergoing seismic shifts. The latter certainly feels more unexpected in a film of this type; at one point, a relatively minor character is given an impassioned monologue defending the cultural import of the Gutenberg Bible and its place within Western civilization. However, Emmerich places them within this space for a reason: by embracing the heights of human intellectual and artistic achievement, these characters provide a hopeful alternative to the human ignorance that has driven the planet to rebel against humanity. The library, in the words of Lichtenfeld, "represents a repository of mankind's history and accumulated knowledge. Therefore, as the world outside is wiped clear, and as the cold encroaches on the library itself, this place marks a line in the snow: Culture's Last Stand."<sup>113</sup> Other scenes prove far more basic in their focus upon survival or death. When an ambulance does not come for a cancer-stricken child at her hospital, Lucy chooses to stay with the child even as the temperatures continue to drop in the abandoned hospital. Though they are both eventually rescued, the situation underlines the helplessness of the characters against the growing cold. Perhaps most poignant are the three men at the Hedland Center in Scotland, whose leader, Terry (Ian Holm), helped provide Jack with information about the atmospheric changes. As the heat generators dies away, the snow blocks them in, and the temperatures continue to fall, Terry and his compatriots toast with an aged scotch and wait for their inevitable demise. The situation proves all the more saddening given that the film had previously shown both the hand-drawn pictures

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<sup>113</sup> Lichtenfeld 232.



given to Terry by his grandson and the wife and newborn child of another technician, Simon (Adrian Lester). Emmerich does not show their deaths; rather, the three men sit in silent contemplation as the lights finally go out, and the viewer never sees them again. It's important to note the humor that runs through this and other scenes within the film, as characters react to their plight with a knowing one-liner that underlines their awareness of the situation's enormity. However, there are little of the smart-alecky pop-cultural quotations that imbued Emmerich's earlier disaster films. This choice, however, ultimately seems more tonal than anything else: the gravity of the situation would be somewhat broken if characters began reaching back to the shared knowledge of a society that may not exist for much longer.

The film's visual and aural aesthetic has a more sober feel as well. Emmerich lights many scenes, particularly interiors, with cool blues and grays, imbuing the space and the conversations occurring in them with a somber feel (given the ever-graying skies that dominate the film's world, this lighting feels as diegetically motivated as it is tonally appropriate). Camera movement and editing within non-disaster sequences rarely draw attention to themselves, keeping viewer focus directed toward the emotional and physical plights of the characters. And while past Emmerich films have employed music that emphasized bombast or thrills, composers Harald Kloser and Thomas Wanker score—with its use of ethereal female voices and emotional yet subdued chords—strikes a more restrained note.

A simple comparison between the very first moments of this film and *The Core* provide an example of *The Day After Tomorrow*'s more restrained aesthetic. Both openings augment their distribution companies' logo to suit the films' respective

purposes. In *The Core*, Amiel has the camera quickly track toward the side of the mountain on the Paramount Pictures logo as ominous music plays in the background. The camera then burst right through the surface of the mountain and rapidly tears through layers of stone and metal to the accompaniment of an energetic score before finally reaching the glowing center of the core. A small explosion then reveals the film's title, which comes toward the camera and eventually travels past it, with the camera travelling through the title's rotating "O". (The subsequent scene is the aforementioned pacemaker malfunction sequence.) Here, the visual and aural emphasis is entirely upon providing the viewer with a visceral experience: objects fly toward the frame, the camera blasts through an established studio logo. It signals the film's emphasis upon excitement and adventure within a visually stimulating and dangerous place. This is also established in an extra-narrative way; Amiel cues the viewer through playful visual and aural techniques to see the film's tone before we even arrive at the first scene. *The Day After Tomorrow* also tweaks its company's logo. The usually-starry sky surrounding the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox spotlights quickly darkens and fills with bolts of lightning. The screen then fades to a black screen, upon which slanting credits of grayish-blue text fade in and out accompanied by the film's sober score. At first, it appears Emmerich will place his credits within an extra-narrative space similar to Amiel, albeit producing a decidedly different tone. However, the credits eventually continue over an extended aerial shot of Antarctica. As the music continues, the camera travels through canyons of floating ice and eventually lands upon Jack and his crew working on the ice. The more-restrained score and calm, gliding aerial tracking shot focus the viewer's attention upon the

magisterial grandeur of the natural setting: one that will prove short-lived as the film progresses. The goal seems not to immediately signal the film's central disaster, but to cast an extended and somewhat mournful glance at the beauty being destroyed by humanity. This sense of loss will prove important to maintaining the film's somber tone and pro-environmental message. Furthermore, Emmerich must place this opening within the context of the filmic world itself, so the impact of the Earth's majesty and beauty can be later contrasted with its terrifying and destructive power. From the very beginning, then, Emmerich establishes the world of the film as marked by serious contemplation as opposed to kicky thrills. This feels markedly different from the majority of 1990s films as well: the exception being *Deep Impact*, which opens upon a starry night's sky to establish the film's emphasis on calm contemplation of disaster's potential consequences over rollicking adventure in the pursuit of stopping an approaching catastrophe.

Three main disaster sequences occur within the film: the hail storm in Tokyo, the tornadoes in Los Angeles, and the giant waves in New York. (I am excluding the "superfreeze" seen that occurs near the end of the film simply because it is framed as an additional level of cataclysm already placed over a decimated city, and therefore does not function in the same fashion as an initial attack upon an operational, thriving metropolis.) As for depicting destruction itself, Emmerich combines new formal strategies to emphasize both the terrifying beauty of the destructive elements themselves and their sobering impact, while also maintaining the favored 1990s strategies of inserting caricatures for quick laughs and/or thrills. In terms of their placement in the narrative, all disaster sequences signal the disturbances'

increasingly-deadly nature, as seen within the scale of destruction they wreck upon their respective locations.

The Los Angeles sequence, in particular, proves instructive in the manner in which Emmerich mixes old and new strategies in visualizing a sequence that, narratively, fits into older patterns of separating principal characters from the disaster site to allow viewers the emotional distance to then focus upon, and take pleasure in, the spectacle of urban destruction. In a sense, Emmerich works to achieve both sobering grandeur and distancing humor by simply erasing images of human suffering of any kind and cutting between extreme long shots of the destruction itself and closer shots of characters futilely recording or simply gawking at the tornadoes' awesome power. Both the idea of televised mediation and distancing humor is introduced in the scene prior to the full-blown disaster sequence, in which we find two Weather Channel employees too busy making out to initially respond to warning signs from equipment in the next room. If this man at the Weather Channel is framed as someone who values a quick dalliance over his work, then the weather reporter himself who calls the station to report humongous hailstones appears buffoonish in his attempts to report on the deadly weather regardless of circumstances of safety. Even when the sequence begins outright, it has already been established that Jack and his team (and, later, Sam and his friends) are watching the coverage on television, adding further levels of aesthetic distance. Therefore, when the television news reporter gets flattened by a flying billboard as he reports on the tornado (a billboard with a garish cartoon of a woman in a bikini, no less), the viewer feels justified in laughing at his all-too-justified fate. Smaller laughs also derive from this notion of

capturing the image of the disaster over physical safety: a man, for example, tells two others to run away as they stand, transfixed, recording the tornadoes with their camcorder. By focusing solely upon caricatures—albeit ones not drawn quite as broadly as in previous Emmerich films—and eliding any images of Los Angeles residents fleeing, screaming, etc., Emmerich allows the viewer to enjoy a distanced chuckle at the extent to which individuals will go to capture extraordinary events (which could perhaps also be read as a gentle jab at those who gawk at make-believe, whether in a movie theater or through a camera lens).

However, Emmerich also cues the audience to know that, if the reactions of some pedestrians are worthy of mockery, the atmospheric disasters occurring onscreen are not. The tornadoes within this scene are not merely visualized as dangerous. They are monstrous, enormous beings that form suddenly and without warning, quickly decimating whole sections of the city. Emmerich often shoots two or three separate tornados in one aerial extreme long shot, lingering less on the specific damage each individual is causing and focusing more upon their massive size, placement throughout the city (and the frame) and elegant, swirling movements. Indeed, there is something visually attractive about some of these images: the interplay of the tornadoes dark blue against and the mixture of darkening gray clouds and bits of yellow sunlight; the sinuous twisting of the tornadoes as they slowly work their way through the city, bits of debris seen spewing up from the ground around them. Longer takes accompany these shots, allowing the viewer to appreciate the image itself as well as its destructive impact. Natural disaster becomes both an aesthetic experience to be admired as well as a cause of epic destruction to be feared.

And fear is the note upon which the scene ends. As a massive tornado seems primed to strike the Weather Channel building, the lights suddenly go off within the frame. The last person the viewer sees is the building's silent janitor, and we return on him when the frame is illuminated a second later. The ever-intensifying musical score has ceased, replaced by the offscreen diegetic sounds of twisting metal, car alarms, television reporters, etc. The man looks down the hall towards the door through which used to be the room where we saw the employees making-out; it is close, but an incredibly bright blue light spills out from underneath the doorframe. The janitor hesitantly opens the door, the camera lingering in long shot behind him and momentarily denying us what has caused this eerie new illumination. We find out moments later in an aerial shot that reveals the entire side of the building has been ripped away. As the softer, eerie female voices come onto the soundtrack, the camera tracks back to reveal some of the massive damage around the building, as the tornado begins to dissipate in the right midground of the shot. Emmerich once again holds the image for a lengthy, 18-second take that emphasizes the sober contemplation of the city's destruction over its more thrilling or spectacular elements. There is an aesthetic beauty to the image, similar to earlier shots of the tornados, but here that physical beauty acts serves as counterpoint to the cataclysmic effects of the tornado upon the city. The scene's import is also underlined by its placement within the narrative: the following scene takes place within the White House, with both the President and Vice President gravely receiving the news about the tornadoes, confirming the disaster's role as a growing national threat. The choice to end this scene on a somber note—moving away from the ironic humor seen earlier—shows that while Emmerich

maintains affection for caricatured laughs, he knows that the ultimate effects of disaster must be taken seriously to maintain the film's tone and message.

If large-scale disaster scenes like this one operate under altered aesthetic principles than those in Emmerich's past films, though, their displacement of the protagonists from the disaster itself defines their narrative purpose primarily in terms of signaling the disaster's increasing power and force. They act as general markers of gathering doom, similar to *The Core*. However, Emmerich alters this when he reaches the New York sequence, where Sam and his friends are all located at the time of the massive tidal waves. Many of the formal strategies within the scene are the same, particularly Emmerich's use of lengthy aerial shots. The initial swell of water, for example, is shown in an uninterrupted 25-second take, the camera circling around the Statue of Liberty as the water slowly rises and threatens to engulf it. Besides highlighting the terrible beauty of the swelling water, the shot also sets up the parameters of destruction within the scene. Namely, though parts of Manhattan will be engulfed with water, the city (like the Statue) will remain standing, defusing some potential viewer discomfort about watching the destruction of New York City. Within the scene itself, Emmerich cuts between these longer aerials takes with shorter shots of fleeing pedestrians, making the viewer aware of both the disaster's large-scale impact and its more localized effects upon the populace. Caricatures are utilized once again in the form of rude businessmen and the greedy, physically-unappealing bus driver who accepts their bribe and opens his bus for them to get out of the rain. They are framed less as comical buffoons than unlikeable idiots getting their just desserts,

which occurs when the bus driver finally notices the rushing tide wave in his rear-view mirror.

The principal difference, then, lies in his focalization of the scene upon Sam's rescuing of Laura, who attempts to assist a French-speaking woman and her daughter and fails to notice the wall of water approaching her. The viewer's interest narrows in scope to the immediate task of Sam and Laura entering the safe space of the New York Public Library, with the approaching wall of water becoming primarily a personal threat to their safety. Within the scene itself, this focus upon two protagonists helps to define the catastrophe as not simply a distanced aesthetic experience, but a tangible threat that could cost the characters their lives. Setting up this expectation will prove important, as Sam, Laura, and the others will inhabit the decimated Manhattan for the rest of the film, and the viewer must be invested in the notion of their physical danger for their survivalist narrative to have weight and impact. Focusing in upon the plight of Sam and Laura takes the focus off the general pandemonium occurring within New York as a whole, allowing the viewer a respite from the large-scale disaster hitting the city. Certainly, Emmerich is not afraid to highlight the effects of the waves on a macro level; he ends the scene with an aerial shot looking down at the waters rushing through the streets and finally beginning to subside. However, allowing the viewer to witness the successful rescuing of a human being amidst a literal tidal wave of death and destruction highlights the push-pull between the wondrous grandeur of the disaster spectacle and the unease we feel when the protagonists come directly in harm's way.



For a film that places a good deal of focus upon survival and the collective guilt shared by those polluting the environment, *The Day After Tomorrow* concludes on a relatively optimistic note. As previously mentioned, Sam's eventual reunion with Jack in New York closely follows the unexplained reversal of the dealing oncoming Ice Age. The sun beams down upon all locations as the film enters into its final movement: an inspirationally-scored montage that intercuts a chastened now-President Becker admitting his past mistakes on global energy use; the rescue of Sam, Jack and company from New York; the revelation that there are more survivors in Manhattan, seen waving from atop still-standing Manhattan skyscrapers; and Lucy, safely watching over Peter in Mexico, hearing of the New York survivors from a television broadcast. The film makes little attempt to explain Earth's sudden change of fate, and given its ultimate thematic aims, it doesn't need to. *The Day After Tomorrow* ultimately frames the atmospheric disasters within the film as a kind of global cleansing that reminds human beings on both the international and personal level what is most important: human connection and global responsibility. The film ends with Jack's discovery of Sam because that act signals the extent to which a human being can attempt to enact change within a seemingly hopeless situation. Having gone through the darkness, humanity is now offered another chance at getting it right, with a clean slate no less: the film's last scene shows astronauts commenting upon the breathtaking cleanliness of the Earth's atmosphere. The film ends on a full-screen image of this newly-cleansed Earth before fading to black: a final note that recalls the sober-minded sincerity of disaster films from the 1950s than the more jokey and personalized endings of the 1990s disaster cycle.

It's interesting to contrast this ending with that of *The Core*, another film that ends with a shot of the planet. Their differences in formal character speak to their different takes on the power of the individual protagonist to save the world from cataclysm. The Earth in *The Core* begins, not with an actual picture, but a series of green lights emitting from Rat's California location. As he sends out news reports of the fallen crew's heroism, more and more green lines chart this flow of information, the camera pulling back further and further until an Earth-like sphere made of the lines appears. That object then fades into an actual shot of the Earth. The final line of the film belongs to Rat: "Destiny, meet world. World, meet destiny." Admittedly, "destiny" refers to the troublesome military project that started the core's deceleration, which Rat is exposing along with the work of the crew. However, the line and the image both point most prominently to the heroism and professionalism of the crew: within the frame, the effects of their work quite literally bring the world into existence. Humankind owes its now-affirmative destiny to the film's heroes (a reminder spoken by one of those heroes to boot). Yet again, the film's world is defined entirely by the actions of its skilled professionals. The Earth in *The Day After Tomorrow*, on the other hand, is contemplated by the astronauts for its own sake: its beauty, its cleanliness, its beneficence to allow humankind to begin again. The emphasis rests not just with the survival of the main characters, but their place within a larger world that has allowed them to survive. This wider view of its central catastrophe helps the film achieve its increased sense of sobriety and slightly more realistic tone than many of its predecessors.

Critics largely did not accept the placement of so serious an issue as global climate change within the context of a Roland Emmerich disaster film, complaining that the film's cheesy dialogue and standard-issue characterizations defused any social or political message it sought to disseminate amongst its viewers. Lisa Schwarzbaum of *Entertainment Weekly* insisted she was all for saving the planet, but found it hard to swallow the message here, "especially when the ecology lesson is coming from a director whose last two scorched-earth scenarios featured a lizard monster (*Godzilla*, 1998) and aliens (*Independence Day*, 1996)."<sup>114</sup> *The Village Voice*'s Dennis Lim proved even blunter in his assessment of the gap between Emmerich's aesthetic and subject matter: "It's somewhat surreal to witness an eco-liberal consciousness-raiser executed in Emmerich's quasi-fascistic style—and on Rupert Murdoch's dime to boot."<sup>115</sup> And Anthony Lane of *The New Yorker* claimed that the film's "shambles of dud writing and dramatic inconsequence...left me determined to double my consumption of fossil fuels."<sup>116</sup> Still, some reviewers did admiringly note the disaster scene's themselves, noting their aesthetic shifts from earlier sequences. "Emmerich has destroyed New York twice before, but never as beautifully," wrote *The Los Angeles Times*' Manohla Dargis, who later described the New York flooding as an "eerily lifelike and mesmerizing" image that carried "undeniable, surprising force."<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Lisa Schwarzbaum, "The Day After Tomorrow," *Entertainment Weekly* May 26, 2004, 28 Jan. 2009 <<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,642516,00.html>>.

<sup>115</sup> Dennis Lim, "Cold Comfort," *The Village Voice* 2-8 June 2004: 56.

<sup>116</sup> Anthony Lane, "The Current Cinema: Cold Comfort," *The New Yorker*, 7 June 2004: 103.

<sup>117</sup> Manohla Dargis, "Movie Review: More Chill than Thrill," *The Los Angeles Times*, 28 May 2004: E1.

These critical reservations left little substantial impact upon *The Day After Tomorrow*'s box-office successes. The film grossed \$85.8 million over the four-day Memorial Day weekend, setting a record for the most money grossed by a second-place film at the box office (*Shrek 2* was number one with \$92.2 million). Admittedly, it did not demonstrate particularly strong staying power within the domestic box office. The film lost nearly 60% of its first weekend business the following week and proceeded to not lose less than 40% of any previous weekend's grosses over the next month. Nevertheless, the film's phenomenal first weekend helped propel *The Day After Tomorrow* to an eventual domestic total of \$186 million. Even more encouraging were the film's international receipts. Fox had opened *The Day After Tomorrow* on 9,276 screens in 100 markets over the Memorial Day weekend, making it the widest "day-and-date" release in film history.<sup>118</sup> Marketing efforts supported this international focus, with posters showcasing various world monuments buried in snow similar to the domestic posters of the submerged Statue of Liberty. The film took first place in 108 of these markets, and earned \$85 million throughout all of these markets during its opening weekend.<sup>119</sup> Ultimately, the film grossed \$357 million internationally, nearly doubling its domestic grosses and ultimately pushing the film's ultimate theatrical grosses to \$544 million.

Many of the reasons behind *The Day After Tomorrow*'s successes have been touched upon earlier: the incorporation of timely, controversial subject matter into a genre blockbuster; a marketing campaign that highlighted the film's dazzling special effects and intriguing end-of-the-world premise with strong, memorable images; the

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<sup>118</sup> Don Groves, et al., "'Tomorrow' Tears Through 108 Territories," *Variety*, 7-13 June 2004: 12.

<sup>119</sup> Groves, et al. 12.

participation of a director known for his highly-entertaining and successful 1990s blockbusters. However, it's worth noting that the memories of September 11, while appearing in various reviews and press surrounding the film, did not seem to visibly detract from the film's success or image in the public eye. Indeed, those articles that did discuss the film in terms of post-9/11 audience expectations seemed relatively light in tone, stressing the relative relief it might be to see Manhattan hit by CGI effects once again on screen. Far from accusations of insensitivity, it seemed to confirm a certain return to normalcy. "It seemed as if a kind of moment, minor but worth noting, had passed in the city's post-9/11 history," reported *The New York Times*' Randy Kennedy, "New Yorkers were finally ready to watch Roland Emmerich destroy their city again on the big screen."<sup>120</sup> Emmerich himself framed his use of New York in terms of fighting the terrorists, or at least their control over American cultural images: "I finally felt that setting the film in another city would be an even bigger problem, because then the terrorists would have influenced where the catastrophe of weather strikes."<sup>121</sup> With mainline, Manhattan-based publications printing such stories, it seemed evident that there was little worry of major cultural backlash against *The Day After Tomorrow*.

However, it's worth thinking briefly about whether elements of the film's content that resonated with post-9/11 conceptions might have been an attractive element of the film to audiences. Firstly, what is the conception of tragedy after 9/11? At the risk of oversimplifying, September 11 (specifically the collapse of the World Trade Center) was framed in the public consciousness as an unexpected attack by a

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<sup>120</sup> Randy Kennedy, "Hollywood Clobbers Manhattan. Again.," *The New York Times*, 26 May 2004: E1.

<sup>121</sup> Tad Friend, "The Talk of the Town: Wrecked Again," *The New Yorker*, 24 May 2004: 36.

hostile group of foreign religious extremists upon an urban-based, symbolically-charged and economically-important site. Many died within this attack, but because so many of their bodies would never be recovered from the rubble, public attention also focused upon those who did survive, those who witnessed the events close-up, and (perhaps most intently) those firefighters, police officers, paramedics, and other city officials from New York City and beyond who spent countless hours searching for survivors, clearing debris, etc. Though military retaliation against the Taliban would commence soon afterwards, the heroes of September 11 itself seemed to be those who survived and those who attempted to help others do so, at potentially physical and mental cost. Now, consider the plot of *The Day After Tomorrow*, with its focus upon a large, seemingly intractable threat beyond the control of any character within the narrative. The principal conflicts within the film come not from heroic plans to stop the disaster at hand, but from attempts to keep individuals alive within dangerous circumstances. Individuals take the time to contemplate the changed world around them, and at times must even accept their own impending deaths. Human relationships—particularly familial—are given primary importance within the narrative, as the reunion of displaced family members proves the only solace within a larger context of helplessness in the face of overwhelming tragedy.

One cannot push this comparison too far, for a couple of reasons. While Emmerich directed this film with clear understanding of post-9/11 sensibilities and expectations, he wrote much of the screenplay before September 11. Script changes may have occurred between 9/11 and when Fox bought the screenplay in May 2002, but the basic story structure most likely would not have been thoroughly altered.

Additionally, it would be hard to prove with any certainty that viewers actively sought out a survivalist disaster narrative simply due to post-9/11 desires to see resonant disaster tropes onscreen. Ultimately, many viewers probably viewed *The Day After Tomorrow* in the way Fox publically framed it: a serious-minded but ultimately enjoyable summer blockbuster.

Still, the success of sober survivalist parable *The Day After Tomorrow* and the failure of *The Core* (with its indomitable professional protagonists and proactive adventure plot) give one pause when considering what exactly audiences wanted from the disaster genre post-9/11. Did they crave a return to the pre-9/11 escapism of the 1990s cycle, with its distancing spectacular and wisecracking heroes? Perhaps to a point (*The Day After Tomorrow* is not without jokes and escapist moments), but one would imagine that *The Core* might have been a bigger success if that was the ultimate desire. Or, did they see a genre inextricably tied (in the short time, anyway) to real-life tragedy as a place where somewhat more serious but still entertaining stories might be told: providing the special effects-enhanced spectacle of destruction but doing so within a narrative and formal context that acknowledged the real-life images that might nevertheless flash within the viewer's mind? As we shall see, the most successful disaster films of the past five years seemed to be made by those directors who risked assuming the latter assumption was true, and produced films that dealt quite explicitly with the event that rocked the genre to begin with: September 11.

## Chapter Three

### How Did Filmmakers Handle Direct Representations of September 11 Beyond the Disaster Genre?

*Gavin Smith: Do you consider the film a dramatization, a re-creation or a reenactment?*

*Paul Greengrass: It's all of those things, under the umbrella of a film. It's a catharsis, it's a reliving, it's a reconstruction. It's a hypothesis.*

*Gavin Smith: Is it intended as entertainment?*

*Paul Greengrass: No.*

- Paul Greengrass, discussing *United 93* with critic Gavin Smith.<sup>122</sup>

One of the advantages of genre filmmaking is its ability to gesture toward—and engage with—serious and disturbing thoughts and emotions while simultaneously placing them in a familiar context: allowing the viewer to wrestle with these potentially upsetting feelings within a defined and well-known set of generic parameters. These conventions provide a certain amount of safety and distance for the viewer, as they know that a film's distressing content will usually (though not always) be solved in a manner similar to other films within the genre. As we will see in the next chapter, the disaster genre came to serve such a role for the imagery and emotions of the September 11 attacks. If some found disaster movies a fruitful outlet by which to grapple with 9/11, other filmmakers took a more direct approach. They chose to make films that explicitly took the attacks as their principal subject matter, basing their narratives on factual accounts of the day and framing their movies as unequivocally about the death and destruction—and also the bravery and sacrifice—

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<sup>122</sup> Gavin Smith, "Mission Statement," *Film Comment*, May/June 2006: 26.



of the day itself. Before moving onto the disaster films that took up 9/11 imagery and themes, it is helpful to examine how those who chose to cinematically represent the event itself framed real-life disaster and its consequences, as well as begin to consider the strengths and limitations of approaching the tragedy through so direct a route.

Certainly, any aesthetic and narrative decisions that filmmakers make when explicitly tackling September 11 are tied to the thorny issues of cinematically representing so delicate and emotionally-raw a topic. These directors not only contended with the inevitable calls of insensitivity or lack of distance from the event itself, but also dealt with a verifiable minefield of historical representation issues. This proves particularly important given that the victims' families and survivors of the attacks are still alive, meaning that any depiction of the events deemed inaccurate or offensive could elicit rejection from the people whom the public assumes knows the events better than anyone. Media and critical attention, in turn, focus upon such issues with a relentless eye. Therefore, even the most skillful film on September 11 is ultimately limited to certain types of narrative and formal choices that will satisfy any concerns regarding issues of exploitation and respect.

What formal and narrative strategies do directors utilize to balance viewer appeal and respect for the tragedy itself? These issues will be explored within this chapter, which will be primarily discussing Paul Greengrass' *United 93* (2006) and Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006). However, it's worth making clear up front that these films should be seen as somewhat separate from the other disaster movies within this study. Connected to the disaster genre through their focus upon mass urban cataclysm and the intrinsic and ambivalent fascination that such imagery

conjures within the viewer, these films ultimately take up certain aspects of the disaster film as examined here while explicitly rejecting others. They may draw upon disaster tropes of disparate individual coming together to overcome catastrophe (and, on a less explicit level, tap into similar desire to see dread-inducing and fascinating cataclysmic imagery enacted on screen), but any trace of wink-wink ironic humor or overt stylization of urban chaos and death has been thoroughly scrubbed away within these films. Both frame their representations as scrupulously respectful and sober-minded reenactments, emphasizing historical veracity and the celebration of the everyman heroism seen on that tragic day. In this way, they work to draw upon both the intrinsic curiosity of the viewer to see tragic yet spectacular events represented onscreen and the desire to commemorate the horrors and triumphs of the day through factually-accurate and emotionally-restrained cinematic narratives.

How these artistic limitations were partially circumvented by filmmaker who utilized the disaster genre to deal with the themes and imagery of 9/11 will be discussed within the next chapter. By examining how directors directly dealt with the event itself on screen, we can more clearly see how disaster filmmakers could utilize and twist generic formulas to engage their viewers' fears and curiosities in a manner that directors like Greengrass and Stone cannot without fearing potential cultural and viewer backlash. This chapter will begin with a brief summary of how filmmakers indirectly dealt with 9/11 on screen in the immediate years after the attacks.

Following this, we will look closely at the formal and narrative characteristics of both *United 93* and *World Trade Center*, and see how each chooses to frame 9/11 and its aftermath, what the opportunities and limitations of these approaches are, and how

they diverge from strategies seen in earlier disaster films. Specifically, I will argue that *United 93* maintains an empathetic yet observational approach to the hijacking of the titular flight through the use of cinema vérité-style aesthetic strategies, creating a world populated by beleaguered professionals and desperate individuals struggling to make difficult choices within impossible situations. *World Trade Center*, meanwhile, utilizes more conventional narrative and formal elements to imagine 9/11 as a fundamentally emotional landscape, in which people view disaster not as a crisis to be dealt with but as an inescapable tragic fact that produces difficult but ultimately noble reactions in all who come into contact with its reverberations. We will then conclude with a look at how these films were sold to the American public, and how they were received critically and commercially.

Certainly, Greengrass and Stone's films (released over four years after the attacks) did not represent the first attempts by filmmakers to acknowledge the changed reality caused by September 11 within the context of fictional film. However, they were the first to explicitly highlight the events of 9/11 itself. Previously, the effects of September 11 become catalysts for narrative complications and character motivations within several films, but the event itself remains largely left in the past. Little more than year after 9/11, Spike Lee's *The 25th Hour* explicitly signaled to his viewers that, though his story of frayed friendships and personal redemption would not deal directly with September 11, it definitively took place within a post-9/11 Manhattan. This is most notably accomplished in the film's opening credits, which play out against a background of the two columns of vertical blue light set up at Ground Zero to commemorate the Twin Towers on the attacks'

one-year anniversary. That same year, *11'09''01*, a collection of short films dealing with the aftermath of the attacks by eleven directors from around the world, premiered at the Venice Film Festival (it would not open in the United States until July 2003). Later films sought to deal with the tragedy's reverberations through the context of interpersonal drama. Some of these deal directly with those involved in the tragedy, like Jim Simpson's *The Guys* (2003), in which an editor helps a New York City fire captain assemble eulogies for eight men he lost on 9/11, and Mike Binder's *Reign Over Me* (2007), where a rekindled friendship with an old college roommate helps a man cope with the loss of his family on September 11. Others take a more diffuse look at how the events have impacted the larger community, as in Danny Leiner's *The Great New Wonderful* (2005), which weaves together stories of disparate Manhattanites living in New York one year after the attacks. In all cases, the attacks provided psychological explanation or emotional context for characters living in a post-9/11 world.

### **United 93: Formal and Narrative Analysis**

*United 93*, however, delves right into the tumult of the day itself. Utilizing jumpy handheld camera work, rapid editing, and a narrative that stresses procedural detail and large-scale action over the sculpting of individuated protagonists, *United 93* works to recreate the moment-by-moment chaos of September 11 as experienced by both the increasingly bewildered U.S. military and aviation authorities and the passengers aboard the doomed titular aircraft. Greengrass seeks to capture the day's events through the objective recreation of events rather than refracting it through the perspective of fictional characters, allowing the viewer to re-experience the morning's

progression from benign confusion to mounting dread to shocked horror and, finally, a mixture of grief for the deceased and admiration for the survivors and those who assisted them. Choosing the story of Flight 93, whose passengers stormed their hijacked plane en route to a collision in the White House and crash-landed the aircraft in a Pennsylvania field, allows Greengrass the narrative opportunity to capture the raw intensity of the day's experiences through the passengers' reactions while ultimately providing narrative closure and satisfaction by showcasing a heroic act of communal self-sacrifice.

Though the film's opening moments prove somewhat deceptive in their focus upon the hijackers' perspective, they work to establish its docudrama aesthetics, somber, relatively objective tone, and reliance upon the viewer's outside knowledge to create tension. *United 93* opens on a black screen, with the sound of a man's voice speaking in Arabic. The voice continues to be heard as the film then shows a somewhat unsteady close-up of a small prayer book open in the hands of one of the planes' future hijackers. Greengrass then cuts to a medium shot of the man praying on the bed as another man walks into the shot, moving about the dimly-lit Manhattan hotel room. This man interrupts the prayers of the others by informing him that "it's time" and goes into the bathroom to prepare. The man stops praying and pensively looks down before the film cuts to black and the abbreviated opening credits begin. Stylistically, this scene establishes many (though not all) of Greengrass' dominant formal choices within the film: shaky handheld camerawork; an open frame in which characters and elements from the environment will unexpectedly enter the composition and share—or even obscure—the principal focus of the shot; naturalistic

lighting either originating from diegetic sources or designed to appear as such; emphasis on diegetic sound. These techniques primarily work in this and other scenes to underline the film's realism. This realist aesthetic serves a dual purpose within *United 93*. On the one hand, a seeming lack of visual flash defuses potential allegations of Greengrass exploiting the events of September 11 to create entertainment through flashy or overly-aestheticized formal choices. On the other hand, utilizing visual and aural elements that cue the audience to view the film's images as somehow authentic in their presentation of the events allows them to further invest in the film itself, whose chief appeal include the opportunity to relive a traumatic and wrenching moment in recent history while also having that moment structured and shaped into a coherent and emotionally satisfying narrative. In this way, the film remains quite connected to the fundamental pleasure of the disaster genre—the desire to see chaos enacted within the safe confines of familiar narrative structures—while also utilizing visual and aural aesthetics to remind the viewer that what they are watching remains firmly based in sobering fact.

Opening the film with the preparation of the hijackers also cues the viewer into the film's general attitude toward crafting a historical narrative: emphasize the human emotions found within the moment itself, rather than extrapolating larger political and social ideas from the moment. Though not filmed with overt warmth, the hijackers are nevertheless presented as rational human beings preparing for the end of their lives: dutifully praying on the bed; beginning to physically prepare oneself in the restroom. Moments of sobriety and quiet ambivalence dominate, not jubilation or joy. Like any other character in the film, they act and react to the immediate events

occurring around them, rather than expounding upon their larger significance. *United 93* is not particularly interested in understanding the hijackers' motives or connecting with their inner lives and subjectivities; the viewer lacks awareness of their past histories or present motives. Indeed, one can argue that the primary narrative function of this opening scene lies in the viewer's visual identification of the hijackers' themselves, which will prove important for crafting suspense once *United 93* and its passengers are in the air. Until the plane is taken over roughly halfway through the film, the principal source of tension within the scenes on the flight lie in when the hijackers will finally overtake the plane. Without introducing these characters previously, the viewer would not be able to definitively identify the hijackers on the flight, and their tension-filled faces and questioning glances at one another within the plane would lose their meaning. That being said, opening the first major U.S. release to explicitly focus upon September 11 with the preparation of hijackers cues the viewer to see the film as an attempt to recreate the day's events in their entirety and without overt comment. No details will be left out, including the somber preparations of the perpetrators themselves.

More than anything, however, the opening moments of *United 93* capture the viewer's vacillations between dread-infused prior knowledge and a desire to further experience historically established events that define the experience of watching any film in which the tragic ending is known from the first frame, particularly one based in fact. Greengrass relies upon the knowledge of the day itself that the viewer brings into the theater. This knowledge both works to fill in certain contextual gaps (including the hijackers' identities and motives) that Greengrass will either explain

obscurely or elide entirely, and imbue the film's narrative with a sense of inevitable dread. As with many scenes in the film, Greengrass places the viewer in these opening moments *in medias res* in order to stress documentary-like immediacy over clearly-delineated narrative causation. It is our knowledge of the film's subject and the events that will unfold that both infuse this and other early scenes with queasy foreboding and helps to process their place within the larger narratives. This opening scene also allows the viewer to glimpse into what, in fact, it might have been like to be in the hotel room with the hijackers on the morning of September 11. This sense of wanting to at least imagine more vividly some of the unknowable elements of 9/11 undoubtedly draws the viewer into this scene, as we search for clues as to the hijackers' emotions, motivations, etc. We know that this scene is ultimately a best-guess reconstruction, based upon information that the viewer perhaps already knows. Nevertheless, the film's invitation to peek into what the scene might have looked like (an act given a greater sheen of credibility due to the film's cinema vérité aesthetic) fulfills viewer desire to gain a more complete picture of what occurred that day and, by extension, a greater understanding of why it happened.

In this way, *United 93* places the viewer on top of the hierarchy of information. However, our access to multiple perspectives within the narrative—without explicit alignment with any one of them—allows the viewer increased understanding and empathy for those on the ground and, especially, on the doomed Flight 93 itself. As he cuts swiftly between several locations and their corresponding groups of people during the early hours of September 11—passengers waiting to board Flight 93 at Newark International Airport; officials and workers at air traffic



control towers and FAA and military headquarters within the New York and Boston area—Greengrass reminds viewers of the poignant banality of that September morning (made so by our knowledge of what is to come) while introducing the films' characters as recognizable and even likeable figures whom the viewer will primarily relate to through their relationship to the larger unfolding disaster. The viewer receives little to no insight into their personal lives, nor is any individuated character arcs sketched out in these opening moments. We know them through the snippets of dialogue we hear or actions we see, making them worthy of sympathy and concern while ultimately defining them as historically-based figures, not individuated characters. Greengrass accomplishes this empathetic distance through his rapid editing, which presents snippets of characters' lives and plans (particularly the passengers of Flight 93) that underline their status as identifiable human beings while not lingering long enough on them to forge a specific connection.

Such formal strategies also signal to the viewer that, unlike other Hollywood films on real-life tragedies, Greengrass will be avoiding the familiar and sentimental route of closely aligning the viewer with a few characters and allowing us to experience the disaster through a personalized perspective. The viewer sees the recognizable and relatable humanity within these characters without delving into specific and potentially saccharine personal detail that might smack of emotional manipulation or overtly remind us of how Greengrass is creating a constructed narrative out of real-life events. Furthermore, it foregrounds the notion of the passengers as a collective, rather than as strictly individuals. From the beginning, the viewer knows them as a group of people, laying down the foundation for their unified

act of heroism at the film's end and separating the film from other films (from the disaster genre and others) in which an individuated and goal-oriented protagonist saves the day by themselves or with some nominal help from supporting characters. Again, Greengrass reminds us, this is no ordinary or fictional hijacking, and it will be constructed in a manner attuned to the rhythms of reality and not Hollywood narrative.

That being said, our knowledge of the unfolding events helps to ratchet up suspense for when key events will occur, and creates a tone of sustained dread for when the mysterious signs of the attack begin to materialize. We watch for the slightest irregularities of behavior or action, cringing when aviation and military officials initially see them as little more than oddities or an annoyance to the day's schedule, and Greengrass prolongs this slow understanding of the event's true enormity over the course of the first hour. This is not unlike the beginning of many disaster films, in which the initial threat is established for the viewer and the characters are slowly awakened to its reality over the course of the film's first act. The key difference here, of course, is that Greengrass does not actually establish the threat for us; we enter into the theater with it firmly in our minds. As irregularities turn into patterns and officials attempt to respond to this unthinkable event, the viewer maintains their higher level of knowledge while also being invited to consider and observe the moment-by-moment decision making that they perhaps never thought of and knew about. These frantic questions—which plans have been hijacked; where are they going; do we shoot them down—are once again emphasized by Greengrass' fast-paced editing pattern employing multiple cuts from different angles to emphasize

an overall mood of confusion and fear. Even when lengthier shots are employed, Greengrass often accompanies them with shaky camera movement to further underline the moment's instability and tension rather than linger upon character emotions, underlining their roles in the narrative as professionals attempting to respond to a crisis, not characters working through personal pain. Still, by filming these reactions and decisions in seemingly real-time, Greengrass allows the audience access to a frantic, disorganized world unseen by the vast majority of American on September 11: fulfilling a desire to know what exactly occurred that day even as we remain one step ahead of those on screen.

This shift in audience placement from fearful knowledge of foregone conclusions to distanced empathy for those involved is especially acute when the film shifts almost entirely to Flight 93 itself in its final act, tracing the moment the hijackers took over to the final moments where the passenger uprising forced the plane down into a field outside Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Up until this point, any moment spent on the plane has spent imbued with anxiety as the viewer wonders when the hijacking will begin. Indeed, Greengrass builds this waiting into the narrative itself, as the seemingly lead hijacker stalls the takeover and the others begin to restlessly question his decision. Shots of passengers and crew members idly chatting make the inevitable violence all the more painful, as it will disrupt the recognizable and seemingly pleasant reality of those on the plane. Once the hijacking begins, however, and the passengers begin to move from terrified inertia to purposeful action, the viewer both anticipates their ultimate actions and gets to experience the development of their uprising: the slow realization that the plane will

be crashed no matter what; the gathering of makeshift weapons. Greengrass visualizes their increased sense of solidarity, moving from close-ups and two-shots to group shots that underline their growing unity of purpose. As previously mentioned, his de-emphasizing of individual characters also contributes to this sense of group cohesion, and highlights the idea that the actions of Flight 93's passengers ultimately came from a feeling of communal connection and survival. (It also may have been influenced by real-life controversies amongst the survivors' families whom Greengrass interviewed personally, some of whom thought that national media focused too intently upon certain individuals assumed to have led the charge and not enough upon the heroism shown by every passenger.) This process is a harrowing one, as the viewer sees those same passengers who were earlier chatting calmly now making frantic, tear-choked final calls to their loved one as it becomes clear that no one on the plane will survive.

But while Greengrass places the viewer alongside the passengers as they prepare to overtake the plane, he ultimately does not invite you to become one of them. Certainly, his frenetic editing patterns, unstable handheld camerawork, and naturalistic mise-en-scene connect the viewer viscerally to the group's takeover, particularly in those final harrowing moments when the plane begins to make its final descent and the passengers violently struggle with the hijackers. This also has to do with the construction of the finale itself, in which Greengrass will cut away from the passengers to the hijackers in the cockpit. Even at this emotional peak, Greengrass remains concerned with painting a balanced and even-handed picture, accounting for the confusion and fear of the hijackers as well as the passengers. More generally, the

knowledge we possess throughout the film of their ultimate fate evoke an intensely emotional sense of respect and admiration for the actions of the actual Flight 93 passengers, as well as a keener insight into what produced their final act of bravery. Still, the film draws a distinction between a particularly-intense recreation of someone else's experiences and an invitation to share in the intellectual and emotional particularities of that experience. This distinction is manifested within the film's final moment: an extended long shot that looks through the plane's windshield as it plummets toward the ground, followed by a cut to black as the plane is about to crash. This unflinching shot evokes within the viewer the mounting terror that accompanies a quickly-approaching demise. However, it also provides a satisfying (if jarring) end to an ultimately heroic story. The viewer gains a sense of narrative closure through their knowledge (underlined by onscreen text before the end credits) that the passengers' actions resulted in less widespread destruction and death. The continuing struggles between the hijackers and passengers heard offscreen show that no one else on the plane experienced this final moment in so relatively calm a manner. This moment of visceral fear, then, echoes the experience of the passengers but does not replicate it.

This viewer reaction—emotional yet somehow detached—works toward the ultimate aim of viewing the passengers of Flight 93 with clear yet unabashedly respectful eyes. The notion of sobriety and reverence are both key to *United 93*. From dramatizing a well-known 9/11 story of unabashed heroism and sacrifice to the portrayal of every character onscreen with tolerance and understanding to the film's insistence on creating an aura of almost-documentary realism (both through formal

choices and the decision of some FAA and military personnel to play themselves in the film), every decision in *United 93* seems crafted to create a unquestioning respectful film that honors the humanity of its subjects by eschewing conventional narrative and formal choices, with their accompanying familiarity and sentimentality. Ultimately, the viewing experience is one of reverent appreciation and even emotional catharsis, but also one that places the viewer at a slight remove from the events it reenacts.

Such a film certainly produces an intense emotional effect upon the viewer, and can be quite powerful as both a visceral reenactment of the event itself and a clear-eyed tribute to those brave and tragic souls aboard Flight 93. However, it also limits how the viewer can interact with the diegesis. As stated, we can imagine ourselves within the situation to a point, but ultimately the film draws a clear line between the viewer and the filmic universe, in order so that we can appreciate their sacrifice. Though the film's initial placement of the viewer as knowing more than the characters is reminiscent of the disaster film, *United 93* remains far more about watching an unfolding disaster occur over the course of an entire movie, rather than seeing disaster occur and watching protagonists react. The viewer's knowledge of the entire story places us at somewhat of a remove, even as the film's docudrama aesthetics recreates the experience in an intensely visceral fashion. For viewers who harbor curiosities about the events of 9/11 on a more personal level—who question what it would have been like to be in that situation and what they would have done—*United 93* offers an idea of what others did, and asks you to appreciate it. Viewers who wonder what a less-noble reaction to September 11 might look like are even less

out of luck. With all of the risks in producing a movie that directly tackles 9/11, most filmmakers would not want to risk offending survivors or the families of the dead with less-than-flattering portrayals, even if showcasing moments of selfishness and anger alongside moments of fearful yet purposeful bravery might produce an even-more humanizing effect by connecting with the base emotions many viewers might assume they would feel in so intense and traumatizing a situation. Such presentations are not found within *United 93*, both out of respect for the family members of the deceased that were involved and for the film's overall theme of group cohesion and bravery over individuated emotions and reactions to the event. For all its visceral impact, *United 93* shows the limitations a director puts upon themselves when they choose to brand their film as a sobering and ultra-realistic reenactment of the September 11 attacks.

### **World Trade Center: Formal and Narrative Analysis**

In contrast, *World Trade Center* invites the viewer to recall the emotional turmoil of September 11 from a more specific vantage point, drawing upon more conventional narrative and formal strategies to provide a glimpse into the harrowing, real-life ordeal of two New York City police officers and their families while connecting their inner pain to more communal feelings of loss, anger, and desperation felt by many that day. Though recreating portions of the attack and placing its principal characters within the wreckage itself provides a sense of experiencing the disaster and its aftermath firsthand, the film's chief appeal to the viewer comes through its reconstruction of the uncertainty and emotional fragility of the tragedy's aftermath, allowing a connection to the characters onscreen that feels more intimate

and recognizable than the empathetic yet less personalized approach taken by *United 93*. Still, one feels the unspoken assumptions of scrupulous respect and tasteful restraint at work within this film as well, particularly in its focus upon the outpouring of communal love and strength that occurred in the aftermath of 9/11. The focus shifts from an encounter with the viewer's potential fears and curiosities about the event itself and shifts onto the emotional consequences for a set group of characters, whose basis in the lives of actual people also means the viewer rarely sees them in a less-than complimentary light.

The film primarily focuses upon Port Authority police officers, John McLoughlin (Nicholas Cage) and Will Jimeno (Michael Peña), beginning with John's early-morning preparations for work in Manhattan and prominently featuring Will as he drives into the city as well. Before turning to the specificities of their personal lives, though, Stone contextualizes them in an opening montage that introduces us to a series of secondary characters, relatively random passers-by, and the city of New York itself. As the peaceful score plays in the background, Stone cuts at a measured pace between various Manhattan locations as the sun rises on what appears to be another day in the city: deliverymen empty trucks, sunlight bounces off skyscrapers; two men reminisce about a particularly memorable home run at the Yankees' game the previous weekend. The Twin Towers make occasional appearances within large skyline shots, and is prominently featured in a moment when a minor character walks to the front of a ferry and gazes out at the southern half of Manhattan. Though these moments are inevitably imbued by the audience with a sense of dread as they think of what would come later, the serenity of the images themselves makes this foreboding



poignant as well as nerve-wracking. The viewer mourns the degree in which this peacefulness will be torn asunder by the attacks, underlined by Stone's choice to place onscreen text that defines the day as "September 11, 2001" only after the montage has ended. More importantly, though, it establishes the cinematic world that John and Will inhabit as a benign and cooperative one. As we will later discover, this world is made up of fundamentally decent people who are willing to help and console one another in times of crisis. This is a far cry from the squawking caricatures utilized particularly in such 1990s disaster films as *Armageddon* and *Godzilla*, in which New Yorkers justified their own sudden (and sometimes comic) deaths through their rude and selfish behavior. The characteristics of a New York City citizen that were once seen as comical at best, obnoxious at worst—the blunt way of speaking, the no-bull attitude—now becomes a marker of the city's unfussy and resilient communal spirit in the wake of mass tragedy.

Primarily, though, this is a film about the experiences of two individuals. Even before John and Will find themselves buried under the rubble of the Trade Center complex—along with another police officer who dies soon after the collapse—Stone frames the experience of the attacks through John and Will's subjectivity. When the attacks first begin, their relatively narrow perspective means that the viewer experiences the full enormity of the event gradually. The first sign of trouble, for example, comes when a large shadow accompanied by a muffled whooshing sound suddenly enters and leaves the frame, quickly passing over Will as he attempts to help a couple asking for directions in Times Square. The camera tracks into a medium close up of Will as he turns around in reaction to the shadow, with

diegetic sound lowering quickly so that only the sound of the plane flying overhead followed by an eerie wind tunnel-like noise on the soundtrack is heard. This is followed by a POV shot that shows the plane's shadow on the side of a bright yellow building: either a continuation of the moment or, given that Will remains in the same space, possibly a repetition of the same action. Either way, the combination of subjective sound, camera movement, and POV shots focalizes this build-up to the attacks through a single character's personal experience, while also underlining his inability to fully take in the full event. Rather than cutting to the next moment, Stone inserts a brief fade to black before cutting to the next scene. This strategy—which Stone utilizes increasingly throughout the attack sequence as well as later in the film—visually echoes these gaps experienced by the main characters, whose limited perspectives allow them to only see fragments of the event. They also provide a moment of a visual and aural pause for the audience, framing the attack as a series of coherent if somewhat temporally disconnected moments rather than as a relentless and unceasing assault on the senses. This strategy perhaps also acknowledges the limits of representation that Stone imposes upon himself in order to visualize the attacks without appearing to either possess complete authority over their look and structure or sensationalize them through an unrelenting sensory bombardment reminiscent of 1990s disaster films like *Independence Day*, *Godzilla*, and *Armageddon*.

As John, Will, and others arrive on the scene and enter the complex to assist with the evacuations, the viewer finds themselves in a somewhat similar situation as in *United 93*. We gaze upon well-known images along with characters experiencing

them for the first time: papers falling to the ground like snow, blood-soaked pedestrians wailing in the streets; bodies free-falling from the upper stories of the Twin Towers. The difference here, however, lies both in Stone's explicit recreation of well-known images (as opposed to Greengrass' reenactment of a plane interior that only the deceased passengers know in terms of visual and aural detail) and the men's relationship with these images as seen through their direct and indirect subjectivity. There are multiple shots of John and Will, either separately or within a group, looking and seeing groups of bloodied and bedraggled pedestrians on the street or in the Trade Center complex before it collapses. Stone will often accompany these POV shots with a reduction of diegetic sound, allowing the emotional nondiegetic score to swell into the scene, emphasizing both the human pain the characters are witnessing and their own terror and confusion, which Stone will occasionally underline with slow-motion shots of the characters' watching, the pedestrians walking, or both. As viewers, these images are familiar to us from the news coverage of the day; though they may remain emotionally gripping, the power of these moments comes primarily from watching the characters' shocked and saddened reactions as they experience them for the first time. Viewers simultaneously sympathize with the victims' plight and empathize with the experience of seeing the horrific and tragic images of September freshly discovered by characters whose emotional states and personalities we have already begun to invest in. This feeling is only enhanced by the formal subjectivity Stone employs, allowing us insight into how the events of the day are personally impacting the characters, as opposed to Greengrass' empathetic but resolutely objective gaze upon those first witnessing similar events.

Once John and Will are pinned beneath the rubble, *World Trade Center* becomes almost exclusively about the physical and mental survival of the two men, as well as the emotional turmoil felt by their respective families. Admittedly, the film does potentially draw the viewer in through a sense of curiosity about what it was like to be in the complex when the Towers fell, though the film does not linger upon the collapse itself. Stone shoots the collapse itself obliquely, utilizing a series of John's frantic POV shots—quick, unstable pans around the interior of the space as walls and windows begin to crumble and shatter—and a gradual lowering of diegetic sound to convey his overwhelmed subjective state, followed by a return to a more objective camera view, loud diegetic sound, and quick cuts as the men run to safety in an elevator shaft. As the building continues to crumble, the scene eventually cuts to black and silence. One does not have to think back too far to recall how such a scene would have been constructed before 9/11: extreme long shots of the buildings collapsing in a avalanche of debris—perhaps visually underlined by cut-ins to low-angle shots of tower pieces barreling toward the camera—with crushing sound effects and quick cuts to awed pedestrians. When connected to actual tragedy, however, a moment of potential spectacle (indeed, a moment of real life spectacle when it occurred) becomes reduced to a limited and fragmentary moment of brief chaos and terror, emphasizing individual experience and emotion over mass-scale catastrophe.

When John and Will become trapped in the debris, meanwhile, the primary focus remains upon their need to overcome physical pain and exhaustion through constant conversation. This yields the sort of personal details and emotional musings

of the importance of familial love and commitment that the film ultimately celebrates. It makes sense, then, that only after the towers collapse that the viewer is fully introduced to both men's families: through the crucible of grief and terror, the characters come to remember the depths of love and devotion they have for one another. This is seen in the multiple scenes of familial stress and bonding seen within both John and Will's homes: mostly through John and Will's wives—Donna (Maria Bello) and Allison (Maggie Gyllenhaal), respectively—and their encounters with their children and extended families. Such moments provide perhaps the most direct connection for most viewers. For, while very few knew the pain of waiting for news of a loved one's survival on 9/11, the sense of fear-induced paralysis conjured within these scene would undoubtedly resonate with viewers who, like the characters, spent hours watching television news coverage with little sense of what was going to come next. Stone's use of real-life news footage and inclusion of sober news anchor commentary in the background of many of the family scenes evoke such memories by using this familiar footage to remind viewers of their own actions and emotions in the immediate hours following the attacks. The viewer connects with these scenes both through a general sense of character empathy and a more specific recollection of how their own experiences resonate with those onscreen.

These moments offer a distinct shift from earlier disaster film models. Disaster movies will often contain moments that elicit character empathy through the insertion of death and loss into the plot, and the viewer is invited to share their pain because we have come to know and care for them as characters. This reaction could theoretically also come from knowing the pain of losing someone in a tragedy as

well, although the films do not assume this. *World Trade Center* employs character empathy in a similar manner, but adds the aforementioned resonance of reminding the viewer of their own personal experiences and emotions surrounding the specific and shared tragedy represented onscreen. In this way, Stone highlights an advantage to explicitly dealing with September 11 within film: the ability to summon empathy for characters through the evocation of communal memories connected with the events reenacted in the film. We care for Donna and Allison as characters, and also as stand-ins for ourselves and other we know who remember the feelings of terror and sadness on that tragic day.

But the film also invites viewers further into the characters' direct subjectivities through its heavy use of flashbacks and fantasy sequences. Part of this is practical. The film keeps both romantic couples apart for much of the film, and the men spend the majority of the film immobile and in great pain. On some level, this does not make for the most dynamic of narratives (something critics will point to in their reviews of the film). Including the memories and reveries of the main characters (particularly the men) invests the narrative not only with a greater variety of situations, but provides insight and (in some cases) crucial character details that would otherwise be simply spoken by the main characters. Both John and Will think back at various points to tender moments when they discussed the birth of their children with their lives, further underlining the film's emphasis upon tragedy as a time that refocuses attention upon the basic aspects of life: birth, family, marriage. These flashbacks are sometimes also used to underline emotional connections through visual cues. John's flashback to Donna and he discovering that they will have a fourth

child is cued by a close-up on John's face in the present. When the flashback ends, however, we re-enter the present with a close-up on Donna gazing off into the distance, implying that she has been thinking of the same moment at the same time. The viewer understands the importance both place upon their relationship and their family simply through their shared recollections. Even the more unorthodox fantasy sequences—John imagining Donna telling him to “get off your ass” and come home so he can finish the kitchen cabinets; Will hallucinating that Jesus is approaching him with a bottle of water—circle back to the notions of survival through familial love and religion.

The fundamentally hopeful tone of *World Trade Center*—its insistence upon the flowering of hope and love within moments of great physical and emotional stress—extends not only to the principal characters, but to the moments when the film widens its gaze to show how the attacks inspired national and global outpouring of support, as well as opportunities for personal redemption. After the initial scene in the rubble with John and Will, the camera ascends through the rubble and eventually over New York City itself, travelling all the way into space where it rest next to a satellite. Having literally risen beyond the immediate narrative crisis, Stone allows the viewer to witness the international response, first aurally through overlapping news broadcasts and then through various news footage (either real or made to look as such) of people from around the world watching video footage of the attacks with hands clasped to their mouths or tears running down their faces. The sense of goodwill and support that Stone locates within New York specifically also extends beyond, reflecting the film's basic manifestation of September 11 as a moment of

unity through pain. More specifically, expansions of the narrative beyond the principal protagonists allows Stone to showcase moments of individuals finding a new lease on life through their service after the attack. A former paramedic whose license lapsed after “a few bad years” helps to rescue John and Will and, by film’s end, proudly refers to himself by his former professional title. More prominently, Stone showcases the story of Dave Karnes (Michael Shannon), a former Marine who receives a calling from God to leave his Connecticut town and assist with rescue operations at Ground Zero. He, along with another Marine, eventually locate John and Will and assist in their rescue. Karnes is perhaps the film’s most prickly character: though ultimately framed as noble and brave (he’s often shot as a solitary figure walking resolutely through decimated city streets and piles of rubble), his rigid demeanor and single-minded purpose invest him with a slightly fanatical quality. Furthermore, his declaration at film’s end that “they’re going to need some good out there to avenge this” has been taken by many critics as an implicit endorsement of the subsequent military actions taken by the United States government in Afghanistan and Iraq: a somewhat puzzling move given the film’s otherwise apolitical nature and Stone’s own prominent antiwar stances. Nevertheless, Dave fits the film’s larger goals of showcasing the 9/11 attacks primarily as a painful moment of reconnecting with basic truths and values on both a personal and communal level.

Of course, telling this specific “true story of courage and survival” (to quote the film’s tagline) in this emotionally intense but ultimately hopeful fashion represents a choice to frame 9/11 in a fundamentally optimistic fashion. John and Will survive their ordeal and are reunited with their families, supporting characters



find new sources of courage and skill, and a city and world is temporarily brought together under the big tent of support and solace in a time of tragedy. For the viewer, then, the film represents a affirmative experience by choosing to focus upon a very specific and hopeful story: something Stone implicitly acknowledges both through onscreen text that honors the hundreds who did not escape the rubble and when Allison and her family somberly walk by a wall of handmade missing-person posters in the hospital where Will has been safely brought. Still, these gestures act as minor notes within a symphony of sober-minded and respectful optimism. Even more so than *United 93*, *World Trade Center* refracts September 11 through a true-life narrative that provides clearly-delineated heroes and a emotionally-satisfying conclusion, while crafting characters whose fundamental decency and goodness are never questioned. While the viewer may see signs of anger and exhaustion within them, they are easily explained by the trying circumstances into which they've been placed. Though differing in its efforts to personalize the story through clearly-delineated characterization and subjective alignment through formal choices and a fundamentally optimistic tone, *World Trade Center* shares with *United 93* one of the principal constraints of making a film relatively soon after a national tragedy: the need to honor its subjects through a visual and narrative presentation that both emphasizes the decency and bravery of its subjects and ultimately defines the day in terms of personal and collective heroism. This impulse, it should be noted, does not divorce it entirely from earlier disaster films. The difference lies in the amount of narrative time expended upon this positive post-disaster vision. Disaster movies like *Independence Day* or *Deep Impact* imagine a world in which cooperation and

togetherness can be powerful tools in the rebuilding of a damaged but far from decimated world. However, these moments occur after an extended battle with (or prolonged wait for) the disaster itself, which is framed in a spectacular and thrilling manner. *World Trade Center* downplays its central cataclysm and lingers upon the moments of injury, heartbreak, and beleaguered hope that occur in its aftermath for most of the film. Its fundamental appeal to the viewer is presented in emotional, and not visceral or adrenaline-infused, terms. In this way, Stone borrows and expands upon elements of the disaster genre while softening or completely excising other aspects.

### **Media, Critical and Public Reception**

The media reception surrounding both of these films further reflect the fundamental need to position both films as testaments to the bravery and human goodness of its subjects, in order to defuse allegations of exploitation or political propaganda. Greengrass and Stone (as well as Universal and Paramount, the respective studios behind their films) took great pains when discussing their respective projects to emphasize the levels of respect and authenticity they sought to infuse within the creation of their films: close communication with either the survivors or the families of the deceased; agreeing to give 10% of opening weekend receipts to build a Flight 93 memorial and donate to 9/11 charities, respectively. Both also had to deal with more specific issues as well. For Greengrass, directing the first mainstream motion picture to deal with 9/11 brought with it the constant question of whether it was “too soon” to cinematically dramatize the event. His public responses typically combined respectful deference to the families of the deceased and an

expansion of what the Hollywood motion picture could communicate to an audience about issues of national importance. “The only people who can truly judge the issue [of timing] is the families themselves,” Greengrass told *The Los Angeles Times*. You have to go to them and ask for their permission. And ask properly, and systematically, which is what we did. And these families [of the “United 93” victims] were unanimous in agreeing to participate.”<sup>123</sup> He added later that, “I believe there’s room for films to challenge us. It’s difficult to grapple with all this, but we have to try, don’t we?”<sup>124</sup> Stone, meanwhile, had to contend not only with issues of historical representation and timing, but his own reputation as a political provocateur whose previous films had sometimes been accused of mixing historical fact with conspiracy theory. Though Stone was not without comment on the present state of America in relation to the rest of the world in the run-up to *World Trade Center*’s release (“We lost the trust of the world,” Stone told Patrick Goldstein of *The Los Angeles Times*. “So now we have more death from terror, not less. Not to mention a constitutional breakdown.”), his comments on the film itself framed it purely in terms of honoring the actions and spirit of the people portrayed on screen.<sup>125</sup> “It’s not about the motives of the terrorists, or who the terrorists were, or the politics of 9/11 in any way,” Stone said before filming began. “It’s about people standing together and overcoming the problem.”<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Scott Martelle, “Is America Ready For Movies About 9/11?,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 12 Apr. 2006: E1.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> Patrick Goldstein, “The Big Picture: Oliver Stone’s Ground Zero,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 8 Aug 2006: E1.

<sup>126</sup> Rachel Abramowitz, “Stone Assesses Sept. 11 Project,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 13 July 2005: E1.

Despite these measures, however, both studios took extra precautions to further defuse any public tensions. After a manager of a Manhattan-based AMC Loews theater stop playing a *United 93* trailer in late March because of customer complaints, Universal made a three-minute feature to replace it, in which Greengrass discussed the making of the film and his personal thoughts on representing September 11 onscreen.<sup>127</sup> Similarly, as part of a larger campaign to distance Stone's past statements and films from *World Trade Center*, Paramount not only hired public relations group Creative Response Concepts to court conservative pundits (the group previously orchestrated the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth campaign against John Kerry in the 2004 election), but held private meetings with congressional leaders, White House staff, and elected officials from New York to assure them of the film's largely apolitical, conspiracy-free content.<sup>128</sup> Even then, some survivors and family members of the deceased publically expressed disinterest or disappointment in the films: sometimes questioning elements of historical representation and sometimes simply repudiating the very notion that the tragedy could be made into any form of filmic entertainment.

Critics generally looked more kindly upon *United 93* than *World Trade Center*, as they favored Greengrass' explicit attempts at unsentimental realism over Stone's more explicitly emotional and character-driven narrative. Reviewers largely praised *United 93* for its emotional intensity and goals of telling the story of Flight 93 in a sober manner free of many Hollywood-style clichés. While certain critics questioned the ultimate purpose of so faithful and harrowing a recreation without

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<sup>127</sup> Kate Kelly and Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg, "9/11 Hits the Multiplex," *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 Apr. 2006: B1.

<sup>128</sup> Jim Puzzanghera, "Calming D.C.'s Movie Critics," *The Los Angeles Times*, 30 July 2006: C1.

significant political or social context, *The Wall Street Journal*'s Joe Morgenstern seemed to sum up general consensus that this film earns the respect of those willing to endure its sometimes harrowing content: "Each of us will decide for ourselves whether it's time to see such a film, time to risk more pain against the possibility of some catharsis, or at least some useful vision of the events of that day. If the answer is yes, then this film is well worth the risk."<sup>129</sup> *World Trade Center*, on the other hand, found itself dismissed by many critics who were turned off by what they felt was Stone's attempt to fit a gripping true-life story into the straitjacket of Hollywood brand sentimentality and clichéd emotional uplift. "The problem is not so much that "World Trade Center" is an attempt to make a feel-good movie about a ghastly situation," sniffed Kenneth Turan of *The Los Angeles Times*, "it's that the result feels forced, manufactured and largely—but not entirely—unconvincing."<sup>130</sup> However, the film did find its defenders, who found the film's emotions to be largely well-earned and based upon an intelligent and respectful appreciation of the day's events and emotions. A.O. Scott of *The New York Times*, for one, thought that Stone took "a public tragedy and turned it into something at once genuine stirring and terribly sad. His film offers both a harrowing return to a singular, disastrous episode in the recent past and a refuge from the ugly, depressing realities of its aftermath."<sup>131</sup> Ultimately, the range of critical reaction seemed tied to a larger notion that it became permissible to respond emotionally to a filmed reenactment of 9/11 when it grounded itself in scrupulous realism. Greengrass' docudrama, then, easily trumped the perceived

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<sup>129</sup> Joe Morgenstern, "Film: Spellbinding 'United 93' Recounts Doomed Flight with Soul-Searing Intensity," *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 Apr. 2006: W1.

<sup>130</sup> Kenneth Turan, "Movie Review: The Easy Way Out," *The Los Angeles Times*, 9 Aug. 2006: E1.

<sup>131</sup> A.O. Scott, "Film Review: Pinned Under the Weight of Shattered Towers, and 9/11 History," *The New York Times*, 9 Aug. 2006: E1.

schmaltz of Stone's more conventional narrative: the further away from mainstream Hollywood convention, the closer to an approximation of factual accuracy and emotional truth.

Both films performed modestly at the box office in comparison to their respective budgets, underlining the fact that even the most respectful of 9/11 films would only court so wide an audience. Each received what were perceived to be healthy first-weekend grosses—given their subject matter and budgets—but ultimately uninspiring final figures. *United 93* made back the majority of its \$15 million production budget in its first weekend of domestic grosses, placing second behind family comedy *R.V.* with a little under \$11.5 million and creating hope that the film might find a broader audience as an alternative to the summer blockbusters about to open. However, the film fell over 50% in its second weekend, ultimately grossing a little over \$30 million domestically. (International grosses totaling nearly \$45 million helped bolster the film financially, the popularity of both this and *World Trade Center* abroad perhaps reflecting foreign country's interest in the 9/11 attacks combined with a geographic and emotional distance that made seeing the films in theaters less of a complicated decision.) Similarly, the \$65 million *World Trade Center* opened healthily with \$18.7 million in mid-August, but largely failed to capture late-summer audiences over the long term, ultimately grossing a respectable but far from rosy \$70 million (though, again, robust international grosses pushed its overall earnings to over \$160 million). Despite the film's—and their respective studios'—attempts to frame 9/11 in terms of reverential respect and emotional uplift, audiences ultimately seemed set on whether these cinematic representations of the

event were fundamentally appropriate or distasteful. In looking at pre-release polls taken amongst potential filmgoers, analysts noted that both films produced unusually high percentages of people who explicitly stated no interest in seeing the film. This, perhaps, helps to explain both films' box office drops after healthy opening weekends. Regardless of good word-of-mouth or reviews in the mainstream press, little could convince many audience members to see a film they were convinced would depress them, offend them, or both.

Clearly, films directly dealing with 9/11 had to overcome issues of both historical representation and public support. They contended with these issues by carefully sculpting narratives and crafting characters (not to mention employing formal strategies) that would offer the audience a version of 9/11 that appealed to the audience's potential desire to further explore or experience the events and emotions of that day while ensuring that, through soberly-told stories of genuinely good and decent people performing heroic acts of sacrifice and/or survival, they were honoring the bravery of the day's real-life heroes, and not exploiting an emotionally-sensitive topic for economic gain. Despite these efforts, however, the subject matter of both films failed to draw a substantial amount of viewers to the theater. However, this does not mean that audiences were not interested in further considering September 11 as an event: its visceral impact, its raw emotional intensity. It simply means that films that considered the effects of 9/11 upon real-life individuals shifts viewer focus away from personal curiosity about the experience of the event itself and onto the tragic consequences felt by those directly affected. Watching the protagonists of *World Trade Center* struggle to survive amidst the rubble, for example, we are given a

glimpse into what the experience of being present at the Twin Towers' destruction might actually been like. However, this fascination with the details of destruction can quickly become subsumed by both the emphasis upon the character's physical and emotional pain and the fact that the characters on screen represent actual people within a real-life tragedy. Who are we to indulge in semi-queasy "what if" scenarios when we are reminded of the actual suffering and death that occurred on September 11? The curiosity was not worth the pain of confronting real tragedy. Films like *United 93* and *World Trade Center* certainly have a role to play both as memorials to fallen heroes and as gripping and emotionally-satisfying narratives in their own right. But the intrinsic complications that come with making them ultimately limit the types of stories, characters, and images they can show us.

The disaster genre, on the other hand, offers something else: a generic framework within which filmmakers could further explore the visceral impact and emotional reverberations of the event itself, as well as ask more diffuse questions about how real-life tragedy complicates the representation and viewing of cinematic disaster. In the next and final chapter, we will see how specifically the genre constructs this cinematic space and examine two films that used the disaster movie to explore September 11 imagery and themes, altering the genre's trajectory in the process.



## Chapter Four

### How Did the Disaster Genre Deal Directly With the Images and Themes of September 11th?

*“What if this really happened? What if it happened to people like you and me? Not to governments, not to presidents, not to general, not to military personnel—what if it really happened to the average American family?”*

-Steven Spielberg, on the thought-process behind *War of the Worlds*.<sup>132</sup>

At first glance, it would seem ludicrous at for any director to attempt to incorporate the themes and imagery of September 11 into a disaster film. The devastation and death caused by the 9/11 attacks struck at the very heart of the genre’s appeal: the ability to imagine widespread cataclysm in a manner that is vivid enough to engage some of the viewer’s fears and curiosities while providing enough margins of safety to allow the experience to be spectacular and contextualized within a narrative of triumph and reassurance. Viewers had proven in the immediate years after that real-life tragic events did not stop them from partaking in the disaster genre, so long as a post-9/11 disaster film engaged their altered expectations of onscreen disaster by imbuing disaster narrative with new levels of emotional sensitivity and vulnerability while continuing to satisfy a perhaps-intensified interest in destruction itself through the visceral, aesthetically-stimulating scenes of mass chaos. But it’s one thing for a genre to engage with a changed sense of what disaster should look and feel when making films in relatively close proximity to an actual tragic event. It’s something else to draw specific parallels between a cataclysm in a fictional filmic

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<sup>132</sup> Rachel Abramowitz, “Summer Sneaks: Scared Silly,” The Los Angeles Times, 8 May 2005: E26.

universe and the defining disaster—the defining event—of the opening years of the 21st century.

The risks are obvious. Placing iconic 9/11 imagery within a fictional narrative—falling bodies, screaming, ash-covered pedestrians—creates the possibility for a temporary disconnect between the viewer and the filmic world they're watching, as all kinds of real-life associations enter their minds and hearts. This, in turn, creates the possibility for viewers to feel exploited and therefore reject the film entirely. For some, no matter how honorable a director's intentions or how sober-minded the end product, the very idea of using elements of September 11 within a fictional narrative devalues the event, transforming its free-floating, unspeakable horrors into fodder for Hollywood-style emotional button-pushing. It can also conjure up guilt for going to a disaster movie at all by reminding viewers that, on some level, engaging with the disaster genre is implicitly agreeing to both view cataclysm as a stimulating aesthetic event and accept that its aftermath can be satisfactorily resolved within the confines of a linear narrative. Have we so soon made the mess, the loss, the heartbreak of that horrific day back in 2001 into entertainment produced for mass consumption?

If drawing explicit associations between fictional and real-life disasters can prove somewhat chancy, however, it also presents an opportunity: one that has everything to do with the disaster's unique position within post-9/11 culture. Without the burden of directly representing 9/11 onscreen, directors of disaster films free themselves of this intensified level of scrutiny while remaining within a genre that viewers still associate with real-life terror and devastation. Audiences walking into a disaster movie know they are engaging with a charged genre that brings to mind

September 11 simply by presenting scenes of mass urban chaos. However, they also feel more comfortable engaging with these images because the genre provides the distancing devices of fictional narratives, individuated protagonists, and various visual and aural presentational techniques to contextualize and frame disaster in a safe and contained manner. Placing 9/11-related images and themes within such a context, then, can allow the viewer to address the lingering emotions associated with them in perhaps an intense and concentrated manner because of the generic comforts and releases built into the film. The viewer can focus less upon the enormity of the event itself—something that one simply cannot escape in a film about September 11 directly—and focus upon their own personal fears, doubts, and even curiosities about 9/11.

This chapter will begin by briefly considering this notion of the disaster genre as a space within which viewers can engage their fears and worries about September 11, drawing upon the seminal work of Susan Sontag as a baseline. We will then turn to close formal and industrial analyses of Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* (2005) and Matt Reeves' *Cloverfield* (2008), two disaster films that utilize images, themes, and plot situations to directly resonate with 9/11 while ultimately telling fictional narratives separate from real-life disaster. Directors as differing in cinematic style and public notability/prestige as Spielberg and Reeves (as well as their collaborators) saw the potential within the disaster genre to create instances of cinematic cataclysm in which the main destructive event not only draws upon the imagery of September 11, but uses restricted narration, malevolent and omnipresent central threats, and flawed, bewildered characters merely hoping for survival to create an altered filmic landscape

that reflects altered viewer expectations of disaster as both a horrifying nightmare to be dealt with and a source of continual (and complicated) aesthetic wonderment. In doing so, they fundamentally alter the viewer's relationship with disaster spectacle from the dominant trends of the 1990s in a manner gestured toward in *The Day After Tomorrow* and coming into fuller fruition here: namely, the sense that watching cinematic destruction now requires both a greater investment of sometimes uncomfortable emotions and a more reflexive notion of what it means to take pleasure from aestheticized cataclysm.<sup>133</sup>

### **The Disaster Genre as a Post-9/11 Cinematic Space**

Susan Sontag's 1965 essay "The Imagination of Disaster," which comments upon the generic qualities and social resonances of science fiction films of the 1950s, has become a touchstone for many in discussing how disaster films reflect and work through contemporary social and political issues within their narratives. I have stated my criticisms of aspects of Sontag's essay previously—particularly her refusal to engage with the specific formal and narrative choices within these films that produce the allegorical meanings she claims they contain—and refer to her essay with these caveats fully in mind. Despite her lack of specificity, Sontag does provide a useful and, in the case of post-9/11 disaster films, very relevant framework within which to consider how the disaster genre can be used as a cinematic space within which filmmakers and viewers can engage with the emotions conjured up by September 11. Sontag argues that the 1950s science fiction films provided their viewers with the

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<sup>133</sup> A major release that will not be covered in this chapter is *Poseidon*, the 2006 remake of *The Poseidon Adventure* directed by Wolfgang Peterson. To me, the film does not directly pertain to the trends discussed within this chapter and, as a critical and commercial flop, lacks the artistic and financial importance to warrant inclusion.

opportunity for their viewers to consider one of the largest and most frightening fears of the era: nuclear annihilation. Through their narratives that threaten the protagonists with either physical annihilation or mental subjugation at the hands of threatening and impersonal forces, these films not only provide viewing pleasure through “the aesthetics of destruction, with the peculiar beauties to be found in wrecking havoc, making a mess,” but reflect viewer fears of the ultimate eradication of the self and society through the dropping of an atomic bomb.<sup>134</sup> These films, then, work to help viewers consider (on a subconscious level if nothing else) “that, from now on to the end of human history, every person will spend his individual life under the threat not only of individual death, which is certain, but of something almost insupportable psychologically—collective incineration and extinction which could come at any time, virtually without warning.”<sup>135</sup> Such a horrifying and overpowering fear became easier to consider for the viewer when seen within the science fiction film. Not only were these issues placed within the distancing frame of allegory, but they appeared within movies whose generic familiarity and low-budget aesthetics provided viewers the comforting distance to engage with these free-floating worries in a more manageable, contained context. Ultimately, these were films whose darker implications were often at least partially alleviated by the affirmative, heroic actions of their protagonists, providing both a chance to consider the terrors (and marvel at the aesthetic wonders) of annihilation and the comfort of seeing these issues resolved.

There is a key difference between these science fiction films and the post-9/11 disaster films dealing with 9/11 imagery and themes: namely, the former constructs

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<sup>134</sup> Susan Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster,” *American Movie Critics: An Anthology From the Silents Until Now*, ed. Phillip Lopate (New York: The Library of America, 2006) 325.

<sup>135</sup> Sontag 328.

narratives that speculate on what could be, while the latter frames disaster based upon what has occurred. No matter how vivid the allegory, the 1950s science fiction films discussed by Sontag ultimately imagine scenarios that resonate with a viewer's free-floating anxieties about potential nuclear detonation (the crucial exception being the *Godzilla* films out of Japan). Post-9/11 disaster films, meanwhile, contend with the fact that the real-life disaster has happened, and that such events have left the viewer with feelings of lingering sadness, fear, and anger. This is not to say that the fear of another terrorist attack occurring on American soil does not cross the viewer's mind. However, these disaster films primarily seek to return the viewer to past experiences, rather than pushing them to imagine potential futures.

That being said, disaster films dealing directly with September 11 resonates with Sontag's descriptions in their use of generic conventions and the distance provided by fictional narrative to engage in their emotions and reactions to the attacks. Part of this derives from a desire to experience the events of the day from a closer, more intimate perspective: to imagine what it was like to run from the walls of dust or watch in horror as whole buildings collapsed around you. Often, these films place the viewer right alongside their pedestrian protagonists as they struggle to survive the cataclysm rages around them, focusing viewer attention upon the travails of the characters while simultaneously allowing us to experience the horrors of cataclysm afresh with the characters. In a sense, this has always been one of the central appeals of the disaster genre. It's only logical that if American audiences now conceptualize cataclysm in terms of what they saw and heard on September 11, they

would desire filmic images and narratives that reflect the circumstances of that horrific day.

For many, of course, this desire to return is shot through with complicated feelings of guilt and complicity. Who am I, some might say, to want to know more about the visceral experience of surviving (or not surviving) mass destruction, when so many have been injured, traumatized, and killed when they actually went through it? Filmmakers inevitably experience similar quandaries: namely, the moral dilemma of shaping human death and massive destruction for consumption and entertainment. As we have seen, directors dealing explicitly with the event itself must balance out these built-in desires with other narrative and thematic prerogatives, framing their stories as testaments to the selfless bravery and heroism of a select individual or group whose story provides both a satisfying narrative arc and a focal point for viewer interest and concern.

While these issues do not entirely go away in the disaster genre, they can be diffused by the fact that, ultimately, these films are telling the viewer a fictional narrative. The protagonists may exist in a world in which disaster looks and feels like its real-life equivalent, but they themselves do not represent the heroism of 9/11 or the fallen of New York City or carry any of the symbolic and historical weight that characters in 9/11-centric films do. Characters can respond to disaster not as stoic martyrs, but as perhaps the average viewer would: with terror, confusion, and a desperate desire to stay alive. The viewer can perhaps connect with them more easily because, like other film protagonists, they have been thought of principally as a character that the filmmaker wants the audience to engage with emotionally, not a

stand-in for an actual person whom the viewer feels the need to respect or admire in a more distanced fashion. And, like the 1950s science fiction films before them, these disaster films can help resolve or at least soothe lingering feelings of fear and doubt by providing a narrative context in which the disaster source is at least partially alleviated, and at least some of the protagonists have made it through the trials of disaster intact. These films do not provide a recreation of September 11 so much as they devise a scenario in which modern-day disaster—defined by the imagery and context of 9/11—can be experienced by the viewer in a visceral and immediate manner, temporarily detached from the complicated and sorrowful consequences and resonances associated with the event itself.

There are limits to what such a film can accomplish, something that Sontag points to in her analysis of 1950s science fiction films as well. She points out that these films ultimately lack any social or political commentary on the contemporary fears they conjure up within their narratives, writing that ultimately “the films reflect worldwide anxieties, and they serve to allay them.”<sup>136</sup> For Sontag, the genre simply was not equipped to handle the consideration of the loftier, more complex consequences of the fears they evoked. In a sense, this observation rings true for post-9/11 disaster films as well. They do not seem particularly interested in exploring either the roots of violent attack or their large-scale impact upon society (though compared to, say, the 1990s disaster cycle, they do make the viewer increasingly aware of the individual effects and personal costs of mass catastrophe). Ultimately, the films seek to provide a visceral/emotional experience over a contemplative/intellectual one. This has as much to do with the objectives of

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<sup>136</sup> Sontag 329.



mainstream Hollywood filmmaking as it does with the capacity of the disaster genre to contend with the messier elements of the September 11 attacks. These films, like their predecessors in the 1990s and earlier part of the 2000s, are the product of monetary studio investment and are therefore aimed at a mass commercial audience. Most films work through and resolve narrative complexities by following and resolving the specific goals of the individuated protagonist. This proves true here as well and it provides the viewer with the sense of closure and emotional satisfaction that can help capitalize on the lingering feelings of fear and unease conjured up by the film's pointed disaster imagery. It seems unfair to assume that a disaster film could not deal with the social and political resonances of its central disasters. However, to do so would significantly alter the chief pleasures many find within the genre, which derive from an aesthetically-thrilling presentation of mass destruction and its effects upon the protagonists who seek to stop, alleviate, or simply survive its effects.

### **War of the Worlds**

Though other films previously mentioned had dealt with September 11 in certain oblique manners (mostly through tracking the emotional and psychological reverberations of the event after the fact), *War of the Worlds* is arguably the first mainstream Hollywood film that so prominently and publically frames its story as influenced by the events, images, and emotions of 9/11. In interviews conducted by national newspapers and magazines, Spielberg openly commented upon how the imagery of the World Trade Center attacks influenced both his decision to pursue the project and individual directorial decisions regarding setting, tone, and aesthetics. "I think 9/11 reinforced everything I'm putting into 'War of the Worlds 2005,'"

Spielberg told *The Los Angeles Times*. “Just how we come together, how this nation unites in every known way to survive a foreign invader and a frontal assault. We now know what it feels like to be terrorized...”<sup>137</sup> He later mused to *Entertainment Weekly* that while “we didn’t set out to play upon the tremendous paranoia and anxiety about terrorism in the environment right now...we do live in the shadow of 9/11.”<sup>138</sup> And he bluntly said in a later *Los Angeles Times* piece that, when it comes to his more visceral interpretation of the original text, “9/11 set the tone and made it worth my time and the audience’s time to see this story treated in this way.”<sup>139</sup> Considering how recently directors like Roland Emmerich and Jon Amiel were framing 9/11 solely in relation to what they would not do within their films, this marks a significant departure. Rather than attempting to downplay any connection between a disaster film and its real-life resonances, Spielberg (with the presumed blessings of co-financers DreamWorks and Paramount) explicitly framed *War of the Worlds* as a film that would acknowledge and explore the images of destruction that affected both the director and the potential audience of the film.

Of course, few would consider Emmerich or Amiel to have the cultural capital of Steven Spielberg, internationally known as both the creator of phenomenally successful blockbusters like *Jaws* (1975) and *Jurassic Park* (1993) and the auteur who has tackled some of the thornier chapters of twentieth-century history in films such as *Schindler’s List* (1993) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). Indeed, if press coverage made an explicit point of framing *War of the Worlds* as among the first

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<sup>137</sup> Abramowitz E26.

<sup>138</sup> Benjamin Svetkey, “This Means War,” *Entertainment Weekly* June 13, 2005, 24 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,1070681,00.html>>.

<sup>139</sup> Rachel Abramowitz and John Horn, “Post 9/11 Anxieties Influence Spate of Films,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 29 June 2005: E1.

mainstream Hollywood films (and certainly the first multimillion dollar summer blockbuster) to address 9/11, it also positioned the film in relation to Spielberg's career and overarching career tropes. More than a few commentators contrasted the benevolent intergalactic visitors of such earlier Spielberg works as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) to *War's* malignant alien forces, while others saw the film's relentless pace and visceral intensity as a return to such earlier thrillers as *Jaws* and even *Duel* (1971). Spielberg himself encouraged these auteurist readings, comparing *War's* handheld camerawork and use of first-person perspective to similar devices in *Saving Private Ryan*, and recalled that the initial idea for an adaptation of *War of the Worlds* came when he was shooting *Close Encounters*: "We were shooting a scene with all these extras looking up at the mother ship that was about to land, and for five seconds I allowed my mind to speculate, 'What would happen if a portal opened on the ship and lasers fired and killed everyone in sight?'"<sup>140</sup> Such career-spanning comments reinforced Spielberg's deft ability to produce both effortlessly entertaining pop fables and more sober films tackling weighty topics, sometimes combining these tendencies within the same film (as in his previous collaboration with Tom Cruise, *Minority Report* (2002)).

DreamWorks and Paramount perhaps assumed, then, that Spielberg's comments about 9/11's influence upon *War of the Worlds* would not scare away potential viewers, but would assure them that these issues would be folded into an entertaining summer blockbuster made by a beloved director known equally for science-fiction spectacle and sensitively-handled historical reenactments.

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<sup>140</sup> Svetkey.

Additionally, both Spielberg's very involvement in the disaster genre and his comments about his film's links to September 11 provided *War of the Worlds* with a touch of prestige that usually eluded the disaster genre. Admittedly, *War of the Worlds* owes as large a debt to science fiction tropes as it does to disaster ones. Still, having an Oscar-winning filmmaker see the generic framework of disaster films as one in which he chooses to explore lingering issues of American fear and paranoia in the aftermath of September 11 raises the film slightly above the average summer blockbuster, and perhaps attracting additional audience members who would otherwise dismiss a big-budget, special-effects heavy popcorn picture. Public comments tying *War of the Worlds* to the larger political and social discourse went beyond Spielberg. Numerous articles cited the historical links between the property itself and moments of massive social and political unrest: the underlying critique of British colonialism within H.G. Wells' original novel (published in 1898); the build-up to the United States' entering into World War II when Orson Wells' produced his famously convincing radio adaptation in 1938; the Cold War reverberations felt throughout George Pal's 1953 film adaptation. Spielberg, then, continued in this tradition by once again re-telling the story in the aftermath of national trauma and discontent. Co-screenwriter David Koepp (who re-wrote Josh Friedman's initial draft) extended the film's contemporary resonances to include the War in Iraq. Comparing the aliens' doomed attempt at colonizing the planet to the United States' adventure into Iraq, he stated that he viewed *War of the Worlds* "as an antiwar film, especially an anti-Iraq War film," though he conceded that "you don't foreground it because it

ruins the movie. If someone wants to see it, great. If they don't, they can just watch the movie and be happy.”<sup>141</sup>

Even if audiences chose to not focus upon the film's potential political metaphors, however, the filmmakers made sure that they knew that they would not simply view their film as another run-of-the-mill disaster film. Indeed, if Spielberg and company saw potential within the genre to effectively engage contemporary fears and traumas, they were going to sweep away some of what they saw as its hoarier clichés to tell a more personalized story. Koepp laid out the ground rules: “No scenes of beating up on New York. No destruction of famous landmarks. No shots of world capitals. No TV reporters saying what's going on. No shots of generals with big sticks pushing battleships around the map. Let's not see the war of the world. Let's see this guy's survival story.”<sup>142</sup> In this way, the film coupled its embrace of topicality with a commitment to on-the-ground authenticity, free of the distancing and derivative formulas that could not only harm the film's aesthetic goals, but potentially provoke viewers to see Spielberg's insertion of 9/11 imagery as goosing a familiar, floundering genre story. Such guarantees framed the film as a more enlightened and creative Hollywood blockbuster that still delivered the summertime goods.

It's important to remember, of course, that any film produced, distributed, exhibited and marketed as a summer blockbuster is the product of wider economic and industrial factors that one director's desire to explore the cultural reverberations of the September 11 attacks. Directed by one of the world's most financially successful directors and starring one of the world's most bankable actors, *War of the*

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<sup>141</sup> Abramowitz E26.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

*Worlds* was financed by Paramount and DreamWorks, in part, to earn a large amount of money. Regardless of any other artistic motivations expressed by its creators, the film also very much existed as an economic entity: one whose very creation came partly out of economic necessity. Initially, Paramount's premiere attraction for summer 2005 was not *War of the Worlds*, but the third installment of the enormously successful *Mission: Impossible* franchise, starring Cruise. However, the film ran into trouble when would-be director Joe Carnahan dropped out of the film in July 2004, roughly two months before the film was set to begin production. With Cruise busy promoting his thriller *Collateral* (2004) and no directorial replacement emerging, *Daily Variety* reported rumors that "crew members in Berlin were issued their last paychecks and told to go home," and concluded that the film "was becoming a train wreck."<sup>143</sup> Paramount ultimately postponed the project until summer 2006, but was left without a viable replacement and no immediate project for Cruise. Meanwhile, Spielberg saw his own schedule loosen when he called for a re-write of the script that would ultimately become *Munich* (2005) by playwright Tony Kushner (re-working the screenplay written by Eric Roth). The possibility of pursuing the much-delayed fourth installment of the Indiana Jones franchise also became a distant possibility when producing partner George Lucas expressed reservations with the script.<sup>144</sup>

These delays, however, cleared the way for *War*, a film that Spielberg and Cruise agreed would be their next project together when scheduling allowed and who both contributed ideas to Koepp back in January 2004 in a meeting that *The Los Angeles Times* described as a "marathon brainstorming session" that lasted for

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<sup>143</sup> Michael Fleming and Dave McNary, "Swift Winds of 'War,'" *Daily Variety*, 12 Aug. 2004: 1.

<sup>144</sup> Svetkey.

“several days.”<sup>145</sup> When Koepp began sending sections of the script to Spielberg (who passed them along to Cruise), the director and actor’s enthusiasm for the project lead to an agreement between both to fill their mutual scheduling holes with the project. This seemingly solved everyone’s problems: Cruise and Spielberg could pursue the script, and Paramount (along with DreamWorks, who joined the project along with Spielberg) had a summer tentpole film. The sudden nature of the project’s fruition, however, meant that Spielberg and company had roughly ten weeks of pre-production: a relatively brief amount of time to plan what would become a special-effects heavy, \$132 million production. Shooting proved equally as tight, with production beginning in early November and scheduled for 75 days. Spielberg worked to alleviate some of the pressures of this fast-paced shoot by storyboarding major sequences with computer animation, shooting key action sequences first so they could be immediately sent for post-production work to special effects house Industrial Light & Magic (ILM), and working with previous collaborators like cinematographer Janusz Kaminski, production designer Rick Carter, editor Michael Kahn, costume designer Joanna Johnston, and ILM visual effects supervisor Dennis Muren.<sup>146</sup> The film was ultimately ready for its June 29 release date, undoubtedly a comfort to Paramount studio executives who less than a year earlier had wondered if they would have any major blockbuster to offer during the summer months. Indeed, one could speculate that Spielberg’s brisk professionalism in delivering the film on time and within budget despite the unusually speed production schedule would only have made Paramount and DreamWorks that much more willing to trust some of

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<sup>145</sup> Abramowitz E26.

<sup>146</sup> Dave McNary, “Spielberg Must Fight ‘War’ Fast,” *Variety*, 22 Nov. 2004-28 Nov. 2004: 9.

Spielberg's darker, more topical impulses: better a Spielberg-Cruise summer collaboration with a somewhat apocalyptic bent than nothing at all.

Additionally, the film's placement as a different breed of disaster blockbuster had to jockey with two other major threads within the master narrative of the film's media reception: inflated financial expectations fueled by a prolonged box-office slump and Cruise's increasingly odd and potentially alienating behavior while promoting the film. The weekend before *War of the Worlds* opened, Hollywood had entered its eighteenth week of smaller domestic grosses than the corresponding week in 2004, the longest slump experienced by the industry in twenty years (international grosses also remained off from 2004, at the time the most successful year for Hollywood ever).<sup>147</sup> With its highly-bankable director-star team, well-known story, and marketing campaign emphasizing iconic alien invasion imagery (in one poster, an alien hand grasps a flaming Earth against a black background), pundits expected the film to break said slump when it rolled out across 3,908 theaters for a six-day holiday weekend.<sup>148</sup> While analysis of the film's box office performance will follow later in the chapter, it is worth noting now the extent to which the film's press coverage remained tied to its potential role as financial salvation for the film industry.

However, perhaps the most complicated element of *War of the Worlds*' press reception had little to do with the film proper, but the erratic behavior displayed by Tom Cruise, particularly his emphatic declarations of love for girlfriend Katie Holmes and increased discussion of his involvement in Scientology. The principal target of discussion (and derision) was Cruise's May 23, 2005 appearance on *The*

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<sup>147</sup> Rachel Abramowitz and R. Kinsey Lowe, "Movies: Moviegoing's Overseas Slump," The Los Angeles Times, 27 June 2005: E1.

<sup>148</sup> Gabriel Snyder, "Aliens Aiming for Boffo B.O.," Daily Variety, 29 June 2005: 1.



*Oprah Winfrey Show*, where Cruise (to quote Sharon Waxman) “jumped around the set, hopped onto a couch, fell rapturously to one knee and repeatedly professed his love for his new girlfriend, the actress Katie Holmes.”<sup>149</sup> For some, such enthusiasm merely struck some as a rare misstep for an actor who had largely handled his public persona with restraint. Others, however, suspected that the romance was more press-baiting than anything else. Holmes had a prominent role in *Batman Begins* (2005), another high-profile summer blockbuster, and some could not help but speculate that the coupling was ultimately tied to pragmatic public relations, and not sincere romantic feelings. The coy, are-they-or-aren’t-they relationship between Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie (whose action-romance *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (2005) became inextricably tied to their then-ambiguous status as a couple) only added to the Cruise-Holmes speculation, with some media commentators favoring Pitt and Jolie’s wink-wink subtlety to Cruise’s couch-hopping fervor. The incident also challenged the maxim that no publicity is bad publicity: *The Los Angeles Times* noted that polls taken by celebrity-conscious publications like *People* and *US Weekly* found that 60% of respondents assumed the romance was purely business.<sup>150</sup>

Additionally, Cruise raised eyebrows amongst the press by increasingly foregrounding his belief in Scientology, a religious organization that some regard as suspicious at best, cultist at worst. *The New York Times* reported in March 2005 that Cruise had insisted on taking visiting executives of United International Pictures (the international distributor for *War of the Worlds*) on a personal tour of Los Angeles-based Scientology facilities: a trip that caused chagrin amongst some attendees, who

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<sup>149</sup> Sharon Waxman, “Tom Cruise’s Effusive ‘Oprah’ Appearance Raises Hollywood Eyebrows,” *The New York Times*, 2 June 2005: E1.

<sup>150</sup> Chris Lee, “True Love or Courting Publicity,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 4 June 2005: E1.

had to extend their planned stays especially for the visit.<sup>151</sup> He also insisted upon sponsoring a “Scientology tent” on the *War of the Worlds* set, a potential violation of Universal Studios policy (where the film was shot) that Spielberg had to personally intervene on Cruise’s behalf.<sup>152</sup> And these were among the less publicized moments. Cruise’s discussions of his religion within the media took on increasingly hostile tones, with accusations that fellow Scientologist Brooke Shields violated the religion’s principals by taking medication for post-partum depression and culminating in a terse interview with *Today*’s Matt Lauer over the efficacy of prescription drugs. Spielberg defended Cruise’s multiple times throughout the build-up to *War*’s release: denying that the lack of Cruise’s visage of the film’s poster was in response to negative press and even coming to Cruise’ aid in a joint interview with German magazine *Der Spiegel*, comparing Cruise’s Scientologist principles to his own work with the Shoah Foundation in promoting Holocaust awareness (an executive at DreamWorks later deemed the comparison “unfortunate”).<sup>153</sup>

These complications surrounding the film’s release foreground how the presence of a star like Tom Cruise—a seemingly unquestionable boon to any film’s box-office, much less one trying to sell a relatively dark vision to a mass audience—can alter a film’s meaning and reception within the contemporary public discourse. It’s ultimately impossible to know whether his behavior negatively impacted box-office receipts or, for that matter, if his erratic behavior may have proved a more predictable (and therefore palatable) alternative to press coverage dominated by

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<sup>151</sup> Sharon Waxman, “Tom Cruise Mixing Business and Church,” *The New York Times*, 22 Mar. 2005: E1.

<sup>152</sup> Waxman 2 June 2005.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

Spielberg discussing his fascination with mass fear and September 11. However, it does underscore the fact that a high-budget film committed to exploring some of the more frightening and intense moments in recent American history is still subject to the influences of specific industrial pressures, unexpected media focus, and the overarching need to attract mass audiences. Even Spielberg himself acknowledged that his more serious reasons for making *War of the Worlds* were mixed with less highbrow inclinations: “I’m just trying to scare a lot of people all on the same weekend,” he told *The Los Angeles Times* with a chuckle.<sup>154</sup> Foregrounding this context illustrates the somewhat-unique circumstances within which the film was made, and perhaps lends some explanation as to how Spielberg managed to include some relatively dour content within the confines of a multi-million dollar summer blockbuster released by two major studios: taking advantage of the truncated production schedule and minor desperation of the Paramount executives to include darker elements within the story.

Perhaps the most important difference between *War of the Worlds* and almost any other films discussed within this study is its almost-exclusive use of restricted narration. In terms of both large-scale narrative knowledge and moment-by-moment visual information, Spielberg keeps the viewer glued to the side either Ray Ferrier (Cruise) or his children, Rachel (Dakota Fanning) and Robbie (Justin Chatwin) as they sojourn from Ray’s home in northern New Jersey to the parents of ex-wife Mary Ann (Miranda Otto) in Boston, where she is visiting with current husband Tim (David Alan Basche). The specific effects of this narrative and visual restriction—how it creates an atmosphere of emotional engagement and visceral intensity—will be

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<sup>154</sup> Abramowitz E26.

further discussed later in the chapter. However, it's worth first considering why Spielberg chose to begin this most-personalized of disaster epics with a prologue that sets up the film's principal conflict in the most omniscient of narrative and visual terms. The film's credits open as ambiguous blue lines squiggle and float around in the darkened frame, accompanied by a low, eerie score. The camera tracks further and further until it is revealed that we are within a single cell, which in turn is positioned within a drop of water located on a green leaf. This drop fades into a globe, which is then positioned within space through what will become a series of dissolves. The globe becomes a somewhat ambiguous red dot (perhaps Mars, though the aliens' origin planet has been excised from Spielberg's adaptation) before fading yet again into the red stop signal on a traffic light within a busy city. Throughout, a somber voiceover (Morgan Freeman) describes mankind's illusory stability as a species and the unknown alien threat watching their movement. This continues as several shots of various lengths showing people walking in New York City are interspersed extreme long shots of traffic on highways and various world landmarks. Finally, a dissolve carries us smoothly back into space, as we glide over the atmosphere of an unknown planet and move toward Earth, with the voiceover describing the alien forces' desire to overtake the planet.

Given that the rest of the film remains firmly at the side of Ray and his children (with the exception of its final moments, when the explanation of the alien's demise is fully revealed), why employ such impersonal strategies at the very beginning? At the most functional level, Spielberg outlines in no uncertain terms both the nature of the alien threat (described as "intellects vast and cool and

unsympathetic”) and the explicitly malignant threat they pose to the human race. Defining the general terms of the alien threat through direct voiceover detached from the central protagonists allows Spielberg to more fully immerse the viewer with the moment-by-moment experiences of Ray and his children while guaranteeing that the viewer possesses a baseline understanding of the film’s principal antagonist. More specifically, the prominent use of graphic matches visually equates images of disproportionate size and structure, gesturing toward the incongruously small forces that will ultimately take down the massive alien forces on Earth. The drop of bacteria-filled water transitioning into the entire planet establishes the Earth itself as possessing the somewhat-mysterious ability to overcome the alien threat, as it is the microscopic elements of the globe that the aliens ultimately find incompatible. Such connections are not immediately apparent upon first viewing, and Spielberg does not push them to explicitly prepare viewers for what some have claimed seems like a somewhat random and anticlimactic resolution (an issue that will be returned to later in the chapter). Rather, he attempts here to subtly establish the idea of the Earth itself invisibly rejecting the alien presence, as he does through other small touches throughout the film. Rachel, for example, does not want Ray to remove a splinter from her finger, saying that her body will naturally push it out when ready. This also draws heavily upon the opening of Wells’ book. Given how much Spielberg will depart from the original text on other matters, his inclusion here is striking in its relative faithfulness.

This opening also establishes a multitude of other visual implications in a relatively short time through aforementioned graphic matches and steadily-paced

editing: the transition from bacteria-filled water drop to Earth mirrors “the narration about humanity being studied coldly by alien beings, as if we were bacteria under a microscope;” the move from the Earth to a red dot implies the desire of the aliens to remake the Earth into another planet reminiscent of Mars; etc.<sup>155</sup> Mostly, though, the overall visual impression is one of rapidly transitioning levels of visual scale: from the drop of water to an entire planet; from outer space to a busy urban intersection; from the slowed-down medium shot of a boy throwing a baseball to an aerial view of hundreds of cars teeming through highways. By doing so, Spielberg both explicates the global scale of the alien invasion (something that will be only gestured towards throughout the rest of the film) and underlines the notion that seemingly small-scale incidences can possess visual—and therefore narrative—equivalence to large-scale forces. Such an implication not only establishes the logic of the film’s conclusion, but indicates the interaction between small-scale personal drama and widespread disaster that will occur throughout the film’s narrative.

Additionally, framing the source of forthcoming disaster as an explicitly malignant one alters the viewer’s understanding of the characters’ plight as they seek to survive its onslaught. Comparing this to other disaster narratives with a survivalist bent seen within this study (films like *Dante’s Peak*, *Deep Impact*, and *The Day After Tomorrow*), the principal difference can be seen in the relatively depersonalized nature of the threat in those earlier films. A violent volcano, enormous meteor, or cataclysmic shifts in global climate are all threatening and deadly scenarios, and the viewer certainly does not feel less sympathy for the protagonists because they’re

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<sup>155</sup> Andrew M. Gordon, *Empire of Dreams: The Science Fiction and Fantasy Films of Steven Spielberg* (Plymouth, United Kingdom: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008) 259.

attempting to withstand more impersonal forces. Nevertheless, this struggle against natural elements differ from a battle between two forces cognizant of their fundamental opposition in that the former almost solely emphasizes the endurance and resourcefulness of the protagonists, while the latter combines this with the suspense of watching their opponent concoct new ways in which to defeat and destroy them. The alien attacks in *War of the Worlds* do admittedly have more a chilly, impersonal feel to them, as the alien tripods unceremoniously vaporize dozens of screaming civilians within a matter of minutes. However, the viewer's knowledge that a being intent upon decimating the human race lies behind these acts of widespread death and destruction give the scenes an added emotional component: we root against the alien forces as we root for the survival of protagonists, whose hypothetical deaths would be the result of heartless and purposeful slaughter, not grave but ultimately impersonal natural disaster. In this way, the film harkens back to the narrative strategies employed by Emmerich in *Independence Day*, one of the only 1990s disaster films in which a malignant force explicitly attacks the Earth. While *Independence Day* quickly becomes a story of how proactive heroes join together to fight the alien threat, however, *War of the Worlds* presents us with protagonists who merely hope to endure the seemingly unstoppable conquest of the intergalactic invaders.

This feeling of direct attack upon the entire world—largely represented in the film by the residents of New England and the greater New York City area—proves necessary to telling a disaster narrative that resonates with the viewer experiences and memories of September 11. It may have been initially mysterious as to the exact

reasoning behind the 9/11 attacks, but the feeling that a malignant force conscious of its own destructive mission and its deadly consequences came from nowhere and wrecked havoc upon the nation seems hard-wired into the fears and panic of that day. *War of the Worlds* establishes a similar opposition between a terrified populace and a shadowy, malevolent attacker enclosed in destructive machinery. No *Day After Tomorrow*-style, self-reflexive eco-guilt here; this film will be fundamentally about surviving the concentrated destruction by an unequivocal outside enemy. One can debate the politics of representation behind this move, but I don't believe Spielberg is ultimately invested in the notion of the 9/11 attackers as unknowable alien evil. As previously mentioned, he seems far more interested in conjuring up the emotional landscape of the day—fear, sorrow, desperation, uncertainty—than constructing a politically-motivated allegory (though, as we shall see, this has not stopped others from doing just that).

*War of the Worlds* makes another critical departure from both earlier disaster models and forthcoming 9/11-centric narratives by both establishing its central characters firmly as civilians and not experts and centering the story around the prickly familial dynamics between two wary, distant children and their selfish, irresponsible deadbeat dad. Unlike almost every major protagonist seen within the films studied here, Ray does not belong to a profession that gives him particular insight into the alien threat, nor is he in a position of governmental, military, or any other authoritative power to help quell the threat itself or contain its effects within the surrounding community. The viewer cannot expect that Ray will provide solutions for the ensuing cataclysms through intuitive skill or intelligence. Indeed, the film works to



establish his everyman credentials: blue-collar job at the pier moving cargo; wardrobe of jeans and worn brown jacket; messy house in an urban neighborhood in which a work-in-progress car engine rests on the kitchen table in place of food for his visiting children. He possesses about as much understanding of the alien threat as the viewer (indeed, in the film's opening minutes, the viewer possesses more information than he does, though this imbalance is corrected rather quickly), and the lack of privileged information about the threat so common to protagonists of other disaster films both immediately limits the types of responses Ray will have within the narrative and suggests an alignment between his bewildered reactions and those that many viewers would assume they would have if placed within a disaster scenario.

However, if narrative structure encourages alignment with Ray, characterization in relation to his children places a bit of distance between the viewer and the character, whose initial behavior as a parent leaves much to be desired. Though the film does not provide much background information as to when and why Ray and Mary Ann chose divorce, it's clear that tensions run high between Ray and his children. These rifts become explicit through narrative detail—casually telling his ten-year-old daughter to “order out” when she asks for food, for example—but Spielberg also conveys the family discord visually. At times, Ray is isolated in a single shot while the children and Mary Ann occupy the frame simultaneously. If he does occupy the same visual space as the children, the dominant emphasis is often upon physical discomfort and awkwardness, as when Rachel attempts to show her father the splinter but refuses to let him touch her hand. The simmering resentments between Ray and Robbie become particularly sharp during a tense game of catch, in

which both men are either isolated from one another in medium close-ups or shown together in shots in which one stands in the foreground and the other in the out-of-focus background, underlining their emotional estrangement through physical distance.

This emphasis upon Ray's parental deficiencies and their clear effects upon his children's trust go beyond the dominant strand of parent-child tension seen within many disaster films, the majority of which revolve around children resentful that their father's obsessive work habits have diminished their own relationship with them (seen in such films as *Volcano*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, and *Armageddon*, which adds a twist of fatherly overprotection). By film's end, however, the respective fathers' skillful and brave responses to the cataclysm—which often include saving the child's life—clarifies both the value of the father's professional identity and his intrinsic worth as a man. This general trajectory ultimately plays out within *War of the Worlds* as well: as he travels to Boston with his children, encountering all sorts of physical danger and emotional horror, Ray gradually gains the respect and affection of his children (particularly Rachel) as he learns to embrace the difficult, self-sacrificing role of parent. But because the focus remains always upon the Ferrier's as a unit, the film places far greater emphasis upon the painful process of continual rejection, suspicion, and outright hostility that Robbie and Rachel display towards their father as he continues to make flawed decisions. Multiple shots place Ray on one side of the space and his children on the other, either separated by an object (a table or counter) or simply by the physical space that the children have placed between themselves and their father. Ray's responses, meanwhile, are not stalwart

and stoic. He flings a half-made peanut butter sandwich against a window when Robbie rejects it and Rachel reminds him of her peanut allergy. He screams at Rachel to “shut up” when she begins to scream in fear as they drive away from the attack. And, after both losing his car and gun to an angry mob and witnessing daughter flee his arms for her brother’s when she becomes too scared, he begins to silently weep at a table in a darkened diner as his children (sitting across from him, naturally) look on helplessly.

Ray’s desperation and despair, his inability to either battle the forces of destruction around him or adequately make his children feel secure, feels miles away from the problem-solving *patres familias* from earlier disaster films who could save the planet, the city, or at least their own family members through the skill sets and seemingly effortless courage they displayed against all odds. In this way, Ray becomes a more recognizable figure to the viewer: reacting in ways that are not to be admired, but empathized with. Furthermore, his placement within a 9/11-inflected narrative such as this complicates the notion later put forth by films like *United 93* and *World Trade Center* that massive tragedy and cataclysm ultimately bring out the best in the individuals surrounding it. Though Ray eventually begins to assert himself more forcefully against the alien threat, his reactions within a disaster scenario so heavily reminiscent of the World Trade Center attacks reminds the viewer that often human response to widespread destruction can also be confusion, panic, and sputtering hopelessness. Because the film does not place him as a September 11 survivor, it can afford to explore the messier, more ragged patches of human experience that films explicitly about September 11 perhaps acknowledge but

ultimately cannot focus on, lest they be accused of disrespecting the heroism of those involved.

If the film's recognizably flawed protagonists and fractured familial relationships place a greater emphasis upon the emotional and interpersonal toll of surviving contemporary disaster, *War of the Worlds* also departs from both earlier disaster models and future 9/11-centric films in its more ambivalent depiction of the large-scale societal reaction to cataclysmic tragedy. As Ray and his children travel to Boston, they encounter a wide swath of fellow refugees and survivors fleeing from the alien attacks. Many of these encounters, however, lack the outpouring of communal support and selflessness so intrinsic to narratives tied either to many disaster films or to the September 11 attacks themselves. Often, they meet people whose fear and desperation produce reactions that are chilly and self-involved at best, hostile and unfeeling at worst. Ray's encounter with a stranded television news crew provides him with more information about the scope of the attack. When one of the crew members asks if he was a survivor of the massive plane crash next to them and Ray says he wasn't, her interest immediately drops as the potential for a "great story" evaporates. Her rapid disconnection from her fellow survivor is visually underlined by placing the camera inside the news van, with Cruise disappearing from the frame as the woman quickly slides the door shut in his face. A harsher example comes later in the film, when Ray and his children (whose car is among the only working after massive electrical shortages following the aliens' arrival) attempt to drive by a large crowd of refugees. As Ray apologetically yells at the pedestrians that he cannot give them refuge within his vehicle, the increasingly hostile crowd begins flinging objects

at the van and eventually forcibly removes Ray and his son from the van (Rachel is almost smothered in the backseat as people begin wrenching themselves into the vehicle). This scene of Hobbesian desperation is not beyond the realm of reason; Spielberg not does portray the refugees as maniacs, but despairing, rain-soaked people pushed into desperate, violent acts. Nevertheless, it largely defines *War of the Worlds*' vision of a decimated world community, in which normally reasonable and decent individuals are not brought closer by communally-experienced tragedy, but driven to ugly acts driven by self-interest. Even moments of attempted kindness becomes thwarted by the frisson between good intentions and incomplete information. When a middle-aged couple attempts to take Rachel away from an oncoming series of explosions, for example, their well-meaning act is undercut by their unwillingness to listen to Rachel, who repeatedly yells that her father is present and trying to convince her brother not to enter the violent fray. The ambivalent nature of attempting to forge bonds in times of mass chaos becomes manifest in the character of Harlan Ogilvy (Tim Robbins), an ambulance driver whose entire family died in the attacks and who offers shelter to Ray and Rachel after they have become separated from Robbie. Initially, Harlan appears merely eccentric: nipping on the mass quantities of peach Schnapps in his basement hideaway; insisting upon the creation of a mass resistance movement to the alien invasion. However, the eerie visual introduction Spielberg gives him (appearing from the shadows of the basement, his face menacingly lit from a lantern) foreshadows his eventual instability which, though based in understandable psychological stress, nevertheless endangers Ray and Rachel by potentially attracting the alien's attention. Ray's eventual murder of Ogilvy

underlines the moral ambiguities of surviving mass cataclysm, particularly the need to protect the interests of one's own family rather than attempting to understand and assist fellow survivors.

Disaster movies of the mid-to-late 1990s rarely had to deal with the overall actions and motivations of survivors of disaster. As many of these narratives were constructed around the proactive responses of a small, elite group of professionals, the viewer tended to only see anonymous pedestrians when they were being annihilated by the disaster itself or at the margins of the narrative. Those films that did linger a bit longer upon groups of survivors tended to frame them in largely affirmative ways. After the destruction of Los Angeles in *Independence Day*, for example, Jasmine and her son drive around the wreckage in an abandoned truck, picking up wounded pedestrians as they went. These refugees are later seen bonding over makeshift camp fires, including Jasmine and the wounded First Lady: scenes that bolster the film's overarching vision of a new, less divided community forming in the wake of global alien attack. Emmerich also portrayed the world reaction to cataclysmic global climate change in *The Day After Tomorrow* as ultimately one of mutual cooperation and sober acceptance of responsibility for the globe's environmental issues, with Central and South American countries accepting North American refugees and the formerly unrepentant vice president acknowledging his errors in judgment as he assumes the presidency. This selfless reaction plays out on a smaller scale as well: the quiet sharing of a final drink between the Hedland Institute members before their inevitable demises; Lucy staying behind at the potentially endangered hospital to watch over a cancer-stricken child. Such a vision is largely

rejected within *War of the Worlds*, whose narrative construction not only places the protagonists as among the throngs of distressed, angry survivors, but insists that such massive and continuous danger leads to a breakdown of larger communal bonds, not a forging of friendship in the fires of trying circumstances. A similar logic to the earlier disaster films influences the 9/11-centered films, in which the trials and emotional stress brought on by disaster fosters connection that transcends both societal constraints (race, class) and personal traumas. These narratives reflect both films' real-life roots, as they are based upon actual events largely seen as stories of hope and proactive resistance. As both filmmakers are both answerable to the survivors and families of 9/11 victims and are invested in the larger public understandings of September 11 as a time of national "coming together," reflecting a sense of positive community as coming from 9/11 makes sense on a pragmatic as well as artistic level. *War of the Worlds* evokes the emotions and experiences of September 11 vividly, but it's ultimate status as a fictional narrative gives the film the distance from the actual tragedy to consider alternatives to the dominant understanding of the American public and Manhattan populace as noble, self-sacrificing, defiant in the face of outside threat. For Ray, his children, and the refugees he encounters, a 9/11-like event exposes the selfishness, desperation, and even madness beneath the seemingly placid societies the viewer saw calmly going about its business in the opening montage. This communal slip into a more base emotional state reflects the film's overall tone of frenzied anxiety, in which survival becomes paramount as random attacks continue to slaughter hundreds of people. So long as the danger remains present, the film implies, many (though not all) people will place themselves above all others.

The film's evocation of a frightening and decimated world as experienced through the bewildered eyes of one family would lack much of its relentlessly intense impact if not for Spielberg's use of restricted narration, lighting and image quality that heavily accent realism but is occasionally used expressively, and extensive use of long takes with a mobile and often handheld camera to create both an atmosphere of all-enveloping dread and a visceral connection to the terrors (and wonders) of localized destruction. As previously mentioned, *War of the Worlds* only leaves the side of either Ray or one of his children in its prologue and epilogue portions, meaning that the vast majority of events are experienced by the viewer the same way they are experienced by the family: suddenly, without warning or context. Perhaps the only moment in which the viewer is above Ray initially, when we are aware that the cause of the freak lightning storms and initial attacks are the invading alien forces. However, once their presence is firmly established in the minds of Ray and his children, both them and the viewer lack any sense of where they are, what their plans are, and what parts of the world have been affected, except when Ray (and the viewer) is directly told by others of the bleak circumstances around the world. The viewer only knows that as Ray and his children travel through the northeast, the alien tripods could appear and attack at any moment, without the sorts of warnings that come in more omniscient narrations: from generals and government officials within dimly lit headquarters, or from brilliant scientists who reveal the overall design of the aliens' plans and methods. This constant sense of not knowing, of perennially expecting the worst, helps give the film its almost exhausting sense of dread-infused suspense: a feeling that comes as much from the establishment of the characters'



helplessness in the face of the alien onslaught as it does the sudden and seemingly random nature of the attacks. Such a moment is experienced when Ray and his children attempt to quickly board a ferry as an alien tripod suddenly appears in the distant hills. Its presence is not completely without warning. Spielberg places the visual focus within the bustling scene upon Rachel as she looks offscreen and sees strange movement within the trees. Nevertheless, its abrupt entrance onto the scene underlines the notion of the threat's inescapability and the sense of constant unpreparedness felt both by the protagonists and the viewer. It stands in marked contrast to, say, *Independence Day's* slow build-up to the central attack, in which viewer expectations are slowly ratcheted up as characters determine the scope of the danger and catch up to our knowledge of the aliens' malignant intentions. In both films, we await the inevitable attack. Spielberg, however, keeps us in a perennial state of anxiety and fear for the characters, while Emmerich guides us to a specific moment in which our expectations of spectacular destruction are finally and vividly met.

This narrow focus upon a working-class father, his teenage son, and his ten-year-old daughter, however, has more resonant implications, particularly in relation to the film's evocation of September 11. When thinking about September 11 as an event within public memory, certain elements stand out and make it unique. Though often compared to Pearl Harbor, the attacks on the World Trade Center had little to do with the military or even the government, though their assistance was obviously lent soon after the tragedy occurred. When thinking about who was there at the moment of impact and who was affected, public imagery tells us that it was civilians: everyday people going to work like another other day. Their reactions reflected the sheer

unpreparedness anyone had for the event: running, screaming, gaping at the destruction, calling loved ones to ensure their own safety. The stories of heroism from the day primarily do not come from the efforts of government officials and national leaders (though their words offered comfort and support); they come from the acts of civilians. Even the veneration of the police officers and firefighters that took place in the aftermath of the attacks due to their constant work and rescue efforts has a blue-collar tinge to it, as many of these men and women did not come from wealthy or privileged background and spoke of their work with self-effacing, “just doing my job” humility.

Like those in New York and Washington on September 11, Ray and his children are consistently caught off guard but the widespread cataclysm occurring around them. They possess no control over its end, nor do they know of the most efficacious way to prevent their own deaths: a position tied directly to their status as civilians who never expected nor experienced anything approaching this level of chaos and terror. The viewer experiences this confusion along with them through the denial of narrative context that provides a certain amount of distance from the character’s direct experiences. However, the viewer also recognizes that the people they are watching onscreen in peril are a familial unit, which underlines the pathos within their vulnerable situation. This is not to say that the death of a professional comrade seen in many disaster films both before and after September 11 does not pack an emotional punch. Still, the thought of a father losing his daughter or son (which, indeed, the viewer assumes he has for part of the film) somehow imbue moments of particularly intense peril with an added degree of dread. And while it

would be somewhat glib to say that September 11 heightened viewer sensitivity to familial death, the high visibility of 9/11 widows, widowers, and even orphans within national media coverage perhaps makes the notion of a family member dying in a similar attack within the cinematic realm seem less implausible and even more resonant than before.

If restricted narration places the viewer intensely with the protagonists by leveling the hierarchy of knowledge within a mysterious and deadly situation, visual and aural elements emphasize this alignment by restricting what and how we experience the cataclysms surrounding the family. Spielberg accomplishes this immersion in the jarring experience of widespread destruction through a combination of effects, most notably the use of long takes with a mobile and sometimes handheld camera. Rather than creating a sense of freneticism or chaos through rapid editing (though some of the major action sequences use this technique to a point), Spielberg will employ lengthier takes that follow the actions of his protagonists, with camera movement that either smoothly track through the space or move jumpily to trail frantic character motion. The latter technique lacks the extremity of the cinema vérité style employed by Greengrass in *United 93*, but it also invites the viewer to experience chaotic moments with more visceral, on-the-ground sensation than the more distanced camera placement in some of the earlier disaster films. In part, this effect is achieved simply by staying with the characters as they attempt to escape a dangerous situation: the continuous movement with the character keeping the viewer focus upon their physical and emotional responses and defining the disaster principally in terms of its potentially devastating effects upon a sympathetic

protagonist. This stands in opposition to the aesthetic strategies of the 1990s disaster films and even earlier post-9/11 films, in which shots of terrified unknown pedestrians were rapidly interspersed with images of the destruction itself. This move fundamentally shifts the viewing emphasis from one that values the visual splendor and awesome scope of the disaster itself to the potentially deadly consequences that the disaster will inflict upon a known central character. Because the focus remains largely upon the protagonist, this also means that both the spectacular effects of the disaster (exploding buildings, flying cars) and the more devastating ones (dead bodies, suffering pedestrians) occur in relation to the protagonist, perhaps on the edges of the frame. This creates a sense of chaos occurring all around the protagonist, adding to the scene's verisimilitude by implying a larger world of death and destruction that lies outside the scope of the character's experience but temporarily enters from time to time. Furthermore, framing the disaster as an all-encompassing threat that extends beyond the frame also allows the viewer to consider its connections to the September 11 attacks more explicitly, as Spielberg uses such techniques to construct a cinematic universe whose primary emotions are fear and dread, not awe and excitement.

A greater sense of realism within the disaster context is also fostered by the look of the image itself, which Spielberg has given a somewhat grainy, washed-out look that complements the rundown urban neighborhoods and abandoned rural highways that dominate the film. Many shots also seem slightly overexposed, with patches of sunlight reflecting off the ground forming large patches of white within the frame. These images—with their somewhat harsh texture and emphasis upon darker

colors within the frame—speak to the film’s efforts to place the alien attacks within a viable and somewhat somber cinematic universe. However, they sometimes perform an expressive function as well; their colder look—emphasizing grays and blues in the frame—reflects the austere and brutal world which the characters occupy. Spielberg sometimes underlines this by going in the opposite direction, using wilder, more garishly colorful lighting to establish a space as visually ominous, as seen in certain shots of Ogilvy’s basement or the vivid blue, yellow and green light flashing into Mary Ann and Tim’s basement as a plane crash occurs outside.

A prime example of the way Spielberg utilizes these strategies—restricted narration, indirectly subjective camerawork with long takes, mostly realistic lighting and mise-en-scene, as well as a mixture of diegetic and nondiegetic sound—can be seen within the first alien attack sequence.<sup>156</sup> Before exploring this in further detail, however, it’s worth taking a moment to examine Spielberg’s use of long, mobile takes in non-action sequences surrounding the family and its responses to the alien threat. Sometimes these long takes function in a similar manner as within scenes of explicit danger, highlighting the emotional intensity and chaos of the moment through both long takes that focus the viewer’s attention upon the interactions between members of the familial unit and energetic camera movement that draws attention to the relationship between the characters and their increasingly unruly environment. An example of this would be the bravura, two-and-a-half minute take (actually a

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<sup>156</sup> Another prominent example of these strategies within the film (perhaps with more explicitly expressive lighting) is the scene in which Ray and the children run into a safer room in Mary Ann and Tim’s home as some sort of violent cataclysm occurs outdoors. The next day, Ray and the viewer discover a plane has crashed outside. This is a complex and evocative use of these techniques that has been written about elsewhere and will not be covered within this study. However, its use of film form is noteworthy, even if there is not room to fully comment upon it here. For further analysis, see: Warren Buckland, *Directed By Steven Spielberg: Poetics of the Contemporary Hollywood Blockbuster* (New York: Continuum, 2006) 216-217.

seamless composite of several shots) in which Ray, Robbie, and Rachel drive their working car through a highway full of nonfunctioning cars. The camera barrels alongside Ray's van, moving smoothly around the outside of the entirety of the car and occasionally entering the interior as Robbie attempts to calm a screaming Rachel and Ray tells Robbie of the attack he saw. When the camera tracks into or near the car's interior, Spielberg does not go into close-ups of any of the characters, but will keep at least two (if not all three) members of the family in frame to emphasize their varying reactions to the disaster and the frictions and/or comforts they provide one another. However, he will also suddenly track out as Ray moves around other stationary vehicles on the road that suddenly enter and exit the frame as he drives by them, both emphasizing their position as the only people with an operational vehicle and reminding the viewer of the larger chaos happening outside of the car even as he remains primarily focused upon the familial drama. A quick, energetic score and harsh diegetic sounds of screeching tires and honking horns underlines this balance of personal tension and its relation to the wider environmental factors surrounding the characters. These track-outs also work to add a touch of humor to an otherwise taut sequence, as when Ray's emphatically dismisses Robbie's guess as to where the attackers came from "what, like Europe?" Ray's emphatic response ("No, Robbie! Not, like, Europe!") is followed immediately by a fast backward track as Ray swerves to avoid a stalled car, which also provides a moment of pause in the dialogue to laugh at the incongruity of Robbie's conjecture versus the sobering reality. And even when the camera holds a more stationary position in the front of the car as Ray describes the attackers, it visibly shakes as it records the conversation, visually expressing the

tension felt by the family as they desperately attempt to leave the area. This interplay between intense personal drama and larger apocalyptic events plays a critical role in relating the Ferrier's troubles to their place within the large disaster, giving their familial drama weight within the narrative while constantly reminding viewers of the larger, more amorphous dangers that await them.

Other times, however, he uses similar techniques to underline emotional and interpersonal dynamics within the narrative, foregrounding character and familial struggles so they remain firmly placed within the viewer's mind as the attack sequences become more dominant within the film. A subtle example of this occurs when Ray and his children walk down into Mary Ann and Tim's empty basement to sleep for the evening (the couple is not home, having left to visit her parents in Boston). Spielberg positions the camera near the bottom of the stairs and quickly tracks rightward as they walk into basement. The movement allows the viewer to speedily establish the contrast between the couple's spacious, organized basement to Ray's grungier surroundings, though the space also corresponds with the cool grays and blues that have dominated the film's visual style. The camera rest on a long shot of the three standing and discussing sleeping arrangements, the continuous shot registering the slight moments of physical tension and verbal pauses between Ray and his children. The camera then rightward tracks again, establishing both the cozy space under the stairs where the children sleep versus the separate armchair that Ray will sit in alone. As Ray looks around the space alone in the center background of the frame, Ray and Robbie affectionately say good night to one another in the partially obscured left midground: the uneasy, tense scouting of their father visually juxtaposed with the

effortless nightly routine of the siblings within the same frame. The scene ends when the camera tracks around to the right side of the chair in which Ray finally sits, with Rachel seen out of focus in the shot's background. Before he sits, he clandestinely removes the gun from the back of his pants, which the audience is privy to in the foreground but is hidden from the children. As he sits, his right profile mostly covered in shadow, his exhausted visage in the foreground is visually contrasted to Rachel calmly looking over an object in the background. By utilizing uncomfortable compositions and visual juxtapositions constructed by camera movement within a long take (57 seconds), Spielberg communicates not only the continuing unease between Ray and his children, but also the growing strain of Ray's dramatically increased role as a parental protector: a strain his children must not see. Focusing upon these quieter moments also allows for the build-up of sympathy necessary for the viewer to care about the characters when their lives are in danger later in the film.

The first attack sequence, however, remains both the choicest example of the film's dominant aesthetic strategies and a useful tool through which to discuss two elements of *War of the Worlds* that require going a bit beyond the film itself: its potential political/allegorical significance and its self-reflexivity in terms of the viewer's relationship to cinematic disaster spectacle. The sequence begins by visually establishing our alignment with Ray, while also placing him within the context of the panicking neighborhood crowd. Spielberg establishes the centrality of Ray's perspective as he runs past a mechanic friend and his assistant arguing about why all of the cars (including their own) have died. The camera, placed at roughly the distance between Ray and the men, moves in a slightly curved pan as the men talk at



the camera (a la, Ray) about their car issues. This places the viewer immediately within Ray's perspective, as well as establishes that Ray belongs to a community of people—friends, acquaintances—who are subject to the effects of the forthcoming attack as well. It's also worth noting that the people Ray talks to are largely defined as chatty, blunt, and argumentative: characteristics associated with residents of New York City, which can be clearly seen from Ray's house. As Ray continues to run toward the intersection where several lightning bolts seemingly struck the same place, the camera follows him in a lengthy, leftward tracking long shot, continuing our identification with his movement and place within the scene. Riding alongside him in the frame, however, is a young man on a skateboard, traveling in the same direction and at the same pace as Ray. His presence, as well as the people that the camera glides by and whose panicked conversations are intermixed with the low, tense score, once again convey Ray's place within the crowd, continue to underline Ray's role within a larger, familiar environments. This stands in marked contrast to some of the earlier disaster films, in which large metropolises like New York or Los Angeles are used primarily for their charged symbolic nature as sites of national identity. Here, the viewer is placed within a town about to be attacked, and these early shots—as well as Ray speculating with a couple of friends about what the lightning bolts and power outages possibly signify—establish the texture of the community that the attacks are about to hit: a community marked by a gritty yet magnanimous tone about to be upended by the alien attacks.

Once Ray and the two acquaintances he runs into approach the site of the lightning strikes, Spielberg structures the slow emergence of the alien ship around

Ray and others passively reacting to a series of small cataclysms that creates a prolonged and unnerving sense of continual chaos. This is established through a pattern of destruction and disruption. Spielberg utilizes a mixture of unsteady, on-the-ground shots with high-angle crane shots that convey both the increasing amount of destruction and panic as the alien ship begins to emerge and its effects upon Ray and the individuals surrounding him. The lack of musical score during this sequence underlines these feelings of tense uncertainty, as the viewer is given no nondiegetic indication of the main disaster through musical build-up or punctuation. The viewer only has the mysterious underground rumblings of the emerge alien spacecraft and the sounds of cracking glass and crumbling stone, further creating a sense of all-encompassing chaos with no clear end. An example of this strategy can be found in the way Spielberg handles the collapse of a church in the town square. The viewer's first indication of the large brick church's imminent destruction comes near the end of a leftward tracking crane shot, where a growing crack in the street moves toward the building's foundation and it begins to crack. However, this takes place within a wider frame of screaming pedestrians and property destruction, making the church's endangerment another element of the chaotic landscape. We cut to a ground level rightward tracking shot of Ray running with the church in the background. He stops and looks as the church begins to split in two in front of him. Ray is framed in a medium long shot, with his back to the camera as he and the viewer together helplessly watch the church crack in half. Spielberg keeps the camera distanced from the destruction, placing the emphasis upon the slow crumbling of the building rather than having it fall in a separate, spectacular shot. Having Ray stare helplessly on as

this occurs underlines his powerlessness and confusion. Neither Ray nor the audience is allowed to see the building collapse fully, however, as the road begins to crack under Ray's feet, and the camera tilts away from the church to follow Ray's backward leap away from the hole in the ground. These interruptions create the sense of multiple disasters occurring simultaneously around Ray, rather than focusing upon the completion of one, leading to an anxiety over when the inevitable attack will actually occur. When Spielberg does break from Ray's perspective and focuses exclusively upon the church's collapse, he downplays the destruction itself, abstracting the church's demise by having the harsh sunlight hit the spewing water from a broken fire hydrant right in front of the church. The church becomes a silhouette in the frame, with screaming pedestrians still seen fleeing in the bottom of the frame. And when the church's spire finally collapses, it occurs in an extreme long shot. The image instills a sense of helplessness within the viewer, rather than kinetic excitement. The spire does not explode or collapse extravagantly, but merely topples over without fanfare. This is far cry from the straight-on shot of the White House's spectacular demolition (complete with cut-ins to exploding columns and massive fire balls) in *Independence Day*, underscoring the manner in which Spielberg crafts an entire world of disaster but only reveals portions of it to the viewer in order to create a feeling of overwhelming chaos rather than a concentrated moment of wondrous disaster spectacle.

When the alien ship finally emerges from the ground and looms over the crowd, Spielberg largely refuses to allow the viewer to see the full machine: placing the camera on the ground to pick up obscuring dust and debris and using the harsh

image quality to magnify the sun's blinding light. The viewer's restricted knowledge comes more fully into play here. While we may have been aware of the alien's dangerous presence before Ray through the prologue, we have no knowledge of what they look like or how they plan to attack. Spielberg underlines this visually, in a moment where the emerging alien spacecraft is temporarily blocked by heavy gray smoke. The camera rests behind Ray as he crouches by a car and looks on at the smoke that dominates the background frame, when suddenly a car flies out from the smoke and launches into the foreground. Like Ray, the viewer has not idea how and why the car flew into frame, making us hyper-aware of our lack of knowledge about the alien threat. This is further underlined by the continually fragmented or obstructed manner in which we and the characters see the alien tripod. Like the characters, the viewer strains to see the machine in its fullness. Spielberg emphasizes the act of looking within these moments before the ship attacks the people, as the screen becomes filled with slightly obscured or mediated images of the tripod: reflected in a car windshield; partially visible through heavy smoke; a man hastily snapping photographs as it hovers over the crowd. Even a distanced aerial shot of the tripod is partially obscured by the surrounding smoke and debris. The musical score resumes here, creating a sense of mounting anxiety but also wonder within the viewer as we collectively await the aliens to act. Besides placing the viewer more directly in the position of Ray and his fellow crowd members, this strategy of visual obstruction once again underlines Spielberg's strategy of creating a dominant mood of dread and fear within the audience, emphasizing the fear-laced mystery of the alien tripods than framing them in shots meant solely to admire them as cutting-edge special effects.

Compared, say, to the alien ships in *Independence Day*, the depiction of the tripods is far less presentational, aiming to place them within a chaotic and mysterious context of mounting fear. However, the visual blockages, mediated imagery, and images of pedestrians (including Ray) gawking simultaneously draws attention to our own desire to see the tripod fully. Seeing its reflection in a car window, for example, only increases our curiosity about seeing the machine head-on and not through a reflective surface. Despite its presentation as a clear threat within a realistic context, Spielberg nevertheless toys with the fundamental desire within disaster movies: to see spectacular imagery as aesthetically pleasing as it is terrifying.

Spielberg foregrounds this desire to fully see the forthcoming cause of mass destruction and death when the attacks suddenly begin, framing the first casualties of the alien attack through the screen of a dropped video camera: the death itself mediated through the small screen. On the one hand, this helps give the death an added sense of verisimilitude. By showing the viewer a mediated image of the death, it implies that there is a further, more “real” version of the individual’s demise that occurred within the filmic universe but that we were not privy to see. Simultaneously, it draws attention to the viewer’s very action of looking: placing a smaller frame within the frame, we are briefly reminded that what we are watching is in and of itself a filmed representation of disaster. Given both the use of handheld camera footage within the news coverage of September 11 itself and the questions regarding the potentially altered pleasures of disaster cinema in a post-9/11 world, the moment both pulls us into the visceral reality of the moment and allows us a moment of pointed self-reflexivity. The deaths themselves are as simple as they are disturbing. Once the

rays touch a human being, they simply explode into dust and float away. This is more than murder; it's negation, and Spielberg frames multiple deaths within a lengthy backward track, underlining the relentlessness of the chaos and inescapability of death. The sheer number of deaths he captures within a shot only increases the sense of utter hopelessness and inevitable annihilation. Though these are relative strangers to the viewer, these moments lack the jokey quality of some of the pedestrian deaths in earlier disaster films. One shot, for example, quickly tracks back to follow a woman in close-up: her despairing, tear-streaked face slowly dissolving into dust as the beam strikes her from behind. Here, the 9/11 imagery comes fast and furious: the human dust collected on Ray's face as he sprints through the streets; the remains of charred clothing floating through the air. These images are not central within the image, but exist on the margins of the frame (as when Ray pauses to catch his breath behind a house after the attack ends, and burned rags hover in the far left background of the frame). As with the build-up to the attack, Spielberg's visual construction places the devastation all around the viewer. He emphasizes the totality of the destruction by emphasizing some details, while leaving others to be caught briefly as they flash or float by at the edges of the frame. Such a tactic is in keeping with Ray's limited perspective, and hints at a level of destruction and death that is incomprehensible to Ray and the viewer. Some have accused Spielberg of exploiting 9/11 imagery in order to provoke audience reaction. However, its use within the film seems more complicated. By not focusing upon the imagery itself but letting it exist within the overall frame and occur through plausible, narrative-driven reasoning (clothes flying through the air, for example, due to the disappearance of the bodies

once inside them), the images becomes part of the texture of the disaster itself. They recall September 11 within the viewer's mind, as they are meant to. However, their visual and narrative integration into the overall scene allows the viewer to experience them less as diegesis-shattering insertions than as part of the new visual vocabulary of real-life disaster: totems of a new era where cinematic disaster can no longer be separated from its factual counterpart.

In addition to charges of emotional exploitation, some critics also accused Spielberg of utilizing the imagery of real-life tragedy without offering a cogent political or social allegory for a post-9/11 society. Indeed, the resonances with contemporary social fears that past adaptations supposedly touched upon made some critics and commentators eager to find what, exactly, Spielberg was trying to speak to—in a sociopolitical sense—through the use of such highly-charged imagery. Some, like *The Los Angeles Times*' Carina Chocano, detected a socially conservative bent within the narrative, extrapolating a celebration of the strong patriarch from Ray's strengthening position as a father figure.<sup>157</sup> Some scholars, meanwhile, have debated Koepp's previously-quoted assertion that *War of the Worlds* works as a covert allegory for the modern-day Iraqi refugee experience. "The 'shock and awe' created by the aliens in *War of the Worlds* resembles the panic generated by the American military more than it does the devastating, but as yet singular, attack on the World Trade Center," argues Lester D. Friedman.<sup>158</sup> Andrew M. Gordon disagrees, however, saying that, among other holes in the Iraq War argument, "the film cannot be about both the 9/11 attacks on America and the American occupation of Iraq

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<sup>157</sup> Carina Chocano, "Movies: The Director's Art," *The Los Angeles Times*, 10 July 2005: E1.

<sup>158</sup> Lester D. Friedman, *Citizen Spielberg* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006) 159.

because the two are fundamentally different events: in the former, the Americans were the victims, but in the latter, the aggressors.”<sup>159</sup> So seemingly ripe is both the source novel and the film for allegorical and ideological readings that Edward Rothstein of *The New York Times* wrote an entire article about the multitude of ways the story has been read throughout the century, concluding that Spielberg “seems uncertain about what allegorical attitude to take to the [Iraq] war.”<sup>160</sup>

As I’ve gestured toward earlier in the chapter, however, it seems somewhat disingenuous to demand a firm political or allegorical stance from a film that, ultimately, does not seem particularly interested in putting forth one. Spielberg’s earlier comments on the film’s relation to September 11 define his reasoning behind making the film not to explicitly comment upon its societal reaction, but to work through and capture some of the experiential memories he has of the day. This seems to play out within the film itself. There are multiple visual references to 9/11 (besides the ones seen in the first attack, Ray and his children also pass a wall full of handmade missing posters reminiscent of those tacked up in downtown Manhattan after September 11). However, they are always placed within the wider context of the frame and narrative, serving as background to the family’s central plight. Ultimately, their “purpose” (to box them into a somewhat limiting term) is to work with the other elements previously mentioned—pedestrian protagonists, restricted narration, visceral long takes following character movement, realistic lighting and mise-en-scene, and others—to create for the viewer a sense of what experiencing and surviving the most dominant and culturally resonant disaster of modern times. As for Iraq resonances,

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<sup>159</sup> Gordon 263.

<sup>160</sup> Edward Rothstein, “Connections: Martians Attack, With Extra Baggage,” *The New York Times*, 11 July 2005: E1.



while Koepp explicitly claimed to imbue the film with his anti-war sentiment, it seems as if Spielberg chose not to press the connection very far. This does not seem to be a product of squeamishness surrounding hot-button contemporary issues. Arguably, if he wanted us to see Iraq connections, he could have placed imagery, characters, or even narrative strategies to impress such an idea more explicitly into viewer's minds.

Indeed, the one extrafilmic concern that Spielberg seems to be invested in exploring throughout *War of the Worlds* is the aforementioned issue of watching disaster spectacle in a post-9/11 world. From the uses of reflective surfaces and mediated imagery to the insistence upon drawing attention to whether events and images are or aren't seen, the film consistently weaves the notion of looking into its visual and narrative structure. Through these, Spielberg insists that the desire to witness scenes of destruction and death can be traumatizing and frightening, but are also understandable impulses. The scene that most directly confronts disaster spectators comes between Ray and Robbie, the latter of whom has been galvanized by the violent imagery he's seen into joining the military to fight the alien threat. Late in the film, Robbie runs towards a large-scale conflict between American soldiers and the alien troops. The conflict is mostly obscured by the hill itself, with only flashing lights, thunderous offscreen noise and a few shots of the American troops providing context as to what might be occurring. As Ray wrestles Robbie to the ground and insists that he stay, Robbie begs Ray to let him go. His plea is not to join the fray as a soldier, however, but so that he can actually see the cataclysmic fight as it occurs. Ray eventually lets him go to do this. He does this mostly because strangers are

inadvertently taking away Rachel further down the hill, but a pause before each man go their separate ways indicates at least a silent understanding of what the other must do. Eric Lichtenfeld sees the moment as Spielberg sending a wider indictment of a media-drenched American culture whose obsession with watching violent spectacle (real or imagined) both reached its pinnacle on September 11 and exposed the ignoble nature of the impulse:

“This need to behold spectacular disaster, taken to the point of self-annihilation, serves as an indictment of our own compulsive intake of such images. This appetite of ours, both fed and deepened by twenty-four-hour cable news channels and the internet, may be best represented by news outlets’ constant replaying of footage showing the two airplanes strike the World Trade Center and the towers’ later collapse. Robbie’s choice to be a witness to disaster rather than a survivor of it, suggests also that in a country oversaturated by media, the need to see has become more base, more primal, than even the need to repel invading hordes.”<sup>161</sup>

Lichtenfeld’s argument points to some of what’s at stake within the scene. Indeed, it is a jarring moment when Robbie seems so willing to abandon his family and most likely sacrifice his life in order to simply witness the battle. This obsessive need to see reaches a kind of mania, and perhaps finds corollaries both in the film’s fictional pedestrians (including Ray) who gazed upon and recorded the alien tripod in the first battle scene and real-life by-standers who recorded the Twin Towers collapsing and bodies plunging off the buildings rather than attempting to run for their lives. However, the scene complicates this understanding because Spielberg chooses to obscure what appears to be a truly epic battle behind the large hill, providing only hints of the mass explosions and cataclysms taking place just beyond our line of sight. As viewers of disaster cinema, we are accustomed to following Robbie (or a Robbie-

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<sup>161</sup> Eric Lichtenfeld, *Action Speaks Louder: Violence, Spectacle, and the American Action Movie* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007) 238.

like character) into the battle zone, where we can both witness the spectacular aesthetics of destruction while perhaps also following the individual adventures of the protagonist. Here, however, the camera does not follow Robbie. The viewer stays with Ray as he rescues Rachel and takes cover. It would be overstating the case to say that the viewer is disappointed to stay with Ray. We've invested too much narrative time with him and Rachel to want to so easily abandon them. However, the viewer has also grown to care about Robbie, and fears for his safety as he crosses over the hill. Moreover, we are curious as to what spectacular things he will see: things worth sacrificing your family, safety, and very life for. Spielberg's film is a post-9/11 disaster movie in many respects, but this may be one of the central markers of the genre as it develops into the decade: an awareness of the push-pull between wanting to engage in the spectacle of disaster made all the more potent and fascinating by September 11 and the simultaneous impulse to place the focus upon the sobering realities of disaster as put forth by those very events.

To that end, critics and scholars have engaged in one last and fairly widespread criticism of *War of the Worlds*: the ending. The finale of the film operates on the level of the personal and the global. The latter posits that what eventually destroys the alien threat is not human force, but the very bacteria within the Earth's air and water, which is incompatible with the aliens' bodies. This ending may seem anticlimactic or even jarring to the first time viewer, but Spielberg takes it directly from Wells' novel, which at least explains its origins as deriving from the text itself and not Spielberg's own invention. On the more personal end, Ray and Rachel finally arrive in Boston, where they meet with Mary Ann, her parents, and—shockingly—

Robbie. The film does not explain how he survived the attack, and Ray does not ask. He simply looks on in muted astonishment and hugs him close. Criticisms have run the gamut, with some claiming this conclusion fails simply due to the sentimental impulse to seemingly resurrect a character the film had implied would not survive. Buckland admits his ending may seem cloying, simply following the Hollywood happy-ending convention, in which all family members survive and the less-than-perfect father figure redeems himself in the eyes of his ex-wife, although he partially defends the choice by adding that “the film imitates the ending of Wells’ novel, in which, beyond all expectations, the narrator meets up with his wife again, whom he thought must be dead.”<sup>162</sup> Friedman, however, sees the ending as actively working to dismantle the realistic world Spielberg has constructed, deeming the narrative inconsistencies and unexplained questions he sees at the film’s end as “glaring intrusions that disrupt the rush of the narrative by ignoring internal logic and consistency within the world on the screen.”<sup>163</sup>

These are fair criticisms. One can see why ending the film with two events that the viewer was largely (though not entirely) unprepared for has been seen by many as frustrating, if not worse. As someone relatively nonplussed by the ending, I would only put forth that it is consistent in its reliance upon the mysterious province of fate to solve narrative problems on both the macro and micro level. The explanation for how the aliens eventually die (told by Freeman in voiceover as the camera zooms out of the Ferrier story and into a drop of water similar to how the film started) insists that forces beyond human sight and control ultimately saved them. In terms of the

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<sup>162</sup> Buckland 219.

<sup>163</sup> Friedman 152.

viewing experience, this is what happened to Robbie as well. To me, it would seem even more cloying to have Robbie explain how he survived so seemingly insurmountable an event as the hill battle. However, I will say that this emphasis upon placing our trust in the mysteries of the universe feels somewhat out of place within the overall scheme of Spielberg's film, particularly after he chose to ignore many of the religious undercurrents within Wells' novel and the 1953 film. Generally speaking, none of the characters here possess the overt religious feelings of Wells' protagonist. This denial is particularly notable in the first attack scene in Spielberg's handling of the collapsing church. The 1953 film framed its fall as a major moment within the initial alien attack, symbolizing the invaders' malignant assault on American society and underscoring the importance of religious faith to the plot in general. Spielberg's placement of the falling church as simply one more element within a generally chaotic space can perhaps be seen as a subtle statement on what elements from earlier versions he has deemed unimportant in his adaptation. It makes it all the more strange and potentially unsatisfying, then, to hinge the film's ending so strongly upon the idea of the mysterious workings of God or fate. This last-minute glance to the heavens, then, might simply have struck many as an insincere act for a film as grounded in a tangible—and secular—cinematic world.

Critics generally responded well to *War of the Worlds*, with several critics applauding Spielberg translating his kinetic cinematic impulses into a disaster film reflective of contemporary fears and traumas. *Entertainment Weekly*'s Owen Gleiberman enthusiastically deemed the film "a true popcorn apocalypse," adding that "Spielberg plays off the post-9/11 image of a potential attack that is vast and

relentless, epic in its horror, yet that deep in our imagination looms frighteningly close.”<sup>164</sup> Stephen Hunter of *The Washington Post* put it in more visceral terms, calling the film “a brilliantly told tale” that “really rips along; it seizes you in its first seconds, holds you spellbound for two short hours and expels you, breathless and spent.”<sup>165</sup> Indeed, almost every major critic praised Spielberg’s visual ingenuity and ability to construct intense and unsettling sequences. However, few were completely satisfied with the work as a whole. A.O. Scott of *The New York Times* offered that the film has some wonderful set pieces, and that it is “perhaps best appreciated as an anthology of such moments, bound together by a serviceable, if familiar conceit.”<sup>166</sup> Others questioned somewhat ambivalently whether Spielberg’s use of 9/11 imagery flirted with exploitation. One thing almost universally decreed, however, was the film’s loss of narrative steam as it progressed, culminating in a deeply unsatisfying and, to some, even insulting final scene. Ty Burr of *The Boston Globe*, who complimented Spielberg on capturing the essence of the September 11 attacks in some of his disaster scenes, had particularly harsh words for the film’s affirmative finale: “If you’re going to take us back to 9/11 and even amp it up to 11 you can’t try to flatter us by pretending that everyone comes back alive. To do so condescends to audiences and trivializes the real event, and some of us may even find that offensive.”<sup>167</sup> This reflects a larger worry present even in many positive reviews of the film: that placing 9/11 imagery and themes within the disaster/sci-fi genre would

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<sup>164</sup> Owen Gleiberman, “Movie Review: War of the Worlds,” *Entertainment Weekly*, June 29 2005, 05 March 2009 < <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,1078167,00.html>>.

<sup>165</sup> Stephen Hunter, “The Great ‘War,’” *The Washington Post*, 29 June 2005: C01.

<sup>166</sup> A.O. Scott, “Film Review: Another Terror Attack, but Not by Humans,” *The New York Times*, 29 June 2005: E1.

<sup>167</sup> Ty Burr, “The Sum of All Fears,” *The Boston Globe*, 29 June 2005, E1.

inevitably lead to trivialization and disrespect. Perhaps this is why so many critics chose to frame their praise as the enjoyment of a rip-roaring and visceral yarn, as it allowed them to applaud Spielberg's cinematic ingenuity while ultimately denying the film any import besides its role as a thrill-ride. Defined this way, it allows them to side-step further analysis of how the September 11 imagery might play into the thrills of the film, as well as provide a space within which to engage those collective fears and curiosities that surround the attacks.

These caveat-sprinkled critical affirmations only further helped *War of the Worlds*, which conquered media speculation when the film's high box office numbers seemingly confirmed Cruise's escapades had little discernible effect upon the film's popularity. Indeed, the film's six-day domestic gross of \$112 million proved a career high for Cruise, as well as for Spielberg and Paramount. However, it also failed to completely escape its media hype, as it failed to break Hollywood of its now-nineteen week box office slump (in fairness, the corresponding weekend in 2004 saw the release of *Spider-Man 2*, which made \$180 million in its first six days). Despite this perceived disappointment within certain sections of Hollywood and media reports (*Daily Variety* noted that "while no one thought the pic would match "Spider-Man 2," industry estimates had been a bit higher than the results"), the film became a sizable hit within both the domestic and international markets, grossing \$234 million and \$357 million, respectively, for a combined worldwide total of over \$591 million.<sup>168</sup> Though impressive overall, the film's popularity within the United States is of particular note, given its explicit 9/11 overtones and darker mood. Of course, the film's heavy marketing, dazzling sci-fi special effects and presence of Spielberg and

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<sup>168</sup> Gabriel Snyder, "Invaders Mint Mega Moolah," *Daily Variety*, 5 July 2005: 1.

Cruise (who remains a star regardless of embarrassing public antics) helped propel the film to such heights. Furthermore, it would be disingenuous to call the film a word-of-mouth sensation: a little less than half the film's total domestic gross came within the first week of release, followed by 50% drops over the next two weeks. Nevertheless, the sheer box office numbers indicate that American filmgoers were not turned off by a film they may have heard made its ties to September 11 open and somewhat disturbing. So long as a director as trusted as Spielberg and a star as likeable—if somewhat tarnished—as Cruise remain at the forefront of a film that very much remains an effects-heavy action blockbuster with a strong emotional hook (family in peril), the result can be a disaster film at once boundary-pushing and widely accepted. However, one should also not rule out the film's explicit treatment of 9/11 as a possible reason for its success, as it handled the attacks in a direct and provocative manner unseen within mainstream film up until this point. Speculation upon how appropriate or effective Spielberg's use of September 11 within the film might have in fact drawn people who had little interest in a summer blockbuster but were intrigued by the idea of a serious-minded look at 9/11 imagery and themes within the safety of a generic context.

### **Cloverfield**

In many respects, *Cloverfield* pushes the disaster genre's exploration of 9/11 themes and imagery in even more prickly and immediate directions than *War of the Worlds*—from explicitly setting its disaster narrative in modern-day Manhattan to imbuing the city's attack with visceral immediacy through the use of what is meant to be handheld video camera footage of the event. Examining the film's production



history, however, one finds that the film's connections to September 11 seemed secondary to the notion of crafting a modern-day monster movie with the spirit of *Godzilla* and the look of *The Blair Witch Project*. This is not to say that *Cloverfield's* ties to September 11 (in both form and content) were elided from public discussions; rather, they became part of the film's larger production narrative of exploring how to make a *Godzilla*-esque disaster film in a manner that audiences would divorce from hokey attempts both old and new and see as legitimately frightening. Furthermore, the content of *Cloverfield* itself became subsumed by a buzz-generating marketing campaign that shrouded the film's premise, central threat, and even title in a veil of carefully-calculated secrecy. In this way, *Cloverfield's* market identity became an intriguing mystery to be unveiled (primarily through the spinning of a web of clues across the internet) and not just a high-concept monster flick marked by herky-jerky camerawork, a lack of recognizable stars, and a particularly downbeat finale—not to mention the often-intense 9/11 resonances weaved throughout.

Though director Matt Reeves' contributions to the unique formal qualities of *Cloverfield* are important and were recognized as such during the build-up to the film's January 18, 2008 release date, media coverage tended to focus on the presence of J.J. Abrams, one of the film's producers primarily known for creating such labyrinthine television series as *Alias* and *Lost*. It was Abrams who initially concocted the notion of revisiting the monster movie, when he and his son walked through several Tokyo toy stores while Abrams was in the city promoting his feature-length directorial debut, *Mission: Impossible 3* (2006). Looking through the boxes upon boxes of *Godzilla* figures, he grew nostalgic for the monster movies he loved

growing up, but questioned how to reframe the genre in a fresh and affecting manner that would get financial backing, particularly in the wake of such high-profile yet underwhelming efforts like Emmerich's *Godzilla* or Peter Jackson's *King Kong* (2005): "I figured it probably wasn't something a studio wanted to rush into. But it still felt like a valid idea. The question was, how do you make it new and relevant?"<sup>169</sup> The answer, in part, came from the conceit of telling the story of a mysterious monster's Manhattan rampage through both the metaphoric lens of a small group of twentysomethings and the actual lens of a handheld camcorder carried throughout the attack by one of the film's characters. Both the emphasis upon a localized band of urbanites struggling to survive a mysterious attack and the use of grainy, shaky footage to capture the wreckage on the fly have obvious resonances with the World Trade Center attacks, and Abrams openly acknowledged that part of the genre's appeal and relevance lied in its ability to grapple with the fears and anxieties of 9/11 while maintaining a comfortable distance from the real-life events. "Cloverfield' is meant to explore the very real and obvious fears we are all living with everyday," Abrams told *The Los Angeles Times*, "to let the audience have the experience but in a much more safe and manageable way..."<sup>170</sup>

Still, it took several other factors brought to the table by both Abrams and Paramount to get the film made. Abrams and his team—Reeves and producer Bryan Burk, all friends since adolescence—approached Paramount Motion Picture Group Chairman Brad Grey and Production President Brad Weston in the fall of 2006 with the idea for *Cloverfield*, which Abrams promised could be made for under \$30

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<sup>169</sup> Jeff Jensen, "Cloverfield': Making a Monster," *Entertainment Weekly* Jan. 18, 2008, 03 Mar. 2009 <<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20172345,00.html>>.

<sup>170</sup> Mark Olsen, "Monster Concept," *The Los Angeles Times*, 16 Jan. 2009: E1.

million (the final budget for the production was \$25 million). Abrams insisted this was possible if (in the words of *The New York Times*' Michael Cieply) "he hired a bunch of no-name actors, shot much of the movie with a single \$1,500 hand-held camera and threw the rest of his cash into special effects."<sup>171</sup> Finally, he outlined a unique marketing plan that would introduce the film to the public in an intriguingly oblique manner. For his part, Grey seemed to place a good deal of trust in Abrams. Though *Mission: Impossible 3* was generally perceived as somewhat of a domestic box-office letdown (\$134 million gross against a \$150 million budget), star Tom Cruise largely got the blame for this, with pundits citing this dip in box-office popularity as the withered fruits of the bizarre seeds sown by his alienating public appearances while promoting *War of the Worlds*. Ultimately, *M:I-3* grossed nearly \$400 million worldwide. Furthermore, Abrams had been placed in charge of reviving the *Star Trek* franchise: as sure a sign as any that Grey had faith in Abrams' vision. On a deeper level, Grey—whose somewhat rocky three-year tenure as chairman had produced both hits and costly flops—saw within his relationship with Abrams the potential to foster a young talent whose career could prove financially and artistically lucrative for the studio. Indeed, Grey revealed the level of both his ambitions and expectations when he recalled telling Abrams that he hoped to support the young director-producer in the way that Universal moguls Lew Wasserman and Sidney Sheinberg guided a young Steven Spielberg in the early 1970s.<sup>172</sup> Abrams' promise at a meeting in the spring of 2007 that he would be closely involved with the film's production helped assuage Grey's concerns about Reeves—whose directing

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<sup>171</sup> Michael Cieply, "Remaking Paramount By the Seat Of His Pants," *The New York Times*, 13 Jan. 2008: 2.1.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

experience consisted mostly of television and a decade-old small indie, *The Pallbearer* (1996)—helming the film (Reeves no doubt demanded a smaller salary than Abrams, as well). Grey's decision also derived from more practical considerations. Another Paramount executive, Rob Moore, noted the box office success of 2007's *Stomp the Yard*, which Screen Gems had released over Martin Luther King's Birthday weekend.<sup>173</sup> The \$13 million film grossed nearly twice its budget over the long weekend. If Paramount could similarly position *Cloverfield* in the marketplace early on, the film's distinct formal rhythms could stand out in a relatively dead month for movies—so long as it was sold to the public in a manner that was intriguing and not alienating. Finally, Grey and Moore may very well have been aware of Joon-ho Bong's *The Host* (2006), whose revamping of monster-movie conventions led to great success in international markets (the film ultimately fared less well when it came to the United States, grossing a mere \$2.2 million after being marketed and distributed largely within the art-house circuit).

From the very beginning of production, it became somewhat difficult to divorce *Cloverfield* itself from the marketing strategies that Abrams and company constructed around the film's release. Soon after giving the go-ahead to begin the film, Paramount informed Abrams that they would need a cut of a teaser trailer as soon as possible in order to attach it before the July release of *Transformers* (2007), a \$150 million co-production with DreamWorks that ended up becoming one of the highest grossing films of the year. But Reeves barely had any footage to stitch together; screenwriter Drew Goddard—also a co-executive producer on *Lost*—had

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

yet to even finish the script.<sup>174</sup> So, rather than beginning to shoot the script, Reeves and company shot the trailer instead: an abbreviated version of the film's actual opening act, in which a Manhattan-based going-away party for protagonist Rob (Michael Stahl-David) is interrupted by the beginning of a mysterious attack on the city. Shot entirely on a handheld camcorder, the trailer ends with a mysterious object being flung from the distance and crashing into the street. Upon closer inspection, the characters and the viewer realize it is the head of the Statue of Liberty. Reeves viewed the process as a positive artistic experience. The actors—all of whom had been kept in the dark about the project's plot until just before production—got a sense of *Cloverfield's* unique demands upon an actor and beefed up their improvisation for the film's often-lengthy and emotionally exhausting scenes of terror and chaos. For Reeves, it provided an opportunity to envision how a film so tantalizing in its conceptual phase might actually be put on screen with a relatively limited budget and shooting schedule, adding that everyone involved “used the trailer as a workshop; the experience taught us how to make the movie.”<sup>175</sup> Still, having the film's shooting schedule dictated by the construction of the trailer underlines how both the studio and creative teams backing *Cloverfield* were relying upon an innovative and buzz-building marketing campaign to create interest in a film with some potential box-office hurdles to overcome.

What resulted was a marketing campaign that arguably garnered more praise than the film itself. It began with the aforementioned trailer, which presented the initial attack scene without any context. The combination of *vérité* camerawork and

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<sup>174</sup> Jensen.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

random acts of urban destruction would probably have unnerved viewers enough, but the trailer did not even provide the film's title, only the involvement of Abrams and the release date some half a year away (an idea that Moore came up with).<sup>176</sup> The preview was the first public acknowledgment of the film's existence, which had been kept largely under wraps until then in order to give the trailer an extra dose of out-of-the-blue mystery. Internet chat rooms began speculating the film's central threat, origins, and actual name (though "Cloverfield" became the film's most common unofficial title until Paramount confirmed it, other monikers floated by fans included "Monstrous," "Colossus," and "Slusho"). In late July, Abrams unveiled the film's poster at Comic-Con in San Diego, showing a decapitated Statue of Liberty in the foreground and a smoking Manhattan in the background, all under a cloudy sky. The poster's only text can be seen in the bottom right, announcing the film's release date. Once again, the combination of explicitly-located urban destruction and calculated ambiguity paid off with a whole new wave of internet buzz around the poster. This, of course, was not the first time a post-9/11 disaster film utilized New York imagery to stoke audience interest: posters for *The Day After Tomorrow* showcased Lady Liberty up to her crown in flood water and snow, respectively. Yet those earlier posters clearly delineated the film's threat (destructive weather), filmmaker and title. Additionally, the image itself shows the New York landmark submerged but standing, with two people hiking across the snow toward a blizzard-blitzed Manhattan skyline: apocalyptic, but also reassuring in its underlining of intact national monuments and the stubborn presence of human beings withstanding the elements. *Cloverfield* provides no such comfort, highlighting the destructive aftereffects of a mysterious

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

being who occupies a mysterious film. And while Lady Liberty's erect torch in *The Day After Tomorrow* connoted a kind of embattled defiance, the raised arm of the beheaded statue in the *Cloverfield* poster feels more hopeless and disturbing. The singularity and impact of the image proved vital enough to keep interested speculation on the film continuing into the fall, while the images' connection to other classic science-fiction films—most notably *Planet of the Apes*—proved strong enough gave the film a market identity as a sci-fi action-disaster film.

However, Abrams was not content with continuing to define *Cloverfield* as strictly an intriguing movie whose mysteries remain solely within the film and will be revealed on opening day. Information cryptically connected to the film's central plot began to be distributed throughout the internet, dropping vague and tantalizing clues that may (or may not) prove relevant to figuring out the film's plot line. Beginning with mysterious "snapshots" of the trailer's party scene and the subsequent military responses with handwritten comments on the back, sources for online clues eventually ranged from the fake MySpace of one of the film's central characters to websites for both a Japanese frozen drink called Slusho (the origin of one of the film's purported titles) and a deep sea drilling company that apparently produced the additives within the aforementioned frozen drink.<sup>177</sup> By dropping these ambiguously connected bits of information (some of which is not even touched upon within the film itself), Abrams and company invite potential viewers into an elaborate online labyrinth that sustains and cultivates interest for a film without revealing all that much about the movie itself; as Ben Walters puts it, audience members "will in many

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<sup>177</sup> Ben Walters, "A Guaranteed Premonition," *Film Quarterly*, Winter 2007/2008: 66.

respects be more deeply embedded in the story than the characters on the screen.”<sup>178</sup>

Even if the campaign inevitably acted to maintain viewer interest until the film’s release, however, the very creation of so elaborate and detailed a universe seems to have been part of the appeal. Abrams’ reputation for building convoluted, character-driven television narratives around amorphous central mysteries proved particularly important in framing *Cloverfield*’s opaque marketing campaign as the slippery, intriguing product of a talented storyteller and not just a studio-backed bamboozle concocted to get audiences to the theater. Even if the film itself flopped, the sheer amount of creative energy invested in the marketing superstructure speaks to Abrams’ interest in constructing intricate and shadowy alternate universes which viewers can enter and explore. “The very idea of a box, and wondering what’s inside a box, is just as engaging—if not more so—to J.J. than the actual contents of a box,” Reeves told *Entertainment Weekly*. “Basically, it’s this: J.J loves mystery.”<sup>179</sup>

Taken together, *Cloverfield* and *War of the Worlds* both reveal surprisingly similar narratives behind the production and public framing of disaster films dealing with 9/11 imagery and themes. Clearly, Spielberg and Cruise possess a higher level of prestige and box office clout than Abrams and Reeves, and their proposed projects reflected different levels of risk for Paramount (hence why *War of the Worlds* was a summer tentpole while *Cloverfield* was framed as a mid-winter alternative). However, the overlaps prove intriguing: both teams approached the same studio (who knew and respected the artistic and financial successes of their previous work) with a project that filled a gap in the studio’s release calendar; that could be produced in a

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<sup>178</sup> Walters 67.

<sup>179</sup> Jensen.



somewhat unusual manner to conform with the studio's needs (Spielberg's marathon shooting schedule; Reeves' minimal budget); and that offered solid marketing potential to a mass audience that incorporated the respective project's dark tone and themes but provided alternatives as well (name recognition for Spielberg and Cruise; elaborate plot opacity for Abrams and Reeves). These unique circumstances inevitably helped both projects' get off the ground. Had *Mission: Impossible 3* stayed on schedule for a summer 2005 opening, perhaps Paramount would have been more leery about Spielberg's vivid and unsettling evocations of September 11. Had Grey not hoped to build a further relationship with Abrams and capitalize on the lack of mid-January film product, perhaps *Cloverfield* would have remained in the "intriguing but risky" pile on a Paramount executives' desk. Who knows; perhaps both of these projects would have seen the light of day regardless, with studio executives recognizing that audiences remain intrigued by disaster films that directly engage with their contemporary fears and anxieties. What it reveals, though, is the extent to which films with potentially disturbing content take shape through a particular and sometimes unlikely set of industrial, cultural, and personal circumstances.

As a film, *Cloverfield*'s impact upon the viewer remains inextricably tied to its central conceit, which frames the onscreen images as found footage taken by a pedestrian during the monster's attack on Manhattan. Its impact upon both the viewer's ability to empathize with the characters and the level of self-reflexivity within the film itself separate it from almost any other film considered within this study, including *War of the Worlds*. *Cloverfield* connects to Spielberg's film,

however, in both films overlapping narrative and formal strategies to reframe the disaster genre in a post-9/11 context—an ambiguous and hostile central threat, pedestrian characters, restricted narration, and disaster sequences that formally emphasize confusion and terror over aesthetic wonder. By analyzing how Reeves augments these strategies with the employment of the handheld camcorder conceit, we can then see how *Cloverfield* alters the viewer's relationship to the disaster, the characters, and their conception of what it means to watch the enactment of filmed cataclysm.

Like Spielberg, Reeves opens the film beyond the immediate confines of the localized narrative, making the viewer aware of the wider and ominous context which surrounds the film's protagonists. While Spielberg utilizes stylized montage and a portentous voiceover to explicate the presence and nature of the alien threat, Reeves keeps the specifics of the disaster's source more ambiguous while immediately establishing the mediated nature of the film itself. Eschewing opening credits, *Cloverfield* begins with a black screen that becomes filled with images and sounds that cue the viewer to see it as the beginning of a tape: color bars accompanied by static and a high-pitched buzzing sound; on-screen text identifying the footage as property of the Department of Defense; multiple numeric codes scattered throughout the image against a black screen. Eventually, additional on-screen text identifies the preceding footage as from a "Camera Retrieved At Incident Site "US-447" Area Formerly Know As "Central Park." This opening works to create both the foreboding and mysterious tone of the film and establish an immediate aesthetic distance by setting up two distinct temporal planes. From the moment *Cloverfield* identifies an

area as “formerly known as Central Park,” the viewer is aware that whatever disaster they are about to witness has already occurred. While we do not yet know the outcome of the disaster, we are immediately presented with the reality of at least a partially decimated Manhattan under military surveillance. This knowledge infuses the early, relatively light scenes of the film with an undercurrent of dread, though for what we are not sure. In this way, the film places the viewer only slightly ahead of the characters, in that we are aware of the forthcoming cataclysm but do not know from where it will come and how (or if) it will end. This separates it partially from *War of the Worlds* and earlier disaster films like *Independence Day*, which do not give away the explicit details of the forthcoming disaster but establish its often-malignant source. Setting the film up this way also lets *Cloverfield* to forestall tying the disaster to an explicit source, allowing the viewer to link the mysterious New York decimation to whatever cause they can imagine: a particularly charged move that lays the groundwork for the film’s more explicit 9/11 connections.

Additionally, immediately framing the footage that comprises the rest of the film as video recordings found at the site of a destroyed Central Park places the viewer in a fundamentally different position than in disaster films where we are simply watching a fictional narrative about disaster unfold in present tense. This works in two ways. First, the film essentially becomes a kind of flashback. By defining the events of the film as having already occurred, the viewer looks upon the narrative’s events as somewhat predestined. From the beginning, we know that the rough geographic trajectory of the story, and therefore anticipate the moment when the characters end up in Central Park and leave the camera behind. This does not

drain the film of suspense. The viewer doesn't know the circumstances by which the camera arrives at Central Park, nor do they know who lives to bring it there.

However, this suspense jockeyes with a growing sense of dread. When the characters seem to be escaping the city on a helicopter, for example, the viewer's principal feeling is not relief, but fear: we know they have to end up at the site of the camera's discovery before film's end, and therefore are not surprised when the monster whacks them out of the sky and sends them dive-bombing into the park. Such a structure lends itself to an increased blending of fear and excitement, in which the viewer remains simultaneously dreading what will occur next and eagerly watching for when it will occur.

Secondly, the film explicitly frames our viewing experience as watching found footage. Using the aforementioned formal markers of video (color bars, etc.), Reeves underlines from the beginning that the viewer is watching images from a disaster that has already taken place. Like any disaster film, *Cloverfield* lets the viewer know what we're getting into early on, in that it gestures toward the disaster that will come to fruition later in the narrative. But if other disaster films always tell us the devastation is coming, they keep us within the narrative present as we follow how characters respond and engage with the crisis. In this way, the viewer experiences the disaster alongside the characters and, like the characters, does not know how things will turn out (although we can guess based upon generic precedent). For viewers potentially squeamish about their desire to witness spectacular destruction, it's an escape hatch: they're watching to see how the protagonists solve the crisis, not the crisis itself. *Cloverfield* casts a jaundiced eye upon such logic. As

previously stated, the viewer knows from the get-go that the disaster has already occurred. We do not share in the struggles of the protagonists in the same present moment that they do, but look back upon the actions the protagonists have already taken. On some level, this is the implicit position we always take anytime we watch a disaster movie, as we know before any of the characters that a catastrophe is about to take place. Explicitly framing the viewing experience as just that—the viewing of filmed destruction and death—*Cloverfield* underscores our desire to watch on screen disaster by taking away the immediacy of our connection with the protagonists that comes with occupying the same narrative moment. I will admit that this is a bit of a simplification: the viewer remains unaware of the protagonists' specific fates, and watches their actions throughout the film in anticipation of whether they will survive. However, it's also worth keeping in mind that Reeves could have easily placed the film within the present and then simply framed the events through the video camcorder. By placing us within the aftermath of cataclysm and inviting us to then go back and watch video footage of the completed tragedy, it underlines the viewer's desire to visually experience disastrous events through the eye of the camera. We know what happened, yet we look anyway.

*Cloverfield* quickly sets up its narrative and formal parameters, establishing both its principal characters and visual vocabulary within the first few scenes. Scenes from two separate dates comprise the video footage: May 22, the night of the attack and Rob's going-away party; and April 27, when Rob and longtime friend Beth (Odette Yustman) awake after sleeping together and spend the day at Coney Island. Though the May 22 footage comprises the majority of the film, the viewer is initially

introduced to the footage via the April 27 scenes. (The film establishes early on that Rob's brother, Jason (Mike Vogel), failed to switch out the tape when he begins taping the evening, resulting in the April 27 footage occasionally appearing but mostly being taped over.) These earlier scenes of Rob and Beth work to overcome one of the intrinsic issues of limiting the viewer's visual information to what is seen through the camcorder: namely, the restriction of character subjectivity. By beginning with the tender, playful imagery of Rob and Beth in bed—teasing one another and throwing strawberries—the viewer immediately gets a sense of how meaningful the relationship is to Rob, and helps explain both his anger at Beth bringing another man to his going-away party and his insistence upon saving her from her decimated apartment during the attack. This emphasis is underlined visually within the Rob and Beth footage. As seen throughout the film, the closest the viewer ever comes to character subjectivity occurs when someone is holding the camera: what they choose to focus on; what they ignore; etc. Therefore, when Rob wields the camcorder in the earlier footage, the images are almost entirely either of Beth in bed or pictures of Beth around the apartment. His visual focus underlines his emotional commitment, and connects the viewer to his quest to save Beth even when the camera has fallen into other hands.

The early scenes of both Rob and Beth, and Rob's party also serve to establish the visual rules of *Cloverfield*. The film remains largely faithful to its handheld aesthetic. Even shots within relatively low-key and quiet scenes like the opening ones can appear shaky or framed at skewed and canted angles. Sudden re-framing and zooms appear throughout, underlining the improvised nature of those wielding the

camera. Lighting within all scenes is designed to appear natural, with characters sometimes disappearing into swaths of shadow that momentarily block out their facial features and body movements. Ultimately, however, Reeves is willing to step outside the self-imposed limitations of its own conceit for the larger dramatic purposes of the particular scene. Therefore, both long and short scenes will be punctuated by jump cuts that make little sense in terms of verisimilitude but allow Reeves to focus upon moments of humor and tenderness without having to squeeze them all into one long take (though Reeves underlines these temporal elisions by moving up the clock at the bottom left of the screen accordingly). This is particularly seen in the party sequence, when Rob's friend, Hud (T.J. Miller), walks around the party getting filmed testimonials from the guests about Rob. Quick editing between multiple guests give the viewer a sense of the hipster milieu within which the characters live, with sudden cuts at particularly uncomfortable moments of social interaction humorously underline Hud's well-meaning but inherently awkward role as de facto documentarian. Reeves also establishes the lack of nondiegetic sound early on, with no score played until well into the closing credits. Such formal strategies speak to Reeves' desire to immerse the viewer within the diegetic world, underlining the realism and weight of the situation through the use of a rougher vérité aesthetic.

The combination of these visual strategies with an intensely localized narrative focus allows Reeves to achieve many of the same effects that Spielberg achieves within *War of the Worlds*. As previously mentioned, the characters attempt to survive an onslaught by a largely unexplained hostile force, with Reeves providing even less contextual information about the rampaging monster than Spielberg does

about the aliens. The only solid piece of information either the viewer or the characters obtain throughout the film is that the monster has successfully beaten back any military attempt to kill it, only increasing the aura of mystery and power that denying knowledge about the monster creates in the viewer's mind. Reeves accompanies this lack of information with a visual strategy that largely hides the monster's appearance, allowing the viewer only brief glimpses until the end of the film. This visual obfuscation heightens both our terror of and interest in the creature, and dovetails nicely with the film's limited special-effects budget. Moreover, this approach to the creature aligns the viewer closely with the perspective of the protagonists who, like Ray and his family, are helpless pedestrians looking to outrun a disaster for which they possess no expertise to understand and no skills to stop. They simply hope that they and their loved ones survive the overwhelming onslaught, resulting in a narrative in which, like Ray and his children, involves the group wandering through the embattled space and attempting to escape a series of potentially deadly encounters with either the monster itself or the smaller creatures that detach from the monster's body and scurry about the city, looking for prey.

This intensely restricted narrative structure also means that, as in *War of the Worlds*, dangerous situations seem to simply appear before the characters without warning as they move throughout the city. A sense of relentless intensity arises as a result, as the viewer remains as on edge as the characters, waiting for the moment when the next disaster will strike. Indeed, *Cloverfield* pushes the shocking suddenness of certain character deaths even further than Spielberg. Jason dies when the monster's tale unexpectedly enters the frame and smashes the section of the



Brooklyn Bridge on which he was standing. The viewer's visual distance from the death only underlines its bewildering and unexpected nature, not allowing us to intimately experience his final moments but ripping him from the narrative without warning or comment. The death of fellow party guest Marlena (Lizzy Caplan) proves even more jarring. After being bitten by one of the smaller creatures, she later begins bleeding from the eyes before being dragged behind a white curtain by doctors, where she promptly explodes into a bloody mess against the cloth partition. Only then do both the characters and the viewer become aware of the deadly side effects that accompany a bite by the creatures. Once again, Reeves allows no visual or narrative build-up to Marlena's brutal demise. After focusing upon other characters for a stretch of time, the camera suddenly swings toward her pale, bleeding face when she begins to complain about her physical well-being. Her death occurs moments later, as nurses discover her bite and rush to get her into a quarantined area. In both cases, the restrictions imposed on both narrative information and camera placement invest these moments with an increased sense of horrific abruptness.

The survivalist journey of *Cloverfield's* characters also takes on slightly different resonances for the viewer than in *War of the Worlds*, based upon the specifics of the characters, their goals, and their surroundings. *Cloverfield* focuses upon a group of twentysomethings whose emotional reactions to mass catastrophe reflect a certain amount of youthful solipsism and immaturity. As fractious as the Ferriers are, it is easier for most viewers to sympathize with a beleaguered father attempting to keep his children (particularly his ten-year-old daughter) from grisly death than with a band of terrified Manhattan hipster types, even if one is attempting

to rescue his long-time love from her collapsing apartment building. At the very least, it appeals to a more limited part of the audience, which is appropriate for a film marketed primarily at a youth-centered viewership. This reliance upon a group of relatively young characters caught within an unusual and deadly scenario recalls the horror genre more than disaster movies. A lack of big names in the cast underlined the horror-movie resonances; as some commentators pointed out, it becomes harder to know who will be scooped up in the monster's jaws when you can no longer rule out the film's major star as a target. Indeed, the focus upon protagonist in their mid-twenties underlines the extent to which all other films within this study tend to focus primarily upon older protagonists, with younger characters connected to them largely through blood ties. When familial bonds are not as prominent, the bonds of professional camaraderie come to the fore. In both cases, the act of defeating, controlling, or surviving disaster takes on a noble air, as it is performed in order to protect one's family and/or friends and colleagues. Indeed, it is often through the process of saving one's family and friends that the protagonists prove their worth as a parent, husband, friend, or colleague. *Cloverfield* invites the viewer to align with protagonists whose youth and inexperience means that the markers of emotionally-intense relationships—marriage and family, primarily—have not yet occurred. Their attempts at surviving the cataclysm cannot lead to a renewal of familial or professional bonds if they are neither defined by families or jobs. Even more so than *War of the Worlds*—with its emotional hook of the slowly reconciling familial unit—*Cloverfield* invites the viewer to align with characters that do not immediately garner our sympathy or interest in standard generic fashion, but whose raw and frenzied

reaction ask us to consider what we would do if placed within a similar situation. It also makes the aforementioned footage of Rob and Beth all the more important; without it, the viewer would have a difficult time discerning why the moody Rob would risk the lives of himself and his friends to rescue Beth. Finally, by setting *Cloverfield* within Manhattan—as opposed to the rural northeast, as Spielberg did in *War of the Worlds*—Reeves allows the viewer to make connections to real-world cataclysm all the easier. Not only is the viewer placed within a scenario whose prevalent visual cues and emotions feel reminiscent of 9/11, as they were in Spielberg’s film. The setting itself recalls televised images from World Trade Center attacks, with *Cloverfield*’s screaming, sobbing characters just another set of shocked faces within a decimated and all-too-familiar urban landscape.

These alterations in character and setting remain relatively minor, however, when compared to the most crucial difference between *Cloverfield* and *War of the Worlds* (or any other disaster film, for that matter): the use of handheld camcorder footage as the sole visual access to the film’s disaster. Some of the effects of the image quality itself have been touched upon already: namely, rough-hewn immediacy that jittery camerawork, skewed framing, natural lighting, and lengthy takes with sudden camera movement produces within a scene, imbuing it with a greater sense of authenticity and on-the-fly realism.<sup>180</sup> Also, the camcorder footage produces a certain amount of distance within the film; by focalizing the entire film through an impersonal apparatus, there is no opportunity for direct character subjectivity in the traditional sense of the term (the Rob-Beth footage provides a certain amount of

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<sup>180</sup> Though Reeves takes these further than most, many of the techniques mentioned here are indeed apart of the contemporary film landscape, as David Bordwell has pointed out. See Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) 121-138.

emotional and narrative context to counteract this). The viewer observes the characters' emotions and reactions to the disaster and can therefore empathize with them to a point, but Reeves denies us the more intense uses of indirect subjectivity that Spielberg, for example, uses within *War of the Worlds* to reveal Ray's exhaustion, anger, and fear.

But there is another, more unusual effect that the camcorder conceit has upon the viewer, and it ties back to how *Cloverfield* contextualizes the camera itself. Early in the film, Jason passes the camera over to Hud, with the instructions of getting on-screen testimonials for Rob to take with him to his new job. Once the disaster strikes, Hud remains behind the camera at all times, recording both the cataclysmic events and the actions and emotions of the group as they attempt to save Beth and escape Manhattan. He is far from an objective documentarian, constantly referring to his role as "documenter" of the night's events and providing a running commentary upon the actions surrounding him: often upon the spectacular and unbelievable nature of the disaster itself more than the human suffering and death surrounding him. Though we rarely see Hud once he gets behind the camera, the viewer knows more about his own reactions to the disaster through the manner in which he uses the camera. Often, this means wildly swinging the camera between individual reactions and wide-scale destruction based upon sudden impulses, revealing a seeming confusion as to what is more interesting and important to document. The viewer does not literally "become" Hud or even necessarily empathize with him, but we align with him by default, as his insistence upon recording the event provides our only visual connection to the events unfolding around the characters.

This produces a certain amount of self-reflexive ambivalence within the viewer. On the one hand, the viewer seems encouraged to not identify with—or necessarily even like—Hud, whose insistent stream of commentary provokes annoyance and anger among the people around him. His obsession with documenting the unfolding tragedy and refusal to put the camera down except in moments when other characters particularly need assistance also incites aggravation and displeasure amongst his friends. Their periodic questioning of why Hud will not simply abandon the camcorder allows the viewer to consider the question as well, and perhaps even view Hud’s recording mania with a certain degree of distanced superiority: a comment upon what Lichtenfeld previously described as the “need to behold spectacular disaster, taken to the point of self-annihilation, [that] serves as an indictment of our own compulsive intake of such images.”<sup>181</sup> On the other hand, if character comments and Hud’s own commentary draw attention to his role as obsessive documentarian, they also point out how completely dependent we as viewers are upon Hud to show us the unfolding disaster. If we follow our initial disbelief in Hud’s refusal to set down the camera, we must then follow that line of thought to its logical conclusion: when Hud puts down the camera, we would have no access to either the destructive spectacle or the fate of the group. *Cloverfield* constructs a narrative situation in which the viewer must rely upon a relentless recorder of cataclysmic events in order to obtain narrative and aesthetic satisfaction, making us complicit in the act of needing to see and record spectacle even as its deadly effects unfold around us. It’s important not to push this point beyond its limits. Reeves is not looking to make a Brechtian avant-garde experiment with

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<sup>181</sup> Lichtenfeld 238.

*Cloverfield*. That being said, his constant foregrounding of the camera within the narrative always reminds the viewer of the mediated nature of the viewing experience: from Hud wiping blood off the lens after a particularly vicious encounter to the occasional appearance of the Rob-Beth footage during the attack scene; from Hud and later Rob and Beth directly addressing the camera to the use of the camcorder's nightvision to spot the smaller creatures within a darkened subway tunnel.

Furthermore, this desire to experience cataclysmic spectacle while also remaining cognizant of its violent and sobering consequences becomes part of the film's visual vocabulary and characterizations, as Hud rapidly shifts visual focus from the group's specific issues and the larger spectacle and results of the attacks: swinging suddenly from the characters walking down the street to a brief glimpse of a bloody impromptu triage station, or attempting to follow his friends along a precarious building ledge while simultaneously trying to capture the monster's nearby rampage below. This tactic both immerses us in the diegetic universe and makes us aware of the constructed nature of what we are watching. If panning between small-scale character action and large-scale and unexplained consequences of the catastrophe places the protagonists firmly within a believable and realistic disaster landscape, it simultaneously calls attention to the process of balancing Hud's—and, by extension, the viewer's—desire to experience both character-driven narrative and unsettling disaster spectacle. It underlines and complicates the expectations of the disaster movie participant by focalizing our visual experience through a character whose temperament and attitude repels even as his conflicting desire to experience

both the disaster and its consequences upon the characters through the mediation of the camera mirrors our own.

This formal set-up also works to complicate some of the assumptions laid down by Sontag. On one level, *Cloverfield* rests within the Sontag-influenced parameter set up in the beginning of this chapter, as it provides a cinematic space within which the viewer can consider their fears, curiosities, anxieties, and desires in connection to the September 11 attacks while feeling safely distanced from the actual event through the imagery's incorporation into established generic structures. If *Cloverfield* provides this experience, however, it also draws the viewer's attention to it by making the cinematic apparatus more apparent through narrative and formal terms. We can certainly engage with the film's imagery and disaster scenarios in a visceral and perhaps even cathartic manner, but the film never lets us really forget that we are actively watching a filmed narrative. That sense of immersion that Sontag describes, then, becomes a more complicated combination of intense engagement with resonant disaster imagery and awareness of the act of watching a film about disaster.

*Cloverfield's* dual strands of immersing the viewer into a visceral, realistic, and emotionally intense disaster landscape and calling attention to the act of watching filmed disaster interact and intertwine with particular clarity in the film's first attack scene. Initially, Reeves utilizes his restrictive narrative and visual strategies to firmly place the viewer in a scenario in which the protagonists' physical distance and lack of knowledge imbue the disaster with a sense of confusion and mounting dread: a scenario whose Manhattan-based location only adds to its echoes of 9/11. The scene

begins suddenly, lacking the stop-and-start build-up of the initial alien attack in *War of the Worlds*, much less the elaborate and prolonged surge toward the destructive climax in *Independence Day*'s first disaster sequence. The disaster commences offscreen as Rob, Jason, and Hud sit out on a fire escape and discuss Rob's fraught relationship with Beth. Without warning, a distant explosion erupts in the background. The fire escape begins to violently shake and the lights suddenly dim all across the city. As the lights flicker back on and the three men rush back into the party, screams and police sirens echo distantly down the street, reminding the viewer of the disaster's effects that lie beyond the frame of both the camera and the narrative. As compared to earlier disaster films in which the central disaster immediately and directly intersects with the principal characters, *Cloverfield* initially displaces the characters from the disaster itself. This not only aligns us further with the characters' sense of panic and incomprehension, but speaks to how most people experience real-life disaster: from a distance. Reeves intensifies this when the party guests gather around the apartment television, where both they and the viewer gain an initial understanding of the massive tremor that just occurred through the reporting of news media. Given the film's of launching the viewer into a disaster scenario reminiscent of September 11 (one character frantically asks another if they "think it's another terrorist attack"), staying with characters who slowly learn of the catastrophe through uncontextualized events around them and snippets of news reports intensifies our alignment through our mutual lack of knowledge while recalling 9/11 imagery of people staring blankly at television screens while the seemingly unthinkable occurred around them.



Reeves relies upon the specific formal qualities of the camcorder footage to emphasize viewer immersion into the character's frenzied confusion, with sudden zooms, jarring pans, and wild shifts in natural light providing visual corollaries to the protagonists' flustered and frantic state as the disaster commences. However, as the scene progresses, the use of the apparatus itself becomes a prominent issue within the disaster scene, as Hud's (a la Reeves') vacillates between the spectacular nature of the urban destruction and its effects upon the protagonists without taking the viewer out of the diegetic universe. This balance of visceral immersion into chaos and awareness of the scene's cinematic mediation blur even further as the characters flee outside their apartment and into the street. Reeves makes the viewer increasingly aware of the camera throughout this scene, beginning when Hud falls down some stairs and the image itself begins to flicker and pixelate, with quick gaps of silence and darkness interspersed between the guests' screaming and running down the stairwell. This simultaneously places the viewer further into the tumult of the moment (through the fragmented image and sound quality) and underlines how the moment's chaos is just as tied to the camera's limitations as it is to the character's reactions. When the group finally gets to the street, the interplay between the personal challenges of the characters and the larger disaster spectacle continue when the camera suddenly swings off the characters as they look for Jason and onto a mysterious object suddenly launched into the frame. The object hurdles through the air, bounces off a building, and finally crash-lands into the street near the camera: all captured in a single, shaky take accompanied by the screaming of both Hud and others and completely lacking context as to how it got there. Hud's camera then steadies on the

now-sedentary object and it is revealed to be the head of the Statue of Liberty. This shocking and uncontextualized mutilation of a famed Manhattan landmark further imbues the scene with post-9/11 queasiness, as does this moment's visual resonance with on-the-ground footage from the World Trade Center collapse itself.

Many other disaster films would linger upon this for a moment, but would ultimately use this symbolically-charged imagery as an emblem that a full-on attack would then commence. In a sense, this is how Emmerich structures the initial destruction of the cities in *Independence Day*: the impact of the aliens blowing up the White House is not only a moment of spectacular destruction meant to produce a kind of pleasure, but signals the beginning of the aliens' plans to demolish the social and political institutions that define the United States. Reeves does not go this route. Rather than framing this moment as the de facto beginning to a scene of massive rampage, Reeves keeps the camera upon the Statue of Liberty's severed head: zooming into sections of its clawed face and slowly pulling back. Rather than rush back to the main characters to see their reactions (or if they have been reunited with Jason), Reeves keeps Hud and the viewer focused entirely upon Lady Liberty, allowing us to study the details and satisfy one of the innate curiosities implicit within watching disaster films: namely, if the Statue of Liberty were to be suddenly decapitated, what would it look like? Certainly, this can be partially explained by the fact that the image is fascinating in its own right, and Reeves takes time to allow the viewer to fully appreciate it. However, he does not always linger so slavishly upon urban destruction. When the Empire State Building collapses moments later, it does so unceremoniously in the background of the shot (a far cry from the multiple angles

and overlapping images of its explosive and prolonged demise in *Independence Day*), emphasizing the breadth of the destruction and the character's limited and localized perspective in a manner reminiscent of Spielberg in *War of the Worlds*. Here, the desire to simply behold the effects of urban destruction becomes underlined and exaggerated within the shot itself, as Hud zooms out to find a small group of people gathered around the head. They all snap photographs on their cellphones and digital cameras: a seemingly incongruous and even absurd reaction until we realize that we have been engaging in the same type of voyeurism. These moments also recall September 11, particularly the de facto documentarians who captured some of the initial footage that ran repeatedly on news coverage of the event. As the film defines itself as explicitly aware of 9/11, such a moment does indeed act as a commentary on a certain breed of recording mania that values the witnessing and transmission of cataclysmic images over human survival. The viewer does not forget about the larger effects of the moment, as we can clearly hear car alarms people's bewildered moans offscreen. However, Reeves films the moment in which the viewer snaps back into the lives of the characters in a manner that directly calls attention to how thoroughly our interest—as well as the characters—has been temporarily displaced by the disaster spectacle. The camera continues to focus upon the severed head, with seemingly random individuals in the midground staring at it as well. Only when one of the women suddenly turns right and embraces a man entering the frame do we realize that the woman is Lily (Jessica Lucas), one of the group members, and the man is Jason. By placing a principal character within the frame but downplaying her visual importance against the larger spectacle of destruction, Reeves again underlines

the balance between character progression and entrancing disaster spectacle implicit in the viewing experience that makes itself manifest on screen.

This first attack scene also plays upon the notion of characters and the viewer seeing the disaster itself, and to what extent characters place greater value upon witnessing the disaster than their own safety. Reeves conveys this tension between survival and observation principally through the aforementioned techniques of the limited view of the camera, as when Hud captures a glimpse of the monster through his use of the camera's zoom as it lumbers down a distant street. This recalls a moment in *Godzilla*, in which news cameraman Victor (Hank Azaria) runs toward the titular creature to get footage for the evening news. In both, men attempt to capture the image of the extraordinary creature on film. However, Emmerich uses the moment as a means of drawing attention to the spectacular nature of his computer-generated creation by juxtaposing the less-real camera images with the diegetic reality of Godzilla about to step on Victor. Reeves, meanwhile, downplays the creature itself, alluding to its size and presence rather than explicitly showing it. His use of the handheld camera footage also connotes a greater sense of reality by framing a fantastical creature within the rough-hewn, on-the-fly aesthetic of digital video. As others flee for their lives and ask about one another's safety and potential injuries, Hud repeatedly shouts to the others if they witnessed what he just did and insistently tells Rob and Jason that he "saw it" as they all cower for safety in a convenience store. If Hud's incessant and seemingly inappropriate focus upon witnessing the monster itself creates a certain amount of distaste within the viewer, his responses also mirror our own desires to see the creature in its entirety. Reeves

pointedly denies us this visual access, utilizing both elements of mise-en-scene (obstructive smoke, harsh lighting, sudden black-outs) and the placement of the camera itself, which suddenly falls on its side as the monster passes by the store. Once again, the moment is simultaneously self-conscious (the prominent thud of the camcorder reminding us that it is the camera itself denying us a view of the monster) and emotionally immersive, as we hear the offscreen roars and rumbles of the creature and anxiously wait with the characters for it to pass by. It stands in sharp contrast to a film like *Godzilla*, which plays a kind of visual peek-a-boo with the viewer in the beginning of the film but soon reveals the titular creature in its entirety, allowing us to fully bask in the detailed special effects and spectacle of its presence. We do not have to think about whether we want to see him or not, because Emmerich's ultimate goal lies in the presentation of scary and wondrous imagery. Reeves aims for something more mysterious and unsettling through his refusal to fully show the film's central threat until the end, prompting the viewer to actively consider their desire to fully see the monster.

Finally, this scene underscores the camera as "director-less" within *Cloverfield*. In other words, its operation and control rest with the characters themselves, without commentary or connections provided by an outside authorial source. Such a strategy, of course, is ultimately one created by the filmmakers, and is as calculated as any other directorial decision. Within this film, however, it proves particularly important not only in capturing the aforementioned interplay of spectacle and character, but in crafting the film's ultimately disquieting tone. Reeves sets up notion of the camera as an impersonal apparatus within the attack scene, when Hud

attempts to rewind the tape to re-play the glimpse of the monster, only to accidentally bring up the carefree footage of Rob and Beth en route to Coney Island. Such a juxtaposition proves not only jarring in its sudden switch-up of place, time, and mood, but reminds the viewer of the relative randomness within which the camera captures reality. Ultimately, the camcorder is designed simply to record and playback footage, oblivious to its content and message and at the whim of whoever wields it at the present moment.

This quality of the camera—its simultaneous immediacy and distance—proves crucial to *Cloverfield's* ending, whose unrepentant bleakness marks a decided shift from any of the previous disaster films considered here. By the time *Cloverfield* reaches Central Park—the film's predetermined endpoint—only Rob, Beth, and Hud have not either died or been whisked away to an indeterminate fate. They survive the helicopter crash, but Hud is quickly killed by the sudden appearance of the monster in Central Park. Rob and Beth grab the camera and duck inside a tunnel as a massive battle between the creature and armed forces commences outside. Though the film ends before the viewer definitively knows the couple's fate, the massive explosion that occurs right before the end of the footage implies that they do not make it out of the tunnel. Certainly, such an ending constitutes a departure from previous modern disaster films—indeed, from the vast majority of mainstream films—in both its grim conclusion to the character's journey and the ultimate ambiguity with which it handles the larger catastrophe. The viewer does not know whether the monster was eventually killed or if it remains rampaging about. This is a far cry from the unexpected yet optimistic *dues ex machine* finale of *War of the Worlds*, much less the

unabashed triumph of humanity seen at the end of *Independence Day*. It also shies away from the obvious sequel-baiting of *Godzilla*'s final moments (though given the flurry of sequel discussions after the film's successful opening weekend, it's not beyond the realm of possibility that studio executives saw the ambiguities of the ending choice to be economically calculated as well as tonally uncompromised).

Still, it is Reeves' emphasis upon the ultimate impersonality of the camera that poignantly underlines their desperation to use the medium to salvage what dignity and humanity they have left. This is gestured at toward the beginning of the film's final scenes, when Hud puts down the camera to assist Beth in helping the injured Rob. The canted angle, smoldering background of Manhattan, off-center placement of the three protagonists in the upper left of the frame, and natural lighting that places them in shadow denies the viewer the emotional connection the characters' suffering that is hinted at by their frantic voices and actions that the viewer does have access to. This is directly tied to the camera's placement which, devoid of human control, rests placidly on the ground without concern for framing the action in an emotionally engaging manner. Similarly, after Hud has a deadly encounter with the monster itself, the camera drops with his dead body, landing upside down to capture Hud's motionless profile. The viewer does not even receive a clear, steady close-up of Hud's face. The camera automatically begins to rapidly flick between the different planes within the image with no regard for their relative level of narrative or emotional importance: grass in the foreground, Hud's face in the midground, the smoking skyline in the background.. Lacking a human being to control the focus, the camera that the viewer has relied upon so completely for access

to the disaster reveals itself to be devoid of the ability to organize and put forth a coherent response to a protagonist's violent demise. The formal expectations that the viewer has come to expect from the disaster genre—a combination of spectacular disaster imagery and empathetic relationships with likeable protagonists—are pulled away, as Reeves utilizes the impersonality of the camera to underline the senseless tragedy of Hud's death.

The inability of this director-less camera to memorialize or frame disaster in an emotionally palliative manner is driven home in the film's moments, when Rob and Beth make their final testimonials to the camera as the stone bridge they are cowering beneath comes under increasing fire from the armed forces. As offscreen sound of the monster and the military intertwine with Beth's sobbing, Rob looks directly into the camera and desperately attempts to summarize the events that have just taken place. His direct address reveals his own level of desperation, but it also explicitly confronts the viewer. "If you are watching this right now, then you probably know more about it than I do," Rob speaks into the camera lens, before listing off the characters that the monster has killed. Indeed, we do know more than Rob, including the knowledge that the videotape is found in Central Park and that, therefore, they will most likely die there. This knowledge adds to the poignancy and despair of the couple's final moments together. Rob then turns the camera to Beth, whose face is almost completely shrouded in shadow. She begins to identify herself at Rob's insistence, her voice tight with fear and grief. An explosion suddenly rocks the bridge, hurling the camera into the rubble. We hear Rob and Beth say they love one another before another explosion is heard and the footage ends. Emotionally raw,



visually harsh, and genuinely upsetting, these moments utilize the camcorder's unvarnished aesthetic to both draw us into Rob and Beth's desolate final minutes and underline the camera's inability to comment or frame their impending deaths in any particular manner. It simply records.

The film's concluding shots underline how little emotional sense the unempathetic camera lends to Rob and Beth's demise. After the footage of the disaster runs out, the Rob-Beth tape runs a few seconds longer. So, after watching the couple in their final moments of life, the camera gives us the image of them riding the Ferris wheel in Coney Island. They stare into the camera, their faces as composed and warmly lit now as they were devastated and shadow-covered a moment before, and Beth insists that she's "had a good day" before the camera finally freezes and the footage ends. On a basic level, this juxtaposition of the couple's despairing final moments and recent happy ones acts as a kind of poignant irony, as well as a reminder to the viewer of the camera's power to capture moments of true happiness as well as sorrow. But it's a cold irony. The only reason these two moments of time have been stitched together is through the arbitrary manner in which they were played by the apparatus itself. Certainly, it represents a distinct decision by Reeves the filmmaker, but he diegetically frames it as a moment of pure chance.

If this paradoxically increases our empathy for Rob and Beth—whose deaths occur pitifully, without the gravitas or empathy that cinematic technique might imbue it with in another, more convention film—it underlines one final time the director-less camera's inherent inability to do anything other than simply record reality: randomly, lacking in order or context. The inherent viewing curiosity that drives us to watch this

disaster footage may have been satiated, but the footage itself does not provide the logical and emotionally satisfying connections through which we can process and absorb tragedy. We gaze at horror through the camera, and then it ends. This gives *Cloverfield* the sting of reality—with all its messiness and lack of cohesion—and, in doing so, underlines the extent to which the film departs from generic conventions that deem all disaster movies must end on an affirmative and emotionally satisfying note. It shows how far the genre has traveled from the 1990s cycle that a mainstream disaster movie could challenge viewer assumptions about their investment in cinematic catastrophe through the self-conscious use of the medium and an unapologetically hopeless and death-filled conclusion.

This is a particularly harsh message for a film marketed as an intriguing mid-winter mystery, and critics largely applauded the film's formal daring and dark vision. That being said, many ultimately framed it more as an interesting cinematic exercise than anything else, constrained by its generic trappings and a cast of characters deemed unlikeable by most critics. Lisa Schwarzbaum at *Entertainment Weekly* straddled the line between both positions when she deemed *Cloverfield* “a surreptitiously subversive, stylistically clever little gem of an entertainment disguised, under its deadpan-neutral title, as a dumb Gen-YouTube monster movie.”<sup>182</sup> Kevin Crust of *The Los Angeles Times* also noted the deeper emotions and resonance churning underneath the film's generic trappings, commenting upon how “the drama is intensified not only by the imminent threat but also by the underlying and universal fear of being alone. Abrams, Goddard, and Reeves successfully mine this communal

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<sup>182</sup> Lisa Schwarzbaum, “Cloverfield,” *Entertainment Weekly* Jan. 16, 2008, 03 Marc 2009 <<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20172122,00.html>>.

unease while alleviating just enough tension to keep it in the realm of entertainment.”<sup>183</sup> And some, like *The Village Voice*'s Nathan Lee, simply applauded the film for telling its story with relative alacrity: “...Give thanks, all praise due, shout joy to the world and hey, hallelujah—something has found us! Something that isn't three fucking hours long!”<sup>184</sup>

Still, if critics were willing to acknowledge the film's fleet, visceral pleasures and the occasional transcendence of generic expectations, they tempered their enthusiasm, primarily by railing on the inanity of the central characters. Even a relative fan like Schwarzbaum dismissed the protagonists as “vapid, twenty-something nincompoops,” and Lee offered Goddard a backhanded compliment when he commented that “the fatal flaw of Goddard's script—shallow, unlikeable heroes—can be flipped to an asset: death to the shallow, unlikeable heroes!”<sup>185</sup> Ty Burr of *The Boston Globe* expands the critique through a dismissal of some of the film's loftier cultural resonances. After pithily referring to the film's heroes as “our fine young mannequins,” he remarked that the film's evocations of 9/11 imagery “would be offensive if the movie were at all pompous about it...But “Cloverfield” is content to be a creature feature; that's what makes it bearable and what keeps it from greatness.”<sup>186</sup> In a sense, Burr's statement makes explicit the implications of most major critics: that while *Cloverfield*'s attempts at grappling with contemporary fears within a generic context are formally ambitious and intriguing, the presence of genre

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<sup>183</sup> Kevin Crust, “Movie Review: A Short, Effective Thrill Ride,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 18 Jan. 2008: E1.

<sup>184</sup> Nathan Lee, “Douchebags, Run For Your Lives!” *The Village Voice*, 15 Jan. 2008: 78.

<sup>185</sup> Schwarzbaum; Lee 78.

<sup>186</sup> Ty Burr, “Monster Flick Takes Hold Quickly and Doesn't Let Go,” *The Boston Globe*, 18 Jan. 2008: D1.

conventions and a younger cast of heroes—scared, confused twentysomethings, as opposed to, say, embattled families—keeps it beyond the realm of true respectability and social commentary. The combination of 9/11 imagery and disaster genre tropes involving younger protagonists, in particular, seemed to clash in critics' minds, as if the presence of the latter worked to minimize the former. Indeed, at least one critic made their moral distaste and generic dissatisfaction explicitly known; in her *New York Times* pan, Manohla Dargis seethed that “the screams and the images of smoke billowing through the canyons of Lower Manhattan may make you think of the attack, and you may curse the filmmakers for their vulgarity, insensitivity, and lack of imagination...But the film is too dumb to offend anything except your intelligence, and the monster does cut a satisfying swath through the cast, so your only complaint may be, What took it so long?”<sup>187</sup>

Ultimately, restrained critical approval may have helped the film's box-office receipts but most likely not in any significant way. After months of carefully orchestrated hype, *Cloverfield* opened over the long Martin Luther King weekend with little direct competition (major new releases included the romantic comedy *27 Dresses* and the comic caper *Mad Money*) and set a record for the weekend, taking in \$46 million over four days. Grey and other at Paramount would have been happy as well: even with an undoubtedly higher marketing budget, the film's opening weekend grosses almost doubled its production budget. Pundits chalked the success up primarily to the film's viral marketing strategies, though several noted the surprisingly strong critical notices as a possible reason why older viewers came out in

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<sup>187</sup> Manohla Dargis, “We’re All Gonna Die! Grab Your Video Camera!,” *The New York Times*, 18 Jan. 2008: E10.

higher numbers than expected. However, the very reasons why *Cloverfield* was such an opening weekend success—viewers curious for the answers to the film’s elaborately constructed online mysteries, and perhaps interest in seeing the film’s visceral take on a 9/11-like event—may have sown the seeds for its sharp declines in subsequent weeks. Once viewers found out the secrets of the film, the questions becomes whether they find them worthy enough to go and tell their friends. This seemed to not be the case with *Cloverfield*, and one can see why. The online marketing promised answers to a byzantine maze involving Japanese soft drinks and offshore drilling companies. With some coy exceptions (Jason wears a T-shirt with the Slusho logo emblazoned on the front), the film simply does not address many of these issues, leaving it up to the fans to parse out their meaning, or lack thereof.

Perhaps more so than a sense of disappointment, however, there is a good possibility that many people simply told their friends that *Cloverfield* is sort of a downer. Even within the press coverage for the film’s successful opening weekend, pundits noted the film’s weaker-than-expected exit polls. Abrams himself admitted that the film had inspired a love-it-or-hate-it reaction: “Some love its different approach to the monster movie; for others it was the cinematic version of ipecac.”<sup>188</sup> Indeed, some theaters reported certain viewers becoming nauseated from the film’s more extreme moments of visual shakiness, inspiring AMC Theaters to place caution signs in front of the theaters warning of potential motion sickness (not exactly a ringing endorsement).<sup>189</sup> These factors all may have contributed to *Cloverfield*’s steep box-office slides after its initially successful opening. The film lost over 60% of its

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<sup>188</sup> Jeff Jensen, “Attack of the \$46M Monster,” *Entertainment Weekly*, Jan. 25 2008, 03 Mar. 2009 <<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20173604,00.html>>.

<sup>189</sup> Rong-Gong Lin II, “Some Can’t Stomach This Film,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 24 Jan. 2008: B1.

previous weekend's grosses two weekends in a row, and ultimately grossed \$80 million domestically (meaning roughly 50% of its entire domestic gross came from its first four days). International grosses, however raised its total to a successful \$170 million. While by no means a runaway smash—and certainly not a word-of-mouth sensation—*Cloverfield*'s overall success when taking into account its unusual concept and slim budget proves both that audiences were interested in going to a disaster movie that directly addressed terror and chaos in post-9/11 Manhattan and that selling such a film also requires the acknowledgment that some people will not find such an offer appealing and need other reasons to enter the theater, such as a complex and engrossing viral marketing campaign.

Ultimately, both *War of the Worlds* and *Cloverfield* achieved financial success, critical consideration, and cultural relevance by doing what previous post-9/11 films has largely shied away from: namely, acknowledging that the viewer's conception of disaster had permanently changed, and therefore the terms of the disaster genre needed to change too. This did not mean that viewers stopped possessing an interest in narratives of spectacular cinematic devastation. Indeed, September 11 may have stoked this curiosity further by tying it to a specific and tangible real-life event. The trick became acknowledging that viewers still went to disaster films to have a fundamental question answered. The questions itself, however, had changed. In the 1990s, the viewer's question seemed to be: "What would it be like if a disaster struck?" This only makes sense, as the last major attack any American would have recalled would have been Pearl Harbor. In the aftermath of September 11, viewers could no longer think of tragedy in the hypothetical. The

question shifted as a result, becoming: “What would it have been like to be there when the disaster struck?” Viewer curiosity was now tied to a key event with a specific set of images, sounds, structures, and meanings. The hypothetical was no longer the disaster itself; it was the notion of experiencing that disaster.

Filmmakers like Spielberg and Reeves recognize this desire and construct disaster narratives that not only signal their connection to September 11 through explicit visual and aural echoes, but by altering the types of narratives, characters, and formal elements to better situate the viewer within the cataclysm itself. These two films worry less about wowing the viewer than they do about immersing the viewer within an emotional and visceral experience at once terrifying and exhilarating. However, they also recognize that 9/11 is not a thrill ride, and viewers know this too. The desire to experience the fury of real-life disaster through the mediation of the filmic image carries with it an undeniable sense of queasy guilty. After all, people actually died on September 11. Are we so arrogant as to want to experience all of the day’s thrilling, terrifying, and spectacular moments while pulling back from the messiness, the grief, the inchoate rage and chaos? No, these filmmakers say: not if we acknowledge both the consequences of disaster and our increasingly complicated relationship with disaster on screen. They imbue their disaster narratives—which provide undeniable aesthetic pleasure and exhilaration—with an increased sense of disaster’s far-reaching and emotionally devastating consequence and a greater level of self-consciousness of film’s ability to not only foster empathy and satisfy curiosity, but to both indulge uncompassionate voyeurism and falsely construct the realities of disaster. All told, Spielberg and Reeves have taken the essence of the disaster genre’s

appeal and reformatted it to fit the needs, fears, and desires of a permanently changed world: one in which the disaster film has found a renewed sense of purpose and a complicated and exciting new set of formal and thematic challenges.



## Conclusion

Many critics wrote the obituary for the disaster genre after September 11 and, in a sense, they were correct in doing so. Once viewers began to associate images of cinematic destruction with a specific and devastating real-life corollary, it became a lot harder to engage in the kinds of thrilling and detached disaster spectacle that had come to define the genre in the 1990s. One only has to recall the critical and commercial failure of *The Core* to discern that escapist disaster films full of gung-ho expert protagonists and cordoned-off segments of impersonal urban cataclysm no longer connected with the way they did in a more innocent time. However, it's also worth remembering that the genre was far from thriving when 9/11 occurred. There had not been a disaster film in the mold of *Independence Day* or *Twister* since *Armageddon* over three years earlier. The films themselves may have been ideal examples for those looking to condemn a decadent and desensitized pre-9/11 culture, but those critics and commentators were essentially beating a dead horse, or at least one that had been put out to pasture by the filmgoing public.

But if September 11 underlined the end of one type of disaster filmmaking, it sparked interest in another. Specifically, it gave the disaster genre a renewed reason for existence within the public eye. If watching a disaster movie once meant a couple hours of high-octane escapism (albeit one that has its deeper roots in addressing some fundamental fears and fascinations with the possibility of mass death and destruction), it now became the genre that could most directly address viewer emotions regarding the experience of 9/11 itself: its sobering horrors and aesthetic

wonders. Viewers attending post-9/11 disaster movies brought to the theater outside knowledge, expectations, apprehensions, curiosities, and—perhaps most importantly for filmmakers—a defined notion of what truly catastrophic and devastating disaster looked and felt like. If they once attended disaster films to indulge vague fears and notions, they now came with specific images, feelings, and questions they wanted addressed and explored. Disaster films provided the opportunity to do so: to viscerally experience the unknown horrors and wonders of the September 11 attacks; to get a sense of what it felt like to be there when the world seemed to be ending. These inevitably also produced complex and ambivalent reactions within people, not the least of which being guilt over whether they should feel curious about the real-life experiences of those who died tragically or survived with traumatic consequences. Discussions of the ornate marketing strategies behind a film like *Cloverfield* underline the extent to which studios recognized that some viewer would simply feel uncomfortable being explicitly invited to relive a facsimile of September 11 on screen. Still, the disaster genre proved particularly suitable for addressing this issue as well, providing a convenient amount of generic familiarity and distance from the actual event that allowed for viewers to investigate their fears and curiosities without constant real-life reminders. Indeed, the popularity of films like *War of the Worlds* and *Cloverfield* (and, to a lesser extent, *The Day After Tomorrow*) reveals that such worries did not prevent filmgoers from attending these movies. One could argue it may have prompted their curiosity even further. By injecting sensitive imagery into well-known generic contexts, the post-9/11 disaster provided a cinematic space for viewers to work through their complicated emotional responses to the event without

the implicit pressures that came with watching a fictional narrative explicitly about the day's events.

If viewer interest in the disaster genre changed as a result of 9/11, the interests of filmmakers changed as well. The 1990s disaster cycle certainly produced a distinctive vision of cinematic destruction, but it was not one that inspired much more than half-smirking admissions of guilty enjoyment by critics and was generally seen as the purview of big-budget commercial filmmaking. Directors generally did not view the genre as more than a structure within which to craft moments of CGI-infused wonder and stories of fast-paced action. Once the notion of heavily-aestheticized disaster spectacle became a potential social taboo, this view of the genre quickly became suspect. If some filmmakers shied away from the inherent ambiguities and risks of navigating the choppy seas of altered viewer expectations and desires, other directors viewed these as an opportunity to maintain the intrinsic pleasures of the genre while exploring its darker corners. Filmmakers like Spielberg, Reeves, and even Emmerich when directing *The Day After Tomorrow* found that the disaster genre already had in place the narrative and formal structures that could then be shifted, twisted, and amplified to craft resonant viewing experiences for a post-9/11 audience: the cool and confident professional hero skillfully defeating a massive catastrophe, for example, becoming the emotionally-wrecked single father fleeing for his life with his dysfunctional family. This not only produced more culturally significant disaster films; it resulted in more formally daring, self-conscious, and complex movies, period. Films like *War of the Worlds* and *Cloverfield* skillfully address the inherent generic satisfaction of watching large-scale destruction presented

in a visually-arresting and immersive manner: issues that became all the more relevant after the September 11 attacks. However, they also confront viewers with the emotionally-intense and disturbing consequences of the disasters that had been previously elided, and ask viewers to contemplate why exactly the experience of watching filmic destruction produces interest and even pleasure. Having been attracted to the changed relationship between real and cinematic cataclysm, these filmmakers ensured that the disaster genre would not just be the arena where the viewer checks their moral qualms and emotional ambivalences at the door.

But if the 1990s disaster cycle shows us anything, it's that all genre cycles eventually come to an end. In that case, a combination of product fatigue, growing expenses, and newer generic cycles led to the quiet fade-out of the disaster film's brief resurgence at the domestic box office. Now, the situation is somewhat different and more complex. First of all, one can hardly claim that four major disaster films in five years constitute a generic cycle, at least not in the strictest sense of the term. One only has to compare these films to the eight that were released between 1996 and 1998 to see that each post-9/11 disaster film has been the product of more singular and specific industrial contexts than the 1990s cycle. Furthermore, current events did not spark the 1990s disaster cycle. As we have seen, certain critics claim that fears of both the pre-millennial and post-Cold War varieties inspired the resurgence of the genre. However, we have also seen that these factors were minor compared to the economic and industrial impetuses that sparked and fostered the genre's short-lived but financially-successful return. Post-9/11 disaster films have by no means existed outside of industrial concerns. Every movie considered within this study has

illustrated the nexus of economic, personal, and social factors that have been weighed and debated before and throughout the production of each one. Still, the specific power and appeal of films like *War of the Worlds* and *Cloverfield* rest partially in their direct engagement with the emotions and imagery of September 11: resonances which remain relatively fresh within the minds and hearts of the viewing public.

What happens to the revitalized disaster genre, then, once September 11 begins to fade within the public consciousness? Will viewers be as invested in exploring their fears and curiosities about the 9/11 attacks in five or ten years? It's an unanswerable question as of now, but one does not have to possess a sophisticated sociological understanding to see that the events of September 11 have naturally become less of a pressing emotional and social issue within American culture. As with any traumatic event, the open wound has begun to heal into a permanent but commonplace scar. It would be make sense if public interest in seeing their thoughts and emotions about the event represented cinematically begin to dwindle as well. This does not necessarily mean that filmgoers will not remain interested in representations of a 9/11-like disaster on screen. September 11 is a defining and devastating moment in American history, and if recent sensitive topics in U.S. history provide any indication—the Vietnam War, for example—Hollywood still has many narratives left to extract from the events of 9/11. Whether viewers and filmmakers will see the disaster genre as the ideal format within which to tell them remains an open question, however, particularly when the passing of time will inevitably make more straightforward dramatic narratives like *United 93* and *World Trade Center*—more socially permissible.

If this imagery placed within a disaster context does lose appeal and resonance, the question then becomes what happens to the formal and thematic alterations to the genre that have occurred as a result of filmmakers responding to 9/11. Again, one can only speculate. There appear to be two polarities between which the disaster genre will now most likely swing, at least for the near future. On one end, there will be those directors who have either worked in the genre post-9/11 or have seen the work of others and recognize that disaster films offer a greater flexibility in terms of the types of stories, images, and themes it can evoke than perhaps previously assumed. Some of these directors will continue to make films that couple an awareness of audience's altered conception of tragedy with an acknowledgment of the genre's continued ability to engage with the viewer's fears and desires surrounding that conception. These films would most likely include some of the dominant formal characteristics of the major post-9/11 films—localized narratives, non-professional characters, greater balance of spectacle and tragic consequences—while adapting them to fit both their specific artistic ends and potential changes in the viewer's idea of what disaster means. On the opposite end, there will be those directors who view the genre as an opportunity to engage in the viewer's innate fears and curiosities surrounding large-scale cataclysm, but will do so in a less visceral and more escapist fashion. They will look back to the special-effects glories in films like *Independence Day* or *Armageddon* and acknowledge that disaster can be defined, framed, and presented in a manner that is thoroughly removed from uncomfortable modern-day resonances while still holding to the genre's inherent appeal of seeing the unthinkable enacted. The films they make will certainly have to contend with the real-

life connotations that some viewers will bring to the genre for years to come, perhaps forever. In response, they may redefine the margins of safety that allow viewers to see disaster as spectacular and wondrous yet also an opportunity for adventure and ultimately controllable—perhaps harkening back to the 1990s tropes of the professional protagonist or the separation of disaster sequences from the principal characters. By doing so, they can bring the genre back to a lighter tone that may appeal to viewers looking for slightly-edgy but non-threatening entertainment.

Towards which pole filmmakers, studios and audiences ultimately swing—indeed, if the disaster genre will continue to be popular at all—will rest upon a multitude of factors, from industrial and economic concerns to large-scale national or international events, from the passion of a single filmmaker to the sometimes-unexplainable whims of the viewing public. Certainly, another attack even remotely reminiscent of September 11 could once again shake the genre's foundations, and also (somewhat paradoxically) potentially inspire resurgent interest. Presuming this does not occur and the genre becomes once again primarily dictated by industrial and economic concerns, the genre will most likely remain in demand for a time, based upon the popularity of films like *War of the Worlds* and (to a less extent) *Cloverfield* that other studios may attempt to replicate. Eventually, as in the late 1990s, the genre will likely experience a period of viewer fatigue, though this may not occur as quickly as in the 1990s as there have been a less concentrated amount of disaster films released in recent years. Other types of films may also begin to take the more intriguing elements of the genre and recontextualize them; one can see this occurring in a film like Alex Proyas' *Knowing* (2009), in which apocalyptic disaster imagery

and post-9/11 resonances are seen within the context of what is basically a science-fiction thriller.

For now, however, it appears the genre remains a presence within Hollywood filmmaking, with upcoming releases providing an opportunity for viewers to see how directors of disaster films choose to handle world-wide destruction as the country approaches the eighth anniversary of the September 11 attacks. A prime example of how filmmakers may swing between newer and older generic models can be seen in *2012*, the latest film from Roland Emmerich to be released in November 2009. The film marks Emmerich's return to the genre after 2008's *10,000 B.C.*—his moderately successful foray into the oft-ignored prehistoric adventure genre—and, in some respects, it seems to indicate a shift back toward some of the generic strategies Emmerich made popular in the 1990s. A brief plot synopsis reveals that the film will follow a science-fiction writer who works with a group of individuals to stop the cataclysmic events predicted by the Mayan calendar to occur in the titular year. Such a plot sketch directly harkens back to the dominant narrative structures of the 1990s films, in which a protagonist versed in the nature of the destructive threat works to mitigate its effects with the help of a larger team (see *Volcano*, *Dante's Peak*, *Twister*, *Godzilla*). As the specifics of this narrative are not yet known, one cannot know if Emmerich will emphasize more localized and emotional elements, as he did in *The Day After Tomorrow*. However, the very fact that the protagonists are working to stop the disaster moves it away from the survivalist tropes of the major post-9/11 films and toward the active and expert protagonists band their divergent yet ultimately cohesive skills together to solve the crisis. The film's casting also



conforms to many of the 1990s films, with Emmerich crafting an ensemble of largely recognizable character actors—Thandie Newton, Oliver Platt, Chiwetel Ejiofar—with a couple of larger names, primarily John Cusack and Woody Harrelson. As in films like *Independence Day* and *Godzilla*, Emmerich's casting choices give his characters recognizable and relatable faces that audiences can empathize, without the presence of a major star that could potentially draw viewer attention away from the film's special effects. This contrasts the use of actors we've seen in other post-9/11 disaster films. In *War of the Worlds*, for example, Spielberg may have tweaked Tom Cruise's persona a bit by casting him as a deadbeat father, but he also used Cruise's familiar presence to center and personalize the film's apocalyptic story. Reeves, meanwhile, populated *Cloverfield* with a cast of largely unknown faces in order to more easily immerse the viewer in an intensely believable disaster universe, without the presence of recognizable actors that could potentially take the viewer out of the story world. Finally, the fundamental disaster *2012* engages with does not seem to echo the September 11 attacks in the explicit manner that *War of the Worlds* and *Cloverfield* did. Placing the film's disaster slightly ahead in the future certainly plays upon more generalized fears of what terrors or tragedies may await the planet in the coming years. However, grounding the disasters in Mayan prophecy potentially closes off the possibility for more contemporary resonances. It specifies the roots of the disaster in ancient divination—albeit ancient divination based in actual research and that has been reported upon elsewhere in the media—and therefore makes viewer connections to real-life tragedies somewhat less likely. The utilization of these strategies may result in a shift back to the way in which the viewer was engaged by 1990s disaster

films: as an entranced watcher of disaster spectacle and those who fight against it.

This stands in contrast to the post-9/11 films, which engage the viewer's thoughts and emotions in a more visceral and direct manner, inviting us to imagine ourselves within the destruction even as we continue to gawk in fascinated wonder at its ever-spectacular qualities.

However, if *2012*'s plot and casting choices gesture toward the 1990s disaster cycle, its marketing choices point to a darker and more sinister tone that speaks to the influence of more recent disaster films. More specifically, Columbia Pictures (the company behind the film) seems to be using both traditional and viral marketing strategies to portray the film's central threat (admittedly tenuous in terms of actually creating anxiety in viewers) as being shrouded by ominous international conspiracy. Worldwide destruction may be terrifying—the film's marketing seems to suggest—but the notion that governments would plan around it and purposefully not save millions of lives is the truly chilling thought. The trailer of *2012*, for example, begins with a mysterious image of what appears to a Tibetan monk running through the mountains toward his stone temple. Eerie, discordant music plays in the background as he and the viewer approach the solitary building, where another monk has begun to strike a large gong. With each strike, we cut from the temple to on-screen text that eventually puts forth the following question: "How would the governments of our planet prepare six billion people for the end of the world?" No sooner has the thought fully entered our minds when an overwhelming amount of water begins to swell over the tops of the mountains and unceremoniously washes away the temple in an extreme long shot as the score builds to a distressing crescendo. As if the image of the

solitary men and their futile warnings being totally washed away by the tremendous swell hasn't already told us, the trailer answers its' own question of how governments would save the planet: "They wouldn't." The music cuts out suddenly, and is replaced by a low, rumbling single note that punctuates the film's title as it comes onto the screen. The last image the viewer sees is not this, however, but the directive to "find out the truth. Google search: 2012." The trailer not only imbues its spectacular disaster imagery with conspiratorial menace, but ends by suggesting that viewer can learn more about this threat—not to mention the film itself—through further internet searches.

Pointedly, the trailer does not tell viewers to go to the film's official website—portentously titled [www.whowillsurvive2012.com](http://www.whowillsurvive2012.com)—but encourages us to simply search the term online. Though *2012*'s website is among the first search results one comes across, it's intermixed with other, apparently non-affiliated sites that explain the Mayan prophecy in greater detail and even speculate upon its veracity. Actual interest or theories behind the prophecy may be relatively light, but searching directly for the term produces real-life corollaries to the disaster promised in the film. In this way, the viewer is invited to connect the film's central threat beyond the diegetic world of *2012* and into the actual world, creating interest by blurring the line between cinema and reality. This is further underlined by the film's website itself, which offers links to three other websites connected to *2012* but not explicitly advertising the movie. One site, bluntly titled [www.thisistheend.com](http://www.thisistheend.com), is meant to be the personal site of Harrelson's character, Charlie Frost: a bearded conspiracy-theorist who video-blogs about the end of the world in 2012 and writes

short, apocalyptic musings via Twitter. The site also links to actual, non-film related articles that discuss Armageddon connected to 2012, creating a porous boundary between where carefully-constructed fictional content meant to appear as authentic ends and actual content on the subject of 2012 begins. The other two sites—the home page of Cusack’s character, Jackson Curtis, who publishes a novel entitled “Farewell Atlantis” about the 2012 prophecy; and the site for The Institute for Human Continuity, an organization preparing for the forthcoming apocalypse—also incorporate real-life content or convincing facsimiles of such to give the film’s conspiratorial feel valid. Curtis’ book, for example, gets a glowing review from real-life science-fiction writer Nick Sagan, and the Institute for Human Continuity website allows you to sign up for the group’s worldwide lottery in order to give “every citizen of this planet an equal chance at survival in 2012.” These connections to the real world enhance the site’s authenticity and, by extension, the authenticity of the disaster event itself. It becomes more than just a movie, prompting the would-be viewer to explore other parts of the film’s interconnected websites. The further one delves into these sites, the more the more information they find on the nature of the 2012 threat and how it is being handled— along with just enough unexplained events and ideas to leave you wanting more.

Clearly, both the level of detail and the mysterious, somewhat diffuse nature of this marketing campaign recalls the complex mythology constructed online in connection with (and promotion for) *Cloverfield*. Even the film’s trailer—though not approaching the opacity of the *Cloverfield* preview—resonates with that earlier film’s goal of infusing the genre with buzz-generating dread and memorable imagery. The

question, then, becomes why. Why market a big-budget disaster film that seemingly conforms (in outline, at least) to some of the dominant strategies utilized by the 1990s disaster cycle in a manner that cues the audience to expect anxiety as well as awe? Certainly, the success of *Cloverfield*'s viral market strategies may have inspired other studios to try it out for themselves. But, as just noted, *2012* feels more situated in the realm of mainstream Hollywood fare than the shaky-cam, no-star *Cloverfield*. Simply highlighting the special effects in a more kinetic manner would seemingly serve a film like *2012* just as well, if not better.

It's impossible to know to what extent the marketing of *2012* reflects its form and content, and it's a fool's game to attempt to draw definitive notions based upon unfinished and unseen product. That said, let us draw this study to a close by considering two possibilities to answer the aforementioned question of why Columbia has chosen to market the film in this manner. One possibility is that the film's tone, visual style, and even plot do indeed reflect the generic changes seen since the September 11 attacks. In this version, Emmerich has taken narrative strategies and common character configurations he has used in the past and given them a darker and unsettling twist. Should this be the case, then Columbia's marketing campaign would seem to be in keeping with the film's overall tone. The other possibility is that *2012* harkens back explicitly to earlier models of disaster filmmaking, with a focus upon proactive protagonists fighting a large-scale cataclysmic force and aestheticizing destruction in a more-overtly spectacular and presentational manner. Should this be the case, then it seems that Columbia is attempting to sell the public a much more unsettling film than Emmerich plans upon delivering.

Even if this proves true (and we should be careful to not draw an either/or dichotomy here), the marketing of *2012* nevertheless points to the notion that a major Hollywood studio feels that the best way to market a major disaster film is by framing it as something dark, mysterious, and somewhat connected to the specter of real-life disaster. Interest in *2012* has thus far been constructed by: alluding to an actual theory of world destruction within viral marketing; making said viral marketing fairly realistic to further immerse the potential viewer into a plausible scenario of worldwide cataclysm; and presenting a trailer that frames global disaster as a force that governments around the world have no power (or perhaps even desire) to mitigate or prevent. There is certainly a margin of safety in dealing with a disaster threat that remains, for many, a pretty far-fetched one. Still, this is a far cry from the *Independence Day* teaser, with its framing of an exploding White House as a kicky, spectacular thrill and the comforting promise that July 4<sup>th</sup> is “the day we fight back.” Thirteen years later, Columbia plans to draw viewers to the theater by implying that perhaps we won’t be able to fight back: that perhaps the world will be engulfed in water, monks will be washed away, and that people will be saved through random lotteries and not through great acts of individual heroism.

Of course, we also know that this is not true. No matter how bleak the disaster seems or how devastating the outcome, part of the disaster genre’s appeal lies in its ability to take us to the edge of complete devastation, give us a nice, long look at the possibility, and then pull us back from the abyss. Few disaster films ever dare to imply that the havoc wreaked upon the diegetic universe is permanent, or that hope does not remain alive (though *Cloverfield* comes perilously close). But the idea of it

nevertheless remains strangely appealing. In the end, audiences go to disaster movies for the same essential reasons that they have always gone: to see what their fears and curiosities about death and destruction actually look like on screen. Most don't want to see the world actually go up in smoke, but they wouldn't mind a look at what might be consumed in those first few deadly and entrancing flames. September 11 undoubtedly altered that question. We know what it looks like when it feels as if the world might actually come to an end—if only for a moment—and so our fantasies of destruction become more painful and specific, our questions more focused and complicated. Yet that fundamental desire to see it enacted—to experience or even re-experience disaster in a manner at once intense and spectacular—has remained.

Perhaps this is ultimately why the disaster genre didn't simply collapse in a post-9/11 world. In its decade-and-a-half move from high-octane spectacle to visceral confrontation with real-life fears, the genre has managed to retain its basic appeal while shifting its generic structure to allow filmmakers to shape the disaster film to the public's ever-evolving conception of what disaster is, means, and looks like. And as this conception continues to change in a post-9/11 world, one cannot help but think—and even hope—that the genre will remain a viable cinematic space in which we can find our fears and fascinations with the destruction of our world not only visualized, but brought to life in a manner by turns exhilarating, horrifying, troubling, and fascinating: the unimaginable imagined and the unthinkable thought, in the most thoughtful and imaginative way.

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