Introduction

Hollywood at Ground Zero:
Confessions of a Conflicted Fan

A 9/11 Film Study without Films About 9/11?

Hollywood haunts Ground Zero at the 9/11 Memorial Museum in New York City, which features a constantly expanding collection of artistic responses to the attack.[1] Chief curator Jan Ramirez notes that "[t]here was such a phenomenal . . . response to 9/11. So many people felt prompted to do something—quilting or painting or collaborative music-making. We certainly couldn't accommodate it all, but we could design and have a very kind of democratic site where people can self-identify as artists" (qtd. in Finn 2014). Although the memorial acts as a monument to how a trauma is represented in art, Ramirez bristles at the idea that such initiatives can bring closure. "History doesn't work that tidily" (qtd. in ibid.). The 9/11 Memorial Museum testifies to history's untidy nature: the ruins of the towers exist alongside both arts and crafts submitted by individuals and Hollywood movie posters. Visitors encounter homemade quilts and Spider-Man, amateur paintings and Godzilla.

No Jurisdiction is an untidy post-9/11 film study. It often elides direct confrontation with 9/11, looking instead for how the attacks haunt Hollywood. We see them mostly in glimpses—briefly on television or in the background of shots. In this vision of Hollywood, the attacks and their legal consequences occupy a mythic realm. We will spend much more

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time in the streets of the fictional Gotham City with Batman and a San Francisco of the 1970s terrorized by the Zodiac Killer, a vision of an American city as a shadow-filled nightmare, than in the New York City of September 2001. But beyond analyzing superhero films' visual allusions to the imploding towers and gun-wielding FBI agents' spongy War on Terror legal logic, I also want to understand my own untidy sympathy with these violent heroes who leave me both exhilarated and repulsed.

Initially, this book featured only films about such heroes and contained no discussion on works directly about 9/11 and its aftermath. Such movies always struck me as nationalistic propaganda, with none of the ethical muddiness that draws me to superhero movies such as Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008). Growing up in eastern Montana as the son of immigrant cinephiles, I often encountered Hollywood co-opted as a propaganda tool by the U.S. government following 9/11. For years, my local movie theater would screen Chuck Workman's montage film *The Spirit of America* (2001) prior to all feature presentations. Workman's three-minute film, produced immediately following the attacks, presents iconic sequences from across Hollywood history. With its glamorizing shots of Matt Damon as a grizzled soldier and Mel Gibson as a Revolutionary patriot, it would make my skeptical father roll his eyes. He was tired of the jingoism on display, and I sympathized with his frustration. In the time when the country marched into war against Near Eastern populations, it was disheartening to see the cinematic entertainments that we both loved reduced to or nakedly exposed as mere ideological weapons. Reenactments of 9/11, in line with the ostensible wide-eyed tone of Workman's short film about Hollywood, seemed to be uncritical celebrations of America and its undiminished (and uncritical) spirit in times of crisis.

Although Workman's film was synonymous with the attacks in my mind, the 9/11 Memorial Museum does not include it. While featuring many Hollywood movies, the museum also curiously shares my book's blind spot. Its exhibit privileges posters of superheroes flying next to the towers while ignoring films directly about the events. References to reenactments such as Paul Greengrass's *United 93* (2006) and Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006), both of which portray the towers before the attacks, are nowhere to be found. It is striking that the 9/11 Memorial Museum so completely elides Hollywood's own portrayal of 9/11. The absence of these reenactments in a museum designed to remember the day suggested the possibility that these films might challenge the very idea of memorialization, framing the limits of direct confrontation with

trauma. The shared omission invited a second look at Hollywood's portrayal of 9/11.

When contemplating a review of these productions, I remembered how my understanding of *The Spirit of America* gradually changed. The film visibly warped in that small-town Montana theater. It was projected so many times that the images lost their pristine quality until they were overwhelmed with scratches. Through its repeated screenings, my local Cinema Paradiso unintentionally transformed Workman's film into a metaphor for an America degraded by the quagmire of the Middle East. It was as though the Hollywood sheen of the United States' righteous mission in the days following 9/11 became sullied by the nation's actions in its War on Terror. By the time graphic photos were released from Abu Ghraib in 2004, where U.S. soldiers were revealed to have tortured Iraqi prisoners, I paid less attention to the romantic images of Matt Damon in uniform than to the also-featured news anchor from Sidney Lumet's *Network* (1976) shouting, "I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!" I began to notice Workman's references to Hollywood's revolutionary fury. I wondered, what might these 9/11 reenactments reveal if I looked at them again with a skeptical eye? Perhaps I would find scratches that tarnished and muddied their presentation of a post-9/11 spirit of America.

So, in the spring of 2020 I conducted an impromptu 9/11 film festival for an audience of one. The reenactments were indeed far stranger and more ambivalent than I expected. As I watched, I felt myself both destabilized and implicated, even pushed to ask unsettling questions about the spectacular movies that so fascinated me. Seeing the Arab-as-enemy in *United 93* brought to mind the brown bodies destroyed in Jon Favreau's *Iron Man* (2008). But as a scholar of Arab heritage myself, how could I relish movies that trade in images of my own destruction? How do I reckon with my own privilege as a film critic? The way in which my impromptu "festival" generated such unnerving, implicating questions recalled my equally destabilizing visit to the 9/11 Memorial Museum in 2017. There, too, the collision of entertainment and mass suffering left me curiously at odds with myself and my own position as a spectator. As I toured the space, I was made aware of the intersections of my identity and the perceptions (both my own and those of others) of those intersections. I was treated as an enemy of America (I passed through machines signaling state sanctioned suspicion), as a victim (I was facing the wreckage of the towers), as a movie and pop culture fan (I

contemplated old posters of Superman), as a critic (I was given space and opportunity to take copious notes while George W. Bush pontificated on the big screen), and as a secular hedonist (nothing prevented me from relishing a fine sandwich in the café).

In this introduction, I deploy different portions of that museum visit as springboards to reflect on key Hollywood films that attempt to recreate the day and its aftermath. These include *United 93*, *World Trade Center*, Adam McKay's *Vice* (2018), and Michael Winterbottom's *A Mighty Heart* (2007). Close inspection brings out moments when these films gesture to their inability to grapple with the event they work to fully capture. The museum's own pointed references to Hollywood indicate the presumed value in perceiving the spectacular attacks through the kind of violent, seemingly apolitical spectacles examined in this book. The site's permanent film presentation—two documentaries in which world leaders discuss the impact of the attacks—hints at how film can act as a tool for state power during times of emergency. And in positioning its screening room near the café, the museum forces a confrontation with the privilege of pop culture consumption and the fraught insights offered by such a vantage point. As visitors consume their sandwiches paired with a grand view of the memorial and the wider city, their sensory pleasure coexists with a simultaneous empathy toward and distance from those who suffered in the attacks. Ultimately, the museum evokes the "untidy" hall of mirrors that I explore in this book on post-9/11 genre film and law—in which the imagined boundaries between perpetrator and victim and between our geopolitical realities and our onscreen fantasies break down.

Passing through X-Ray Machines and into the Security Theater

The 9/11 Memorial Museum opens with an eerie reenactment of one of the consequences of the attacks. All attendees walk through a metal detector, and those who set off the alarm must submit to a pat down. Although I passed through without incident during my visit, I had been worried that my prosthetics would inspire the usual rigmarole that occurs in airports. When alarms are set off, the metal in my arm and leg braces provokes a frisking by bored security attendants. With clinical detachment they handle my right hand and leg, atrophied since birth due to cerebral

palsy. Our interactions last far longer than those allotted for able-bodied persons who move through the machines without being stopped. The extended duration gives me time to ponder the perception of my disabled brown body in a post-9/11 context, not only as vulnerable but also as a potential threat. So my visit to the museum started with the now typical reflection on myself, a French Arab American, as principally an object of suspicion. In this way, the place felt less like a memorial to a major historical catastrophe than a monument to the Transportation Security Administration (TSA).

The entrance offers attendees a taste of what Bruce Schneier describes as "security theater," a space designed to evoke the feeling of security without actually having any tangible effects (Schneier 2009). Visitors dutifully took part in the performance, slipping off their bags and coats without question. My non-normative body exposed the strings of this puppet theater (at least in my own mind) by underlining my role as an antagonist in this drama. The theater demands the performance of vigilance on the part of security forces against the bodies falling under their gaze. Such "neutral" screenings tend to adopt an ableist stance, since those in wheelchairs or wearing prosthetics are often singled out. The exceptional treatment of those with disabilities draws attention more broadly to how this theater depends on and reinforces difference, be it bodily or racial. I feel, in these spaces, the intersections of my own identity that mark me as outside the norm, as worthy of scrutiny. Even though it is the metal in my brace that sets off alarms, I cannot help but consider my outward appearance. Indeed, I often sense myself as a brown body when walking through such machines, and that sensation was particularly palpable at a museum where in the formal displays Arab men are explicitly labeled as the enemy. Security theater intentionally or inadvertently depends on and implicates certain kinds of bodies, characters who fit a type.

Just as the museum's starting point drew attention to my visible Arab-ness, Greengrass's *United 93* traffics heavily in visions of the terrorist enemy as stereotypically Arab and quintessentially Muslim. Greengrass presents a reenactment of United Airlines Flight 93, where passengers allegedly resisted hijackers until the moment of the crash. The film recounts much of the story chronologically, in real time. It opens with a recitation from the Quran, the words heard first against a blank screen and then against a tight shot of the holy book. The recitation continues over images of New York City seen from above. The

un-subtitled verse sounds like an incantation that looms menacingly over this metropolitan space. A supposedly incomprehensible Islamic threat thus floats above, permeating the American setting. In this way Al Qaeda members are reduced to their religious beliefs, acting without what they might consider to be their political logic. Soon the set design emulates an imagined radical Islamist view of the United States. Several of the hijackers enter the airport, passing by a pair of fake fashion magazine covers, "The Shape Issue" and "The Bust Issue," each of which features a seductively posed woman, one of them with a phallic Popsicle resting on her lips. Although the shot lasts only a second, it frames the enemy's perception of American media as prurient and obsessed with the female body. The set decoration, featuring such an objectified, hypersexualized femininity, implies that these enemies are driven either by misogyny or by regressive attitudes about sex and the body. *United 93*'s camera operates with an eerie prescience, continually falling on the Arab hijackers, even before the plane's takeoff—visually engaging in a kind of racial profiling. Greengrass's docudrama, where history seems inevitable, leaves little room for nuance.

"Don't think!": Looking at the Collapsing Towers

Following the security check that crystallized my "marked" status, and feeling scrutinized by museum personnel much in the way that Greengrass's camera was scrutinizing the Arab figures in *United 93*, I moved into the main atrium of the museum, a space in which the event is depicted as a sublime and overwhelming catastrophe. It presents actual warped steel beams of the World Trade Center. Through such a staging, the museum pushes visitors to inhabit a state of silent, unquestioning reverence. The melted and twisted debris suggests that the attack lies somewhere outside a rational understanding—these monumental disasters obliterated not just human life and architecture but the conceptual armature that supported the edifice of the nation. Even as the exhibit's construction shut down questions, it provoked them: What could a visitor of Arab descent, a young man who had just passed through a security screening, say that would be acceptable to other visitors in the face of these ruins? Moreover, what is he allowed to say about his own dehumanizing typecasting in the aftermath of such devastation?

Films that directly represent 9/11 often reference the inability of those affected to contextualize or make sense of what happened. They

invoke that sense that I had too, of being speechless. In Greengrass's portrayal, when government officials realize that Flight 93 has been hijacked, they immediately struggle to recall when a hijacking last occurred. The camera hangs close to officials during an FAA briefing, the tightness of the shot evoking the claustrophobia inspired by the revelation of the hijacking, as though the state is becoming trapped by the unfolding attacks. For a moment, the officials are somewhat like the victims ensnared in the towers. Soldiers at the North American Aerospace Defense (NORAD) Command Center are similarly flustered by the hijacking and debate whether it is a simulation or "real world." The excited camera, bobbing around and punctuating the dialogue with rapid zooms, further frames a military institution struggling to find a vantage point from which to understand, let alone fight the situation.

Stone's *World Trade Center* portrays New Yorkers facing the attack in similar confusion. The film centers on police officers who become trapped under the rubble of the towers. From the bus shuttling them to Ground Zero before the towers' collapse, they catch a confusing glimpse of the smoking buildings far in the distance. They are unable to agree on which tower is smoking. Further illustrating their feeling of disconnection, one officer's cell phone has no reception. The bus then swerves wildly as it speeds around a corner, physically rattling the men. In this literally disconnected and shaken state, the officers see one man lying on the sidewalk, many blocks away from the World Trade Center. Stone deploys an editing technique from horror films—first presenting the shocked onlookers' reaction before cutting to the object of their gaze. Here the camera catches the dismayed officers staring out the bus windows and then shows the body that grabs their attention. Paramedics surround the victim, a middle-aged professional, his untouched appearance implying that he has most likely suffered a heart attack. It is a notably banal and distinctly non-catastrophic demise, lacking the overwhelming scale that commonly defines the attacks. However, somber music and slow motion draw attention to the significance of the law's first encounter with death on the monumental day. Stone's use of horror film convention in this encounter, from its visual style to even the officer's disconnected cell phone, underlines that state representatives confront an uncanny, dread-inducing challenge. The single death of a businessman, seemingly from shock, frames 9/11 as itself a lethal psychological shock to citizens. The police officers face the unnerving possibility that they cannot protect their charges from such terror.

When the heroes rush into the base of one of the towers, they hear blasts offscreen and briefly crouch down. Their leader, Sergeant

John McLoughlin (Nicolas Cage), shouts, "Don't think! Keep moving." To survive catastrophe, the film's A-list star is reminding us, we need to dissociate from our critical faculties, even shut them down. The scene ends with the sergeant urging his men to stay focused. With that directive, the lights of the downbound elevator briefly come into view. A deafening siren fills the soundtrack before a cut to black. Stone thus illustrates the difficulty of staying focused on the trauma. The film evokes this focal challenge again when the towers collapse. The implosion is seen from the limited perspective of the responders. Through a point-of-view shot, from McLoughlin's perspective, the film shows the lobby crumbling. Emulating his frantic head tilts, the camera whips from people running to shop windows shattering and the ceiling cracking. The quick succession of images fleetingly highlights only parts of the set design. While perhaps a necessity for economically capturing the large-scale event on film, the staging metaphorically reduces the World Trade Center to a claustrophobic set where a macro-level view is impossible. The first responders rush toward the safety of an elevator shaft. Then, another cut to black. These parallel sequences where the image cuts to darkness signify the possibility of a conceptual oblivion. To confront the event directly may require a relinquishing of sight.

Both the museum and the films about the attacks feature clips of shell-shocked reporters, denoting how the mass media played a key role in representing the disaster for a global audience. *United 93* even presents a government relying on news coverage for information on the unfolding attacks. The din of phones ringing above the pulsating score creates a soundscape of confusion in the NORAD Command Center. Greengrass's camera wanders around the setting. Only the announcement of breaking news from the Pentagon slows the camera to a halt and brings quiet. News footage of a smoking Pentagon takes up the frame; however, the enlarged image appears blurred, as though such reporting cannot offer granular detail. Echoing Stone's insinuation that a focus on disaster leads to a shutting down, the reportage on the devastation causes the soldiers to fall silent. For a moment, they are unable to react. The sequence ends with the reporter's booming voice proclaiming, "There's a lot of confusion here at the Pentagon." By freezing the state representatives in silence, Greengrass's media outlets contribute to mass confusion; indeed, they are clearly framed as producers of confusion rather than conveyers of information.

In *World Trade Center*, news reports sometimes dominate as well, but the film also features citizens reacting to the shallowness of the ad

nauseam coverage. In one sequence, a news report showing the collapsing towers ends with a handheld camera falling to the ground. When the announcer says that "officials seem simply stunned by the scale of the losses," Stone's camera pans from the television and through a living room. It lands on the disgusted wife of one of the first responders, who complains, "They keep showing the same thing over and over and over." Stone once more presents the footage from the news camera shaken by falling debris, centering it in the frame as the reporter calls the scene "complete chaos and utter hell." The volume of the rumbling is heightened so that its roar intrudes into the home. The sound design makes it seem as though the media contracts space and renders the living room into an annex of the World Trade Center. Watching the scene, another of the wives in the room cries out in terror, "Oh, my God!" Unlike her more frustrated friend who desires more information from the media, she appears ever more shaken by the images. For some, rhythmic repetition of the attacks on television, without any added context, further buttresses the event's traumatizing power. Stone's film thus indicates that spectacular images of 9/11 on (limitless) repeat, a refrain of the media's melody of devastation, can dull a critical ability to see wider systemic forces at work.

"Like watching a Hollywood blockbuster": A Memorial Calls Out to the Movies

Such a critical ability is a vital resource for those who would work to understand 9/11. The 9/11 Memorial Museum implies that the movies offer a space to do that work. Testimony from survivors is broadcast on loudspeakers, and their images are projected onto the museum's pillars. One of the first accounts visitors can hear and read states that, upon first seeing the attacks broadcasted, one witness "thought we were watching a Hollywood blockbuster." The word *blockbuster* is simultaneously projected on to a pillar. The prominent reference on the museum's wall also suggests a very different possibility: 9/11 has always been understood through the lens of popular cinema. The attacks represent America's cinematic dreams weaponized against itself, a disaster movie brought to life. As to the thin boundary between movies and life, media scholar Stephen Prince has argued that the limited popularity of films such as *World Trade Center* "suggest[s] that viewers are rejecting the role that popular cinema might claim in bearing witness to atrocity" (Prince 2009, 305).

Films about 9/11 sometimes share Prince's viewpoint that we do not want to glimpse atrocity in our entertainment. Stone features the frightened wife of one of the trapped first responders catching her daughter watching the television cartoon *Ed, Edd n Eddy* on a neighbor's sofa and laughing. Although the cartoon can only be heard and is not seen onscreen, the soundtrack reveals that the child giggles at a scene from the episode "Urban Ed" (2000) where a character's homemade cardboard city collapses. The city's downfall is met with the snide comment from an onscreen character, clearly audible in Stone's film against a shot of the concerned mother looking into the home: "Ceaseless toil and broken dreams are the essence of urban living." With its presentation of a pre-9/11 cartoon that stages a 9/11-like catastrophe as fodder for kids' entertainment, the film critiques Hollywood consumers as callously oblivious to the broken dreams of the citizenry who experience urban death. Moreover, even the most direct media parallels to our real-world traumas may refuse to be seen. The child's mother looks directly at the camera, thus at the film viewer, so that we are made to feel like her naive children, judged for our desire to be amused in a moment of crisis.

In his Dick Cheney biopic *Vice* (2018), Adam McKay is more explicitly skeptical about entertainment's relationship to recent history. As Cheney mulls over the opportunity to consolidate his power on 9/11, the dispassionate narrator notes, "As the world becomes more and more confusing, we tend to focus on the things that are right in front of us while ignoring the massive forces that actually change and shape our lives." The film punctuates this assessment with photos of a man golfing in front of a forest fire and a woman mowing her lawn in the path of a tornado. The narrator continues, "When we do have free time, the last thing we want is complicated analysis of government, lobbying, international trade agreements, and tax bills." His words are overlaid against a mid-shot of young people dancing—one shuts her eyes and another's mouth hangs grotesquely open. Our fantasies might reflect an urge to dance blindly. Are they a sign of our refusal to bear witness and engage systematically with not only a trauma like 9/11 but also the political order emerging from it, and the one from which it emerged?

For all their ostensible suspicion of escapism, reenactments of the attacks echo the museum's call out to the movies. They take seriously the role of cinema in comprehending what is posed as an inherently cinematic catastrophe calibrated to draw the world's eye. *Vice* metaphor-

ically stages its indictment of our tendency to disengage during our free time just before its narrator announces the film's intention to capture the "ghost" of American power who revealed himself after 9/11. Popular cinema, productions designed for our entertainment and not featured at the 9/11 Memorial Museum, also might make us face the ghosts of our politics that we would otherwise be afraid to confront, as we will see later in this book.

On a more literal level, Stone's *World Trade Center* references Hollywood in the seconds before, and just as, the plane hits the first tower. A Port Authority police officer passes by a statue of 1950s sitcom star Jackie Gleason, jokingly warning loiterers to get away from "my statue," claiming this benign bit of popular culture as his own. At the precipice before a twenty-first-century trauma that will dramatically transform law enforcement practices, when, in the words of former director of the CIA's Counterterrorist Center, Cofer Black, "the gloves come off," the law seeks out a smiling mascot from the prosperous postwar years (Priest and Gellman 2002). When the plane strikes, we see it via a point-of-view shot from the officer's perspective (Fig. I.1). He watches the shadow of the plane pass over a billboard for Ben Stiller's slapstick

Fig. I.1. The shadow of a plane about to crash into the World Trade Center passes over a *Zoolander* (2001) billboard, a metaphoric gesture to how 9/11's shadow may fall over all of Hollywood. *World Trade Center*.

comedy *Zoolander* (2001) atop a Manhattan Loew's movie theater. At the moment of impact, the lawman is looking toward the movies. *Zoolander* was roundly criticized both for its irreverent attitude in a time of mourning and for ultimately editing out the towers from its New York City skyline (Jones 2016). Rather than position the cinematic junk food as separate from the American trauma, however, the shot composition leaves open the possibility that 9/11's shadow falls over all of Hollywood. Audiences can look for its presence at oblique angles and understand how deeply the attacks are embedded in the culture, bubbling up in benign stories ostensibly designed to help viewers ignore what the *Vice* narrator calls our "more and more confusing" world.

"The World Trade Center in the Popular Imagination": Finding Superman at the 9/11 Memorial Museum

The museum ultimately makes viewers confront the Trade Center's presence in Hollywood productions. A room presenting "The World Trade Center in the Popular Imagination" (as it is described on a very small plaque adjacent to the display thanking donors) contains bright posters showing characters such as Superman and Godzilla atop the towers, directly linking the skyscrapers to power fantasies, placing the site in the realm of superheroes and Eastern monsters.

Sarah Senk, in her study of the museum, frames the room as a site for a forbidden pre-9/11 nostalgia and notes that this is the only place in the exhibit where survivor testimony is not broadcast. Senk points out that on the official map of the collection, the pop culture–centric room is "marked only as an empty square" (Senk 2015). In her reading, the museum thus enacts a disavowal of its own archive. Senk's understanding of the room as a place of myopic nostalgia that pushes the attacks out of sight brings to mind Hollywood productions such as Robert Zemeckis's *The Walk* (2015), which chronicles Philippe Petit's famed high-wire walk between the towers in 1974. Zemeckis's film, on the surface at least, constructs a blissfully innocent time when authorities had only to worry about individuals turning the towers into spectacle for artistic performance rather than for deadly political statements. However, the film's dramatic impact depends on a thorough knowledge of a post-9/11 world. For instance, Zemeckis plays with the shock of seeing a lackadaisical American security system wherein U.S. Customs lets travelers pass into New York with equipment that they admit is designed to infiltrate

the towers. The film appropriates the iconography of the famed "Falling Man" photo, where a citizen jumped from a tower before its implosion, for a sequence where Petit's shirt falls harmlessly from the towers. Even the film's final image, in which the hero claims that he (and implicitly the viewers he speaks to) will have access to the towers "forever," seems to visualize the shadow of the attacks. The shimmering towers in the morning light shine brightly as the image fades out, so that they seem to become overwhelmed by darkness.

The way I sense *The Walk* as a film that troubles pre-9/11 nostalgia, recognizing that it demands a recognition of the trauma in order to function, points to how I experienced "The World Trade Center in the Popular Imagination" differently than Senk. There, where the loudest of pop art is presented in silence, I found a space to reflect on cinematic myth after 9/11. Although the towers have fallen, the featured icons such as Superman, Godzilla, and Spider-Man remain. Perhaps their adventures, like the room itself, exist in an empty square in our imaginations, both outside and within the memory of the attack.

An allusion to pre-9/11 genre media is found in the wreckage of Stone's *World Trade Center* as well. Trapped under the rubble, the film's protagonists discuss their pop culture heroes. Officer Will Jimeno (Michael Peña) cites the televised police procedural *Starsky and Hutch* from the 1970s as the reason he wanted to become a police officer. He recounts that when he heard the television show's theme song, he would perform a mock arrest on his sister. In humming the theme song from the old program when faced with the destruction of the towers, the officers resemble George W. Bush, who invoked the western when he declared his War on Terror. Not only do law enforcement actors mobilize the popular stories of Hollywood in their rhetoric, but also Hollywood's example shapes conceptions of how to wield their power.

Like a Hollywood Superhero Blockbuster?
Finding Spider-Man in *World Trade Center*

Stone's film presents two different kinds of stories that became synonymous with the 9/11 attack—one religious and the other superheroic. A vengeance-seeking rescuer speaks with the rhetoric of Christian retribution that marked Bush's speeches. More strangely, under the wreckage the police officer who had professed to be a fan of *Starsky and Hutch* hallucinates Jesus Christ. In a time of trauma, he thinks about his heroes from

both popular culture and his religion. Captured against a bright white light, Jesus appears in silhouette, the Sacred Heart wrapped in thorns on his chest. From the perspective of a pop culture fan, Jesus looks like a superhero, the Sacred Heart akin to the spider symbol on Spider-Man's costume. This portrayal of Christ foreshadows the film's homage to post-9/11 superhero movies at its climax. When the trapped Sergeant McLoughlin is pulled out of the rubble, the film alludes directly to Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man 2* (2004), evoking a sequence where the superhero is saved by New Yorkers, too.

To understand the full implications of the surprising gesture to the superhero figure in Stone's film, we need to linger on the vexed relationship of Spider-Man media to the World Trade Center. In the 9/11 Memorial Museum, the superhero appears on a poster for the 1978 Spider-Man television show. He stands in the front of the towers at midday, so that they seem to arise out of him. Raimi's *Spider-Man* (2002) similarly cor-related the site and the hero in its advertising campaign. In its first trailer, released in the summer of 2001, Spider-Man catches bank robbers with a web he strings between the buildings. The towers are also reflected in the superhero's eye, reinforcing a visual link between Spider-Man and the New York landmark. Following 9/11, as with *Zoolander*, all traces of the World Trade Center were removed from the film. For some, that might exemplify how these genre movies merely enact erasures of troublesome history. Stone's key reference to Raimi's superhero film troubles this idea, however, showing how spectacular genre movies, even those scrubbed of the towers, may lead viewers back toward Ground Zero.

The specter of the superhero emerges from the rubble of the World Trade Center in Stone's film as McLoughlin, rescued, is lifted over the heads of emergency medical technicians. A shot from above shows him surrounded by a mass of caring citizens that extends to the horizon. Simi-larly, after Raimi's Spider-Man exhausts himself when stopping a speeding train, a band of commuters lift his unmasked body over their heads. Framed from above exactly as McLoughlin is, the composed superhero emphasizes that he is supported by ordinary New Yorkers. *World Trade Center* and *Spider-Man 2* convey a similar message with this portrait of a wounded hero surrounded by citizenry—disaster inspires compassion. By evoking the superhero film so directly in its final moments, *World Trade Center* highlights how audiences return to 9/11 not through meticulously detailed reenactments but through fantastic stories. It is striking that the first and only clear view of Ground Zero in Stone's reenactment is steeped in the imagery of a post-9/11 superhero film. Earlier in the film,

describing the blinding smoke that rises from the site, an evangelical rescuer notes, "It's like God made a curtain with the smoke, shielding us from what we're not yet ready to see." The final moments of Stone's film inspire a question: Do superhero movies, a genre featuring the divinely powerful, offer us the strength to look at what we would otherwise not yet be ready to see?

"Welcome to a world without rules": World Leaders as Movie Stars

After passing through "The World Trade Center in the Popular Imagination," I encountered Arab faces in the museum's archival photos of the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. Senk finds that this exhibit is the only one that muddies the museum's rupture-oriented "before" and "after" presentation of the attack: in "a space otherwise dedicated almost entirely to the exceptionality of '9/11,' the brief inclusion of 1993 reveals at least a partial interest in thinking about 9/11 as something that was neither as singular as the dominant public discourse would suggest, nor without concrete historical 'causes' " (Senk 2015). She argues that the 1993 incident is presented in a way that makes it seem like a logical predecessor to 9/11. The narrative of somber inevitability is further reinforced in reenactments such as *United 93*, when the plane's initial taxi down the runway before takeoff is accompanied by foreboding and somber music.

The placement of these photos near "The World Trade Center in the Popular Imagination," filled with ephemera from pre-9/11 popular culture, also suggests the wider history of the Arab as an enemy in the popular imagination. He had long signaled fanatical menace in Hollywood films such as *Black Sunday* (1977), *Back to the Future* (1985), *True Lies* (1994), *The Siege* (1998), and *Rules of Engagement* (2000). The animated television program *South Park* gestures to how entrenched the archetype of the Arab terrorist is in a 2007 story arc entitled "Imaginationland," where terrorists attack the titular site, the literal home of all of humanity's imagination. The threatening Arabs coexist with and terrorize pop culture icons from both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The deadly bombing that heralds their arrival in Imaginationland visually mirrors the D-Day sequence of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), thereby suggesting that they act as a proxy for the Axis Powers in World War II. Like the figure of the Nazi, the terrorist can easily be slotted into viscerally satisfying narratives of exceptional catastro-

phe, comprising pure evil and assailing unimpeachable goodness. After watching a hostage video that ends with the beheading of a Care Bear, a happy cartoon character from the 1980s, a military general pauses the tape. He turns to his men and somberly remarks: "Terrorists appear to have complete control of our imagination." With a grotesque absurdity, *South Park* underlines that these figures hold a very real sway on the public and the state's thinking.

Following 9/11, the Arab has been represented as an enemy not only in the geopolitical world and reenactments like *United 93* but also in popular fantastical movies. He has controlled the imagination of Hollywood. For instance, villains linked to the desert land of Mordor in Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003) are brown-skinned and dressed in robes that evoke the stereotypical image of Bedouins. *South Park* reinforces this reading by presenting its contemporary Arab terrorists running amok in Mordor. *Iron Man* (2008) reduces Middle Eastern men to cannon fodder for its superhero, an embodiment of the American drone program. With perfect aim, Iron Man separates the civilians from the enemies. The latter do not even get a label in his electronic sights—they are nameless, killable objects existing without clear definition, like the "enemy combatants" of post-9/11 law.

Remembering this scene amid the many photos of brown enemies at the museum, I wondered: Do these pop dreams that I love watching offer me only visions of my own inhumanity? How can I make sense of my torn allegiance between the heroes and their enemies? And how can I manage to genuinely love these films?

I think my love stems, in part, from their disruptive potential. Paul Pope's *Batman: Year 100*, which influenced the aesthetic and themes for Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, encapsulates my sense of how these tales of the (super)powerful can productively speak for the powerless. In a key moment in Pope's comic, the masked superhero is caught by the police in a rundown high rise. He hides in an apartment and is helped by a black child who leads the police away. "You see anybody come this way? Guy dressed like Dracula . . . ?," an armed officer asks the boy. The child sits in the foreground with his back to the reader, squeezing a Superman action figure. In the background of the panel, we see the militarized police leaning into the living room. Batman hides behind the door. In Pope's composition, the superhero stands over the child's head—the objects of the state's gaze are visually linked (Pope 2006, 9). After they are left alone, the boy gives the wounded hero his Superman toy, as if it were a protective talisman. The scene reveals how figures like the superhero

give the marginalized the strength to look upon power directly and to be critical of those whom authority labels as monsters to be hunted down.

At the same time, Pope's focus on the black child who hangs on to his beloved superhero for strength stands at odds with how typical representations of Batman indulge in his privileged status as the white male industrialist Bruce Wayne. Pope told me in a personal interview: "My Batman is essentially an accidental home-grown terrorist against the state. My Batman isn't a billionaire. He's an Everyman [*sic*] trying to do good, maybe or maybe not Bruce Wayne, who gets sucked into the machinations of the state apparatus" (Pope 2017). In other stories, Batman usually directs his violence and his surveillance equipment against those in impoverished communities. Comparing Pope's rendering of Batman supported by a person of color who loves superheroes against more standard representations of the character draws attention to how such stories invite their consumers to wander between subject positions. Through them, we might hold the weapons of the state and take aim, even as we taste the fear of those targeted. Just as the black boy holds on to a superhero to give himself courage, we might also find new founts of bravery to resist. These spectacles break the "us-versus-them" mentality George W. Bush often evoked. In some ways, they allow us to be both "with us" and "against us," victim and victimizer, simultaneously.

The poster for *The Dark Knight* sharply exemplifies how pop heroes help us to sense the victimizing side of the authorities, undermining our allegiance with those conventionally presumed good. If the museum were to have an exhibit entitled "The Burning World Trade Center in the Popular Imagination," it could be a centerpiece. Batman stands in the foreground. Behind him looms a tower with a flaming hole at its center. Its structural wound forms the shape of the Bat symbol: this devastation appears to be Batman's doing. Combined with dust in the background that resembles the plumes from the imploding World Trade Center, the poster suggests that our heroes lie at the root of our terror. They are akin to the terrorists who linger on the periphery of our political imagination. At the top of the poster is the film's tagline: "Welcome to a world without rules." Such a story promises to show how violence can obliterate the ethical and legal rules of the established order.

While the Batman poster informs viewers of its intent to destabilize established Manichean frames in a world defined by a burning tower, the film component of the 9/11 Memorial Museum presents the trauma in simplistic good-versus-evil terms, as an exceptional moment outside of history. On the upper floors of the museum, an auditorium constantly

plays two short documentaries featuring world leaders attesting to 9/11's impact. In *Facing Crisis: A Changed World*, President Bush testifies that he was horrified when he saw the TV footage of the attacks. Bush goes on to declare that the event showed that "evil is real" and that it "was brought home on that day." Displaying such a leader on the big screen, speaking with disbelief about the changed world, labeling the attacks as an ahistorical cataclysm in a way consistent with much of the museum's explicit presentation, implies that film can act as a tool for those in power to shape policy. Within its dark, subterranean levels, the museum shines a light on the ability of cinema to help audiences understand the attack. On the upper floors, it reveals how cinema can serve state interests by framing Western nations as righteous victims of "evil" enemies.

The Hedonist's Eye:
Eating a Sandwich and
Glimpsing the Nation's Enemy as a Mirage

Following their stroll past images of mass death, visitors have the chance to grab lunch at the café adjacent to the museum's cinema. The eating area sits next to huge glass windows that offer expansive views on the reflecting pools where the towers once stood, along with the wider city. When I ordered a sandwich, I thought of my own position of privilege. Michael Rothberg refers to "privileged consumers" as implicated subjects, "participants in and beneficiaries of a system that generates dispersed and unequal experiences of trauma and well-being simultaneously" (2019, 12). The museum offered an estranging space to contemplate myself as imagined enemy of the state, and as a disabled body attracting scrutiny. Sated from my sandwich while looking out at the memorial and New York City, however, I also sensed myself as a privileged consumer who has the luxury to muse about historical tragedy through the lens of entertainment. At the museum, my trauma and my well-being commingled.

Richard Rorty has argued that empathy emerges out of both "security and sympathy" (1993, 128). The latter feeling might arise only after the former is obtained. Emotional connection with those different from ourselves is possible only from a position of comfort. To be capable of compassion, Rorty suggests, is to be privileged. One filmmaker has crafted both direct and very indirect portrayals of the War on Terror: Michael Winterbottom. One of his films in particular encapsulates the tensions

in my own identity that I felt at the museum café, with the remains of the World Trade Center somewhere far beneath my feet.

Winterbottom has directed several post-9/11 documentaries and reenactments, most notably *A Mighty Heart*, which chronicles the kidnapping of Daniel Pearl by Al Qaeda and the struggles of his wife, Marianne Pearl (Angelina Jolie), in the immediate aftermath. Many of the aforementioned themes of *United 93* and *World Trade Center* can be found in this film. With the assistance of a pulsating score and shadowy staging, its brown inhabitants of Karachi persistently exude menace, similar to Greengrass's hijackers. The film also narrativizes the struggle to look directly upon trauma. When the video of Daniel Pearl's beheading is played, the film shows only a montage of shocked faces reacting to the scene. Like Stone, Winterbottom is concerned with the struggle to directly face violence. He presents many shots through multiple panes of glass, which add a layer of illegibility. That visual remove accentuates the distorting power of the news media often referenced by Marianne Pearl and her peers. Finally, the film posits the difficulty of engaging in, and the temptation to withdraw from, the ethical ambiguities of the present moment through news reportage. One scene presents a friend of Marianne lying on the couch in a fetal position. As she nestles in her arm, as if on the verge of drifting off to sleep, a news anchor discusses the "renewed concern over how the United States is treating its detainees." Winterbottom, who also directed a documentary about Guantánamo prisoners, reveals the struggle to confront the inhumanity of one's own state and contemplate the humanity of the alleged enemy.

Within *The Trip* series of films (2010–present), Winterbottom proposes that the privileged consumer of cinema has the perspective necessary to accomplish such critical work. The series follows two hedonists, actors Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon, playing caricatured versions of themselves. They go to the finest restaurants while cycling through a Rolodex of celebrity impressions. As they eat and banter, they touch on different historical traumas, from Pompeii in Italy to the Spanish Inquisition and the Spanish Civil War. For these men, traumatic history and Hollywood cinema are inextricable. They mention both in the same breath as they feast on the most exquisite food. These pop-culture aficionados always appear to be on the border between complicity and insight. *A Mighty Heart* can only gesture to the guilt of its heroes within a broader political system and hint at how they rhetorically demonize nonwhite citizens around them, as when Marianne Pearl rants about Pakistanis as "psychos and liars"

while her Pakistani allies look on. Although her insults are ostensibly directed toward those with knowledge of her husband's abduction, the camera hangs on the "friendly" Pakistanis present in the room. How they meet her hateful words only with a stunned silence implies that Pearl is painting all Pakistanis with a dehumanizing brush. *The Trip* series has the remove necessary to more pointedly lodge such indictments against its heroes and its viewers. Moreover, the films' mockumentary form calls attention to and hangs on the fulcrum between reality and fiction, providing viewers the chance to meditate on the fictional aspects of the enemies that terrorize our political reality.

The phantom of ISIS, radical Islamic terrorism, haunts the last moments of Winterbottom's *The Trip to Spain* (2017). One of the men looks at the perpetrators of traumatic violence, the phantoms of our time, directly. Without the context offered by Winterbottom's earlier work, such as *A Mighty Heart*, the suddenly political finale can seem inscrutable. Coogan goes to North Africa to meet his partner at a high-end resort. Although he appears to have met her, he wakes up at daybreak stranded in his Land Rover on a desert road. The idyllic reunion is revealed to be a dream. The roused comedian is framed through the shimmering reflections in his car window, recalling similar compositions in *A Mighty Heart*. Then the film cuts to an extremely wide shot of Coogan's Land Rover, so that it appears minuscule against the desert setting. Coogan discovers his gas tank to be empty. The hedonist, a man of cafés and cinemas, is alone and vulnerable. After he sips his last drop of water, he sees a car coming in the distance. He approaches the camera and smiles. When the car emerges out of the desert heat, his smile fades when he sees that it is the iconic white Toyota pickup of ISIS. As he stares at it, the cry "Allahu Akbar" can be heard. The film ends with the freeze-frame of the pleasure seeker staring at a geopolitical nightmare. Unlike the news media viewer from *A Mighty Heart* who seems to be near falling asleep on her sofa, Coogan, the consummate movie viewer and our hero in *The Trip to Spain*, remains frozen in contemplation, caught in the act of seeing.

Whereas the previously discussed reenactments often uncritically present Arab enemies, the Arabs' appearance in *The Trip to Spain* is troubled with a song choice. The Arabic cry of "God is great" is placed against the Michel Legrand song "The Windmills of Your Mind" whose English lyrics were written by Alan and Marilyn Bergman. The circular theme is the anthem for the film, lustily belted out by the comedians during their journey. They dub it alternately "a postmodern manifesto" and "a lovely song from the seventies." The tune first appeared in *The