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REBOOTING MASCULINITY AFTER 9/11: MALE HEROISM ON FILM FROM
BUSH TO TRUMP

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky

By
Owen R. Horton

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Susan Bordo, Professor of Gender and Women's Studies

Lexington, Kentucky

2018

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

REBOOTING MASCULINITY AFTER 9/11: MALE HEROISM ON FILM FROM BUSH TO TRUMP

Conceptions of masculinity on film shifted after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks from representations of male heroism as invulnerable, powerful, and safe to representations of male heroism as resilient, vengeful, and vulnerable. At the same time, the antagonists of these films shifted towards representations as shadowy, unknowable, and disembodied. These changing representations, I argue, are windows into the anxieties Americans faced in the aftermath of the attacks. The continuing presentation of power as linked to violence, however, illustrates the ways in which conceptions of masculinity have stayed the same.

KEYWORDS: Masculinity, Terrorism, 9/11, Bush, Obama

Owen R. Horton

April 15, 2018

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Forces Of Evil	2
Rebooting Masculinity	6
Chapter 1: Bond, Re-Bourne.....	11
Introduction	12
Early Bond: Stabilizing The Cold War.....	16
Bond Re-Bourne: The War On Terror And Spy Adventures.....	22
Bond And His Others: Craig Reboots Masculinity	28
<i>Bond And Women</i>	30
<i>Bond And The Enemy</i>	50
<i>Bond And The Soft Male</i>	58
Conclusion.....	67
Chapter 2: Traumatized Superheroes And Disembodied Nemeses	69
Introduction	70
Fantasy Elsewheres, Sutured Realities	71
Origin Stories	76
Disembodied Villains (The Batman Trilogy)	85
Techno-Masculinity (The Iron Man Trilogy)	109
Conclusion: Strength Through Struggle	122
Chapter 3: We Have To Go Back!	125
Introduction	126
The Unclaimed Experience	135
Compelled Return.....	139
Discipline And Mastery.....	151
Conclusion.....	161
Chapter 4: Knowing Is Half The Battle	164
Introduction	165
Anxieties Of Uncertainty.....	166
War Films Since Vietnam: Masculinity Lost.....	172
<i>Vietnam</i>	174
<i>Post-Vietnam</i>	181
<i>The Gulf War</i>	183
Fantasies Of Stability: Location	187
Fantasies Of Stability: Surveillance	197
Coda	204
References.....	211
Vita.....	216

Introduction

Forces of Evil

On September 11, 2001, around 8:30pm, President George W. Bush addressed the nation. In this speech, as in many subsequent speeches in the coming months and years, Bush drew distinct lines between good and evil, terror and resolve, and present and future. Perhaps most importantly, Bush highlighted the uniquely communal experience of the 9/11 attacks on the American psyche: “The pictures of airplanes flying into buildings, fires burning, huge structures collapsing have filled us with disbelief, terrible sadness, and a quiet, unyielding anger.” (Bush 2001) Two elements of this sentence intrigue me: first, Bush acknowledges that 9/11 was a traumatic experience mediated by mass media; second, he—quite instructively—moves the nation from experience (“disbelief”) to trauma (“terrible sadness”) to vengeance (“unyielding anger”). That the attacks were distributed and received through mass media is crucial to understanding how an event that directly affected thousands of people could become resonant for hundreds of millions. The 9/11 attacks were experienced either first-hand via live television or second-hand through continuous media repetitions of the moments of impact, explosion, and collapse. What Americans shared, then, was both a trauma *through* media and a trauma *from* media—the act of watching and re-watching the attacks was enough to cause Post-Traumatic Stress symptoms in people who lived thousands of miles away (Cavedon 2015).

Beyond acknowledging the communal experience of 9/11, Bush’s rhetorical movement at the end of his sentence instructs Americans how to move forward. Not eager to wait, or allow time for mourning, introspection, or healing, Bush suggests that we move from “disbelief” to “terrible sadness” to “a quiet, unyielding anger.” I read Bush’s desire to move beyond sadness toward retaliation as a refusal to accept the

trauma, and the vulnerability it represents, as a stage in the grieving process. In other words, if that terror, fear, and sadness that Americans felt could be refocused into revenge, then control could be restored and the trauma—this out-of-control feeling of helplessness—could be erased. Thus, the movement toward a conflict; a war on terror. But where to fight this war? And against whom? America’s entrance into Afghanistan and later Iraq brought no resolution to the trauma of the 9/11 attacks, neither did the killing of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. Modern terrorism is larger and more complex than a single country or figurehead—it is cellular and independent. Overthrowing the Iraqi government did nothing to stop terror cells in Libya, Syria, or Yemen. Similarly, killing bin Laden did not cease Taliban activity or stop ISIS from growing. By its very nature, terrorism resisted the American impulse for revenge; there was no single place to focus this “unyielding anger.”

The impulse to fast-track healing through revenge is common in both reality and narrative. Americans were eager to move past this moment of vulnerability, sadness, and fear because it runs so antithetical to our national mythology. The 1941 attacks on Pearl Harbor are the closest analogue for 9/11, and yet those were done within the backdrop of a World War. The United States’ path toward revenge was clear and laid out before it in a way that did not exist in 2001. Instead, Americans were frequently forced to look inward and craft stories of domestic heroism as a means of overcoming the trauma and helplessness of the attacks. Christina Cavedon (2015) notes that post-9/11 rhetoric focused on the idea of families not as “bereaved” but as “survivors,” which she believes has connections to Bush’s desire to move forward:

Whereas *survivor* implicates an active, heroic position that speaks of resilience to the effects of the traumatic experience, *bereaved* summons up the notion of a passive subject [...] In a post-9/11 context, the term survivor became preferred to the term bereaved because it helped to immediately activate the already amply discussed American resilience template. (170)

The “resilience template” Cavedon mentions echoes in Bush’s speech: “These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve.” (Bush 2001) The focus on American resolve, resilience, or determination marks a shift in American self-identification. Cavedon notes that “9/11 was traumatic for Americans not directly affected by the attacks because it countered previously held beliefs of safety,” (173) a belief system she calls the “myth of American invulnerability.” (173) 9/11 marks a drastic and seismic shift in the mythologies of America and Americans—what was once invulnerable, safe, and powerful was now broken, damaged, and traumatized. Bush’s desire to move from trauma to revenge, then, was as much about preserving this cultural self-identification as it was with any military intelligence. Like the bereaved and survivor phrasings Cavedon mentions, the movement toward an aggressive response repositioned the United States in an active rather than passive role. We became the aggressor in order to avoid being the victim.

Beyond the rushed timetable, Bush also situates the 9/11 attacks within a larger mythological framework: good versus evil. In his short address, he uses the word “evil” four times; certainly, evil is the proper word to use for those who would commit such

heinous acts. And yet, the word choice also illuminates how binary the war on terror was for Americans at the time—the implication being that if our enemies are evil, then we must be good. Again, however, terrorism proved resistant to American national narratives. In order for the good to triumph over evil, after all, there must be an evil out there. As I mentioned earlier, modern terrorism is so difficult to combat because it is both shadowy and cellular—each individual cell operates independently and without the need of a strong leader. Because of this, there is no base to take down, no figurehead to kill, and no battle to fight. The lack of tangible enemy disrupts the ability to craft a binary: if there is no evil out there—or worse, if we cannot locate that evil—then how can we recover that lost power, invulnerability, and safety? The failure to locate and destroy the evil forces against which we were fighting disturbed the healing processes Bush was recommending. Cavedon argues that

moralizing politicians limited themselves to picturing the attacks as assaults produced by intrinsically evil forces that are adverse to the American way of life. Therefore, celebrations of American exceptionalism as a reaction to an alleged national trauma prevent melancholy discourses from ever gaining a prominent standing. (174)

By doubling down on the rhetoric of American power and strength, the Bush administration attempted to facilitate healing through conflict. In the end, because of the nature of modern terrorism, all we found was frustration.

Americans turned toward art as a means to understand, overcome, or rewrite their frustrated position. In the films I examine throughout this dissertation, the lingering

questions of American power or vulnerability, invincibility or resolve, and knowledge or naiveté continually repeat themselves. My dissertation maps shifts in heroic masculinity following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the subsequent War on Terror. In it, I argue that popular media— in this case, film— is responsible for both reflecting shifts in masculinity brought forth by political events (the terror attacks and subsequent political actions in the Middle East), and for constructing new masculine models of heroism set to appeal to a contemporary audience. In doing so, I stretch beyond the extant scholarship of media and 9/11, which has so far been interested in how media “represents” terror and war, toward an understanding of popular media as both a mirror of shifts in masculinity and a producer of new hegemonic norms. I focus specifically on the rise of the “broken” or “damaged” hero after 9/11— an archetype that has seen play throughout history, but has never been as ubiquitous as he is now. This omnipresence, I argue, is part of a cultural drive to reframe what it means to be American: from an invincible, safe, and pure country to one who instead finds strength through hardship, challenge, and trauma. Politicians moved from talking about America as powerful to talking about America as resilient. Films about heroic men reflect this reframing.

Rebooting Masculinity

My dissertation iterates on the model of pop-cultural analysis set up by scholars like Jeffords or Robin Wood. In fact, Jeffords’ *Hard Bodies* may be the closest analogue for my work. However, while Jeffords focuses her critique of post-Vietnam masculinity on the singular figure of President Ronald Reagan, I focus on an event (9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror) that works through three presidencies (Bush, Obama, Trump). While each president has his own response to the War on Terror (revenge/vengeance,

drone warfare, zero-sum aggressiveness), I am less interested in administrative arcs than I am in cultural response to the shifting realities of terrorism post-9/11. The difference is important in that it allows me to examine the multi-directional nature of the relationship between American politics post-terror and the entertainment industry. Throughout this project, I intend to stress the role of Hollywood and the film industry as active participants— not just reflectors— in the shaping of cultural ideas about American power, masculinity, and global terrorism in the 21st century.

Each chapter focuses on a specific genre, and the way that genre presents a “rebooted” masculinity after 9/11. My first chapter, “Bond, re-Bourne” peers through the cracks of the suddenly vulnerable visage of James Bond to expose a core truth of hegemonic masculinity: it does not exist. Rather, masculinity is constructed through its relations to “inferior” racial, gender, and class Others. Starting with the 2006 reboot of the franchise, the four Daniel Craig films (*Casino Royale*, *Quantum of Solace*, *Skyfall*, and *SPECTRE*) see Bond fall in love, experience loss and trauma, and attempt to locate the villain, only to fail over and over again despite his successes against henchmen. The first two issues speak to a masculinity in crisis, while the last issue speaks to the anxiety of the War on Terror; more specifically, to the frustration of dealing with a decentralized and cellular terrorist threat. What makes this treat so terrifying, among other things, is the inability to identify and locate the terrorists, their leader, or their base. Like Bond, the West finds itself searching for a central figure against which to use its military fight, and like Bond, it manages only to conjure up low-level henchmen or ghosts from the past (bin Laden).

Chapter two, “Traumatized Superheroes and Disembodied Nemesis,” examines the meteoric rise of the superhero film in the early 21st century in relation to the origin narrative these films frequently present. I frame my argument through a pair of trilogies: Christopher Nolan’s Batman trilogy (*Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, and *The Dark Knight Rises*) and Marvel’s Iron Man trilogy (*Iron Man*, *Iron Man 2*, and *Iron Man 3*). Superhero films, I argue, become the optimal space to work through feelings of powerlessness and despair after 9/11, since superheroes almost universally originate from traumatic origins. Most importantly, these narratives link the trauma to an ascension into power-- it was necessary for Bruce Wayne’s parents to die in order for him to become Batman. Through this linkage, superhero films reframe masculinity as not something that was always invincible and omnipotent, but as something that acquired its power through resilience in the face of trauma. This reboot of masculinity allows Americans to imagine 9/11 not as some terrible end to an empire, but instead as the genesis point from which a more powerful version of ourselves can emerge.

My third chapter, “We Have to Go Back!”, moves from the battlefield to the homecoming. Here, I take on the anxieties regarding the returning soldier with PTSD as they play out in time-loop movies like *Edge of Tomorrow* and *Source Code*. The time-loop structure, which is different than time travel in that the individual is forced to repeat the same day over and over again, I argue (using Cathy Caruth’s work *Unclaimed Experience*) is a perfect metaphor for the compelled return victims of trauma experience in their daydreams and nightmares. These films present a scenario in which the protagonist, through mastery and discipline, forges a way through a doomed scenario in order to obtain freedom, victory, and power over death. The problem, I argue, is that this

presentation imagines that the trauma survivor needs only to be “resilient” in order to overcome his psychic scars. “Supercrip” fantasies like these are never about the disabled individual, but instead speak to the latent guilt an ableist society experiences as a result of the barriers faced by said individuals.

I conclude my dissertation with a fourth chapter, “Knowing is Half the Battle.” This chapter combines elements of several previous chapters: anxieties about information and the enemy, the returning soldier, and trauma and resilience, and reads them through the 21st century war film. War films, I argue, have historically focused on oscillations between “over there” (the battlefield) and “back home” (after the war is over). We see these examples in post-Vietnam films such as *Rambo* (a back home film), *Full Metal Jacket* (an over there film) and the ensuing films in the *Rambo* franchise, in which the “over there” becomes a fantasy space where we get to “win this time.” After 9/11, I argue, these different spaces become blended, tenuous, and indistinguishable. In the 2014 film *Good Kill*, for example, drone pilot Thomas Egan (Ethan Hawke) lives in Las Vegas but spends most of his days looking through the eye-in-the-sky of a drone in Afghanistan. Conversely, films like *American Sniper* work to reinforce and stabilize ideas of knowledge and certainty, offering a fantasy in which Chris Kyle’s every intuition is proven right and justified. These breakdowns and stabilizations expose a core anxiety regarding masculinity’s place in war, an anxiety that while omnipresent in war film is exacerbated by the unknowable enemy and unending war.

I use a generic focus in my dissertation because it allows me to focus on the ways in which different film genres attempt to answer the questions of masculinity brought forward by the War on Terror. How do we understand ourselves as powerful when we

can be so easily attacked and injured? How do we utilize our military strength against an enemy that refuses to fight? And most importantly, how can we dominate and defeat an enemy we cannot identify or locate? Certain genres, such as the superhero film, are more capable of answering certain questions, such as the first one. No genre is able to answer them all. In my Coda, I examine the rise of Donald Trump, and the first few months of the Trump presidency. Certainly, Trump has caused us to reexamine masculinity in America, and I argue that his zero-sum approach to identity and conflict plays and will continue to play a large role in the global War on Terror. While 9/11 and the War on Terror are seismic shifts in American masculinity, Trump's ascension to the presidency is a tremor in its own way. I chose to write a Coda rather than a conclusion because the election of Donald Trump does not feel like a concluding moment with regards to the ideas my dissertation raises. Instead, it feels like a sharp turn back in time, towards an even more regressive and aggressive masculinity. The Trump presidency so far is an absurd magnification of the violence, vengeance, and power structures that my dissertation outlines.

Chapter 1: Bond, Re-Bourne

Introduction

During a campaign rally on August 31, 2016, Donald Trump made a promise to Americans regarding the safety and security of the nation should he become president: “On day one we will begin working on an impenetrable, physical, tall, powerful, beautiful southern border wall.” Typical of Trump, the sentence is a meandering adjective soup propped up by simple images of classic masculine strength. Ignoring why Trump needed to clarify that the wall would be physical (are there non-physical walls?), or what exactly makes a wall “beautiful,” I would instead like to focus on the connection between his masculine-adjectives “impenetrable” and “powerful” and Trump’s overall campaign focus: Make America Great Again (MAGA). The fantasy of MAGA was, on its face, a promise of return to an older, stronger, and more secure America. An invincible America. A pre-9/11 America. Behind that promise was also the ability to deliver on it. Trump argued that his xenophobic and racist policies toward Muslims and Mexicans were the only way to secure a suddenly-vulnerable and weak nation, and he positioned himself as the only man capable of doing so. In essence, it is not the wall or a registry that will keep Americans safe, it is Donald Trump himself.

Trump’s attempt to call back to a stabilizing regressive masculinity is not new, we need only think back to George W. Bush’s cowboy persona or Ronald Reagan on horseback in weathered gingham. While these images hearkened back to a wildness born from the westward expansion, Trump’s all-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful masculinity feels medieval in nature. Trump looked at a world in crisis, a nation wounded, and saw the opportunity to present himself as the stabilizing force, one which could return the nation to a time before terrorism. In this way, he attempts to share qualities with another bastion of masculine stability: James Bond. From 1962 until 2002, Bond was the symbol

for a classic, refined, and stabilizing masculinity, one which offered certainty and consistency throughout the ambiguous and shadowy world of the Cold War. What happens after the Cold War, especially what Bond becomes after 9/11, is the primary focus of this chapter. I use the play on words “Re-Bourne” in the title because the Jason Bourne franchise, released in the aftermath of 9/11, reimagined what spy films could and should be. In many ways, the Daniel Craig reboots beginning in 2006 are as much a product of Bourne’s influence as they are the War on Terror.

In this chapter, I would like to consider the ways in which the character of James Bond has transformed in response to shifting world views of masculinity. More specifically, I would like to frame my analysis through the constant battle between masculinity and “Otherness.” Connell’s (2005) assertion that masculine “[h]egemony... is a historically mobile relation” (77) is crucial to my argument, as masculinity’s response to “crises” such as feminism, the end of the Cold War, and 9/11 can only occur if we understand masculinity as adaptive and fluid. “True masculinity” does not exist, according to Connell (45). Thus, we can understand it only as an amorphous blob of cultural ideas about men and manhood at a fixed moment in time. Connell further states that

hegemonic masculinity embodies a ‘currently accepted’ strategy. When conditions for the defense of patriarchy change, the bases for the dominance of a particular masculinity are eroded. New groups may challenge old solutions and construct a new hegemony. (77)

If we take Connell's arguments to be valid—and I do—then our conceptions of hegemonic masculinity must include two basic notions: (1) masculinity never exists on its own as a fixed idea, therefore (2) masculinity becomes concrete only through challenges to patriarchy, and its new form is always constructed *in relation to* that challenge. In short: masculinity requires an Other against which it defines itself.

What constantly places hegemonic masculinity into crisis is that these Others keep changing, forcing the idealized notion of manhood to shift and adapt. Throughout this chapter, I will put pressure upon the rift between eras: between pre-9/11 Bond as a paradigm fantasy of “intact” heroic masculinity (the stable force) and the post-9/11 “Re-Bourne” Bond as the shattered remnants to be put back together. I will do so through a focus on three separate areas of Bond's world: Bond's women, the villain, and the “soft” male. While I chart these shifts in definition as they occur throughout Bond's career, I mark the terrorist attacks of September 11 as a flashpoint of adaptation in the Bond aesthetic and mythos. Without a response to the changing template of the action movie hero post-9/11—a template perfected by Matt Damon in the Jason Bourne franchise—Bond risked falling into an *Austin Powers* (1997) type parody.

Many critics have articulated some version of the idea that the Bond films were not actually spy movies, but action adventure films. The Bourne franchise's response to severity and gravity of 9/11 only made the lighthearted nature of the Bond film seem more out-of-place. Bond's adventures had to change, to become more in line the world around them. Similarly, the Bourne films also featured a protagonist, Jason Bourne (Matt Damon), struggling with trauma and identity—something we could never have imagined Bond doing. And yet, they are at least partially responsible for the broken and

traumatized Bond we see in the Daniel Craig Bond series. In the later sections of my chapter, I will take stock of the impact of the Bourne franchise on the Bond film after 9/11—most specifically the ways in which it presented an adaptation of masculinity that more accurately reflected the challenges of the times.

Moving through the Bond franchise chronologically, I will take Sean Connery's Bond as the axiom for Bond's aggressive, omnicompetent masculinity. His first film, *Dr. No* (1962) released just months before Freidan published *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), situating the early Bond in the small gap between the beginning of the sexual revolution and the rise of feminism. Bond's sexually liberated—yet still dominating—relationship with his “Bond Girls” is only part of the examination: I also contend with the “female threat” presented by masculine women such as Rosa Klebb and Judi Dench's M. I will also consider the role Bond's antagonists play in helping him shape himself. This simple black/white relationship from earlier films becomes complicated after 9/11, when anxieties about the decentered nature of global terrorism disrupted our ability to craft a coherent “us/them” understanding of the War on Terror. Finally, I will investigate Bond's relationship with what I call the “soft” male. I identify the “soft” male as the intellectual, introspective, emotional, frail, and submissive agent Bond frequently encounters during his visits to Q Branch. These men present what Connell would call “masculinities”—alternative forms of manhood that challenge our singular notions of what masculinity is. Bond's relationship with Q Branch shifts dramatically throughout the series, to the point that they form an active coalition in the most recent installment, *SPECTRE* (2015). Like Bourne, the post-9/11 Bond falls apart. My chapter is concerned with the ways in which he puts himself back together.

Early Bond: Stabilizing the Cold War

The most deadly threat to Bond in *Dr. No* is the titular doctor himself. Dr. No is a classic and archetypal Bond villain: coolly intellectual, detached, exotic, disfigured, effeminate, and aberrant. As a character foil, he serves as the opposite to Bond in every way imaginable. And yet, he simultaneously seems strangely drawn to Bond, so much so that he refuses to execute Bond several times and treats him to dinner while revealing his elaborate plot. At one point during dinner, Dr. No has Bond's eye-candy, Honey Ryder (Ursula Andress) sent away from the dinner table so that he and Bond may chat as men and equals. Dr. No desires Bond to himself, and this homosocial desire is presented as strange and abnormal. He is supposed to desire the physically stunning Ryder, but he instead lusts after the challenge offered up by Bond's mastery. Dr. No's interest in Bond is reflective of Dr. No's function in the film: he believes Bond presents an interesting challenge for him, yet his purpose in the film is to present an evil caricature against which Bond can test his masculine mettle. By overcoming Dr. No's trap, and physically overpowering and killing him, Bond has proven himself masculine and simultaneously defined masculinity against Dr. No. In the world of 1962, then, we can understand masculinity as anti-intellectual, aggressive, racially white, able-bodied, hetero-normative, and adherent to social norms. In many ways, Dr. No defines masculinity (through negation) more than Bond could ever hope to.

Bond's triumphs over Dr. No present an interesting quirk of the series: because the directors cannot assume that the audience has seen the previous films, each installment must be self-contained. And yet, each Bond film is simultaneously in conversation with the entirety of the franchise through references, inside jokes, and immediately apparent archetypal characters. The next film in the series, *From Russia*

With Love, however, subverts much of what the first film set up. The introductory scene, in which Bond pursues a blonde henchman, offers a shocking twist: Bond is murdered! Only, this Bond isn't Bond, but a man in a Bond mask. What is most interesting about this scene is the way it presents identity. If SPECTRE's henchman were training to kill James Bond, which is more important: that his target looks like Bond or that his target behaves like Bond? The film appears to side with image in this case, which is extremely antithetical to the masculinity of action presented in *Dr. No*. In many ways, this scene is the perfect introduction for the film, in that it sets up a subversion of gaze and presents Bond for the first time as an object rather than a subject.

As in *Dr. No*, Bond negotiates his masculine identity through the other characters in the film. Although the film imagines that his primary nemesis is the blonde assassin Red Grant (Robert Shaw), I would argue that the main villain of this installment is the former SMERSH colonel Rosa Klebb (Lotte Lenya). Grant is indeed a threat to Bond's mastery (and his life); however, he functions more as a double than as a foil. The introductory scene, in which he strangles the Bond impersonator, constructs him as someone who seeks to replace and replicate Bond—this is not a threat to normative masculinity but an affirmation of it. Grant simply represents the generational nature of masculinity, that it reproduces itself through mastery and adherence to norms. Klebb, however, hits the usual Bond villain refrains: she is cold, calculating, and physically aberrant.

The twist in this film, however, is that Klebb is female. Unlike the femme fatale villains of other Bond films, however, Klebb is not sexually desirable; in fact, her character works aggressively against any sort of objectification. As she enters the

SPECTRE training grounds, she bristles at the friendly touch of one of her comrades. We are meant to immediately read her character as frigid. More specifically, I believe we are meant to understand her character as a woman who desires masculinity (or at least male forms of power). This presentation must be read in the light of the nascent feminist movement—especially in the context of the hyper-sexualized Bond women who precede and follow her. Through this lens, the film casts feminism as aberrant, frigid, aggressive, anti-sexual (potentially lesbian), and threatening to men. Klebb is infinitely more threatening to Bond than any femme fatale, simply because his sexual potency is wasted on her. In fact, Klebb shows aptitude for reversing and challenging the male gaze. Later in her training ground visit, she comes upon a shirtless Grant, and subjects him to an objectifying gaze. This is more than a subversion of the male gaze, it is an inversion. Here, the male body is placed as spectacle for the female viewer. If Grant is Bond's double, which I certainly believe he is, then Klebb's gaze objectifies our hero as well. Her inspection is normalizing, but it is not a normativity of hegemonic masculinity, it is something aberrant and strange. Similarly, Grant is forced into the object position, which disrupts notions of normativity precisely because of how well he performs idealized masculinity through physical perfection and mastery.

As with the working woman in *Dr. No*, Klebb's feminist gaze must be vilified for both male viewers and female viewers. As such, her next scene—the meeting with Agent Tatiana Romanova—presents her as sexually aberrant and dangerous to women. In many ways, this scene mirrors the earlier scene with Grant: Klebb's icy stare discomforts the viewer and the subject, and objectifies Romanova through an abnormal lens. Klebb, in a masculine-fitting suit and with her gruff voice and rigid posture presents more as a man

than as a woman. The contrast between her and Romanova is stark and apparent. She strokes Romanova's hair, and interrogates her about her sexual history. Klebb's femininity is presented as anti-heteronormative. She so starkly blurs the lines between woman and man that she may be one of the earliest queer models in cinema. For this very reason, Bond must eradicate her and the threat she poses to the masculine power structure. As SPECTRE's stated goal is destabilization, Klebb is the perfect agent. Her mere presence destabilizes the rigid gender binaries on which Bond relies to assert his manhood and mastery. In the same way, she is the perfect feminist—critiquing the myth of monolithic masculinity through her apt performance of men's roles.

Klebb is the force Bond must remove; Romanova is the force Bond must restore. In all the ways Klebb destabilizes normative gender roles, Romanova reinforces them. She is the anti-subversive, the nostalgic call back to the era before feminism. And for all these reasons, she is the heroine of the film. Romanova, in many ways, becomes the tabula rasa for the imaginations of masculine society. Her body and mind are a colonized space. The first time Bond sees Romanova, it is through a periscope. As he spies on a meeting at the Russian embassy, Romanova enters the room. While the men in the room are all seated at a table, Romanova remains standing, waiting on the men and serving tea. Because she is standing, Bond can only glimpse her from the neck down. This is the male fantasy: all body, no brains. Bond likes what he sees. Compared to Klebb, Romanova's body signifies feminine in every way imaginable. Later, he gets to claim his prize. Back at his hotel room, Romanova is waiting for him in bed, wrapped up like a present. She even has a nice bow around her neck. Her collar becomes a consistent visual cue throughout the film, as Bond reattaches it as a means of putting her

back in her place. The film also calls attention to Romanova's mouth. In bed, before their first time together, Romanova worries about her adequacy compared to Bond's bulging masculinity: "I think my mouth is too big." The camera focuses in an extreme close-up of her mouth while Bond replies "it's the right size, for me at least." (*From Russia With Love*) Romanova's mouth exists only to emphasize the scope of Bond's masculinity. Her large mouth is just the right size for his oversized manhood.

Her mouth, however, has another signifier in the film. As Bond and Agent Ali Kerim Bay (Perdo Armendariz) track down one of SPECTRE's agents in Istanbul, they arrive at an apartment with a prominent advertisement of a blonde woman on the side of the building. Kerim Bay remarks "she has a lovely mouth, that Anita," calling Bond's attention to the billboard. Yet again, we have a blonde woman with a prominent and large mouth. Bond quickly realizes that the mouth is a secret escape hatch for the agent, and he sizes the space up. The camera, in a point-of-view shot from Bond's rifle, zooms in on the woman's mouth. The introduction of every Bond film features the same scene: Bond walks across the camera as we see through the scope of a would-be assassin. Bond quickly turns and shoots the camera, killing the assassin. The mirroring of these images is meant to remind us that the object in the crosshairs is often a larger threat than the person looking down the scope. Women are threatening, even to Bond. This threat is assuaged, however, when we learn that the woman's mouth is not dangerous, it is merely an escape hatch for a man. Like Romanova, this woman has no mouth or mind of her own, what comes out is simply regurgitated masculinity. *From Russia With Love* closes as it must: with Bond fighting off Klebb while Romanova watches helplessly. Klebb was able to gain access to Bond's room through a subtle gender performance. Dressed as a

maid, she went unnoticed to Bond—by adopting the clothing and affect she was supposed to have, she blends right into the background of Bond’s world. When Bond kills Klebb he is reinforcing the gender binary of hegemonic masculinity; he is restoring order.

Pierce Brosnan’s reboot of the Bond franchise is perhaps most notable for its return to classic Bond. The previous Bond films had been commercial disappointments, so a shift in focus made financial sense. While Moore represented a softer, smoother, and more juvenile Bond, Brosnan returns the character to his aggressive, hirsute, and hyper-masculine self. Masculinity works toward a nostalgic reclamation project. Here, as in previous Bond films, we see women in the workplace; and yet, the threat still presents as immediate and novel. The film opens with Bond and his mandated psychiatrist speeding along an open road. He proves immune to her psychoanalysis, often toying with her, and she proves totally vulnerable to his charms. Immediately, the film presents a woman in the workplace standing in the way of Bond doing his job. While the scene has potential for self-awareness, it reverts to a conservative view of masculine mastery and its power over women. The psychiatrist clears Bond for duty despite his problems. Equally threatening are Moneypenny (Samantha Bond) and the new female M (Judi Dench). While the earlier Bond films presented Moneypenny as an eager participant in Bond’s blatant flirtations, *Goldeneye*’s Moneypenny references sexual harassment.

M’s threats, however, are much more explicit. Like Klebb, there is no sexuality in her, and she codes as more masculine than feminine. Also like Klebb, she has no problems letting the men in her workplace know about her resistance to their sexuality: “I think you’re a sexist, misogynistic dinosaur. A relic of the Cold War, whose boyish charms, though wasted on me, obviously appealed to that young woman I sent out to

evaluate you.” (*Goldeneye*) M mirrors Klebb, and that is perhaps the vilest threat of feminism toward the masculine imagination: it transforms our own women too! Klebb as cold and gender-queer was acceptable because Bond would eventually eradicate her; M as cold and gender-queer is much more threatening because it reflects the belief that feminism has rooted itself in the inner workings of society. In other words, M is the worst fear of hegemonic masculinity: that feminist thought will work its way into patriarchal power structures. Bond must work to restore power to the threatened patriarchy.

Bond Re-Bourne: The War on Terror and Spy Adventures

The first Bond film to release after 9/11 was not *Casino Royale*, but the final installment of the Brosnan series: *Die Another Day* (2002). While *Die Another Day* did fine at the box office, critics largely panned the film. Re-watching it for this chapter, I was struck by how old the movie feels. Had I not known, I would have assumed that the film released in the mid-1990s with its focus on remnants of the Cold War (this time North Korea is the enemy) and its “X-treme” sports and marketing presentation. I certainly would not have guessed that this film released just over a year after 9/11. When I say the movie feels “old,” I mean that it feels like it is from a different era: a time of relative peace and prosperity for the United States; a time when spy films about terrorist attacks could still be fun adventure popcorn flicks without weight or gravity. Looking back, this film reflects more what we might imagine from an *Austin Powers* parody than a post-9/11 spy film. The villain is a cartoony megalomaniac, and Bond defeats him using increasingly unbelievable gadgets while seducing both women and emerging from physical and psychological trauma unscathed. To be reductive: this film was not serious enough.

Unfortunately for those involved with the production of *Die Another Day*, its premature aging was exacerbated by a film that released a few months earlier: *The Bourne Identity* (2002).

The Bourne series as a whole was a breath of fresh air in the spy genre upon its release. I recall sitting in the theater and marveling at how completely different this film felt from any other summer movie I had seen. The fight scenes are jarring, utilizing a modified “shaky cam” combined with discontinuous editing and an intimate proximity to create a disorienting and raw experience. Nothing feels staged because everything is so frenetic. At one point, Bourne repels a knife-wielding assassin with a rolled up magazine; later, he fences with a ballpoint pen. Similarly, the car chase sequences use practical effects to ground the film’s gritty realism. In contrast to the abundant and poorly-executed CGI of *Die Another Day*, *The Bourne Identity* presented a grim and serious world more reflective of the national mood after 9/11. What sets it apart from the Bond template, and why I think it represents such a large schism in the Bond universe, goes far beyond the visual aesthetics of the film. I suggest two main consequences of the Bourne universe on the Bond universe: (1) Bourne introduces uncertainty into the superspy genre, posing not only questions about his enemy and his mission but also about himself, and (2) Bourne experiences love, loss, and trauma, and ultimately recaptures his masculinity without devolving into a typical Bond-style hyper-masculinity. Point (1) is important because uncertainty becomes a theme after 9/11, thus Bourne’s uncertainty paves the way for Bond’s uncertainty in the later Craig series; point (2) demolishes Bond’s ability to simply recreate his masculinity without devolving into parody, forcing

the Craig series of films to reconsider and incorporate a Bourne-style “fall apart, then rebuild” narrative instead.

Bourne’s presentation of uncertainty initially complicated my reading of identity and masculinity in films after 9/11. An overarching argument I make in this dissertation is that unidentifiable nature of the terrorist cell during the War on Terror created a disruption of the Other, which in turn disrupted the ability to craft masculine narratives in response. In *The Bourne Identity*, this relationship is inverted: first Bourne loses his identity, then he cannot distinguish the enemy. Further complicating my reading, the more Bourne discovers in this film—about himself, about Treadstone—the less he actually knows. The knowledge he does gain further upsets his ability construct a coherent personal narrative: at one point, after discovering that he is a highly-trained assassin, he tells Marie¹ (Franke Potente) “everything I found out I want to forget.” Ultimately, this inverted timeline—between the loss of identity and the indistinguishable enemy—forced me acknowledge 9/11 as simply *part of* cultural history, rather than the earth-shattering event we learned to describe it as. Certainly, the terror attacks are a strong force in the creation and reception of Bourne, but his identity confusion also comes to exist at the same time post-feminist conceptions of masculinity came in vogue. Bourne’s crisis of confidence, then, is as strongly tied to cultural shifts in the way men think about themselves as it is to 9/11 or the War on Terror. His uncertainty illuminates the effects of decades of feminist thought: men are now forced to consider themselves and their impact on those around them.

¹ Marie is Bourne’s love interest in the first two films. She is also so much more than that: she coaxes him out of his shell, forcing his vulnerability to bubble to the surface. As the only person he ever trusts, she is also his conduit to a more human world. The fact that these two end up as lovers is secondary to the fact that Marie single-handedly rehabilitates Bourne’s human side.

Beyond the loss of his memory, Bourne also struggles with connection and intimacy. In a shadowy world where anyone could be trying to kill him, how could he trust another person? Luckily, desperation forces him into a resolution. He recruits Marie to be his driver, and she takes him to Paris. Their relationship only begins when she chooses to come into his apartment—ostensibly for a shower and some food. Marie’s nomadic, gypsy lifestyle makes her a perfect partner for Bourne—she has as much experience living off the grid as he does. This film constructs identity through data and surveillance: the information we have about someone (bank statements, records, residences, phone calls) determines who they are. Marie’s lifestyle makes her nearly immune to identification: her history is every bit as cloudy as Bourne’s. Yet, what Bourne finds is that Marie is accessible. She openly shares information about herself, her feelings, and her concerns. This relationship complicates what Bourne and Treadstone believe, by illustrating that data and information are not the same as knowledge. Bourne’s knowledge of Marie—gained through interacting with her—directly contradicts his knowledge of himself: the more he learns, the less he understands and the more he “wants to forget.” This realization upsets Bourne’s inner world: he can know himself, but not in the way he imagines: only through his connection to others can he create a stable identity.

Marie both complicates and clarifies Bourne’s life. At times, she smokes out vestiges of the human being he used to be before he became a programmed killing machine. These instances force him to actively reject his programming—to seek out human connection and bonding. She also helps him embrace his vulnerability through intimacy, which becomes key in his growth throughout the series. I recall seeing the shower scene between Bourne and Marie in the theater in 2002—I was struck by how the

camera and the action presented Bourne's body, not Marie's, as the one for visual consumption. Bourne cuts and dyes her hair, washes her, then strips off his shirt to reveal his toned physique. To call this a "sex scene" would be overly scandalous, as the camera cuts before anything truly carnal happens. Instead, the audience is only treated to the emotional intimacy that comes before the sex—an intimacy borne out of vulnerability. Bourne does not seduce Marie, he falls in love with her. This is something we would never imagine saying about Bond before 2002.

Intimacy is not usually a word we consider in Bond films. Certainly, Bourne is a much more serious take on the spy genre than Bond (although that changes during Daniel Craig's run), but the intimacy in a world of double agents and sleeper cells feels fraught with danger. Beyond simple intimacy, Bourne also experiences an emotional vulnerability that coincides with his memory issues. When I make the point that Bourne does not seduce Marie, I am emphasizing that fact in direct contrast to what we know about the slick superspy Bond represents. Bond's power, his virility, his masculinity, and his omniscience all radiate outward from the simple act of seduction—an act which is repeated in nearly every Bond film. His ability to seduce became narrative shorthand for his power. I emphasized that "Bourne does not seduce Marie, he falls in love with her" because throughout the films—even, and especially, after he loses Marie and grieves for her—Bourne's power, competence, and masculinity are never in question. The magic of the Bourne franchise (at least the first two films) is in its ability to present a broken, vulnerable, and fragile man who still fights and wins. If Bond was already drifting toward self-parody with *Tomorrow Never Dies*, the first two Bourne films kicked him over the edge. After Bourne, there was no way to go back to the cheesy, effects-laden adventure

films—Bond had to get serious, he had to show some cracks, and we had to get close enough to him to see it all. Bourne forced Bond into intimacy.

The second major contribution of the Bourne franchise was the injection of existential uncertainty. Given that the Bond movies are about shadowy spy networks, uncertainty makes sense as a repeated theme, yet Bond himself never experiences uncertainty with regards to himself, his mission, or his enemy. Earlier, I discussed the role that SPECTRE played in the older Bond films: as a third-party outside of the East-West dynamic of the Cold War, they posed a unique threat of destabilization that Bond frequently worked to counteract and stabilize. At the end of the Cold War and after, the concern was about identity in the aftermath: exactly *who* is the West? Against whom were Americans fighting? Did we even have an enemy? All of these are uncertainties, for sure, but none of them possessed the urgency and immediacy of the Cold War or what happened in the aftermath of 9/11. Bourne emerges in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks, and exposes the anxieties of battling a nationless, cellular, and decentered enemy. Bourne's remark that "everything I learn I want to forget" is certainly a reflection of the sordid history of American interventions into the Middle East that created Al-Qaeda, but I also read it as a rejection of a classical and binary model of self-knowledge. Bourne does not learn anything about himself by understanding his foes, his marks, or his kills. That knowledge simply frustrates him. His enemy is not out there, and none of his physical confrontations offer him any insight into himself (even though he always emerges victorious). Rather, the knowledge Bourne seeks comes from building coalitions and relationships, and by looking inward and deciding for himself who he wants to be.

The Bourne films present an introduction to the frustrations of modern terrorism: through their very existence as borderless, nationless, and cellular (not *leaderless*, but also not dependent upon one leader) entities, terrorist organizations destabilize the ability for hegemonic entities (masculinity or the nation) to engage with and defeat them. Bourne will not find any answers by beating up bad guys, any more than the United States can win the War on Terror by killing Bin Laden. Rather, Bourne is forced to consider his recalibration: he is interested in who he was—despite not knowing exactly who that is—but he is uninterested in allowing that past self to define his future. Instead, he attempts to create a new self in the aftermath of his resurrection at sea (something Bond similarly experiences in *Skyfall*), a self that finds meaning in personal relationships and non-violence. While not an exact template, Bourne’s movement away from the Other as a means to understanding the self serves a loose guide for the Bond franchise in the Craig reboot, *Casino Royale* (2006).

Bond and his Others: Craig Reboots Masculinity

Late in Sam Mendes’ 2012 film *Skyfall*, James Bond (Daniel Craig) takes M (Judi Dench) “back in time” to a point when “[they] have the advantage.” The time travel here is figurative, as Bond and M search out a safe haven in his childhood home—the titular *Skyfall*—in northern Scotland. Yet, for both the characters and the audience the resistance to time seems real: Bond and M travel in the classic Aston Martin from the original *Dr. No* (1962), providing a visual gag to go along with Bond’s time travel quip, and the *Skyfall* mansion exists in a foggy Scottish valley that has both been ravaged by time and immune to it.

Time is a unique concern for James Bond. Throughout the franchise, which itself has stood the test of time, time has been an absent force. Consider primarily the nature of the narrative: each individual episode hurtles Bond through a dramatic conflict—usually against the clock—that is solved and then promptly erased the moment the next installment’s title credits play. Bond has no history: his exploits are contained in the episode and then never remarked upon again. The events of *Dr. No* do not have any impact on the events of *From Russia With Love*. Beyond that, he never suffers from history either—no scars, no bruises, no psychological trauma, no romantic entanglements. All that rings true for most of his 50-year cinematic history until the 2006 series reboot with Daniel Craig, which brings me back to *Skyfall*. As Bond and M prepare to fortify the crumbling mansion against Silva (Javier Bardem) and his henchmen, they come across the groundskeeper, Kincade (Albert Finney). Kincade represents a living connection between Bond, *Skyfall*, and his past. Kincade tells M that after his parents’ death, young James hid in a secret passage under the home for two days, and “when he came out, he wasn’t a boy anymore.” Viewers do not need to be told what Bond emerged as: a man. Since the early 1960s, Bond has been an iconic figure of Western masculinity. And yet, the James Bond of *Skyfall* embodies remarkably different elements of maleness than Sean Connery’s Bond in *Dr. No*.

Throughout this chapter, I have illustrated the ways in which the Bond franchise attempts to stabilize singular ideas about masculinity despite shifting “threats” to the hegemony. Masculinity may at times be stable, but it is never hegemonic— as I have argued, the shifting nature of the threat necessitates a shifting recourse masculinity. Throughout the history of Bond, however, three consistent “threats” appear and reappear:

women, villains, and “soft” men. Bond's relationship with women allows him to demonstrate his omniscience and stabilize masculinity against aberrant gender performances; his opposition to his villains illustrates a constant need for adaptive foils against which masculinity can articulate itself; his opposition to "soft" men represents the drive to construct a singular version of masculinity rather than accept the reality of masculinities. All of these three relationships undergo changes during the Daniel Craig reboot of the series. For the remainder of the chapter, I will examine the ways in which Craig's Bond's relationships with women, his battles against his enemies, and his interactions with Q Branch all illustrate a shift in his masculinity commensurate with a larger shift in masculinity after 9/11.

Bond and Women

I grew up in a family of men. Our house was in the country—in the middle of nowhere might be a better phrase. My parents adhered to rigid gender roles—even though my mother worked, she was still expected to cook, clean, do the laundry, and take care of the kids while my father was out in the garage building or fixing things. My two younger brothers and I lived in a desert of femininity. Since there were no neighbors, and since we lived too far away from town to get cable television, our main cultural interaction outside of school was movies. We loved movies, and we watched them voraciously and repeatedly. Our favorites tended toward the extremes of normative masculine fantasy: action flicks, horror films, sports movies, science fiction, fantasy, and martial arts epics. We loved Bond movies. Westerns and war films, two masculine mainstays, were at a cultural nadir in the 1980s, so we generally viewed those as “old people movies.”

My grandparents bought a new VHS camera when I was 10, and they gifted their old camera to us. My brothers and I spent our subsequent summers and winter breaks writing, storyboarding, acting, and directing our own films. Naturally, we mimicked what we loved, and my parents' house is still filled with boxes of old VHS tapes of our martial arts films, sports movie knock-offs, and crime dramas. Out of all those tapes, probably hundreds of separate films in total, we never made a James Bond-style spy thriller. Nothing even close. Until I began researching for my dissertation, my childhood career as a filmmaker had never struck me as important in any way—it always just seemed like a game. But children's games are often revelatory of the social norms young minds are struggling to absorb and synthesize. It is telling that my brothers and I never once made a Bond-style film, mostly because we covered every other area of interest comprehensively. As I consider it now, the reason seems obvious: we could not make a Bond film because we did not have a female lead. Obviously, every single other movie style I mentioned earlier—horror films, sports films, action films—features a female lead of some kind, but my brothers and I recognized, if only subconsciously, that for Bond films the female lead is crucial to the narrative. As Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott write in *Bond and Beyond*: “[t]hat Bond should encounter a girl in the course of his mission is foreordained, a necessity of the formula.” (115) My brothers and I were able to make martial arts and science fiction epics without girls, but trying to make a Bond-style film without an actress was like trying to make it without a camera.

In *The Politics of James Bond*, Jeremy Black focuses on Bond's heterosexuality as a core component of the character. More specifically, Black identifies the ways in which Bond must navigate the rise of feminine sexuality in the 1960s and 1970s while

simultaneously resisting his own emotions and attachments. Bond's heterosexuality is both a gift and a curse—it marks him as a paragon of normativity, but it also entices him with potentially compromised futures as a husband or father. Bond needs to be sexually active and desirable to women because it speaks to the mythology of his omniscience that the films construct. His imperative, according to Black, is to balance his ability to elicit and respond to love from female marks while avoiding emotional ties which Black refers to as “traps” and “compromised” situations. (109-110) Part of the way Bond defends himself against these domestic “traps” is through a refusal of continuity. Each Bond film exists in a wholly contained world, and each Bond adventure begins and ends within that world. Certainly, there are carry-overs such as SPECTRE, M, Money Penny, or Q, but neither Bond's villains nor his women survive through multiple episodes. The serial nature of the Bond film creates a situation in which he can safely bed the “good” girl at the end of the film without any worry that she will stick around, want to get married, or become pregnant. Instead, the next film begins with Bond on his next adventure and his next girl, and the audience neither desires nor receives any explanation of his previous girl's whereabouts.

Unfortunately, Black was unable to predict the seismic shift in culture and masculinity that would occur later in 2001 (his book's publication date). Beginning with *Casino Royale* in 2006, and working all the way through 2015's *SPECTRE*, Bond's relationship to women and his own sexual desire/desirability shift dramatically. In the remainder of this section, I will chart the ways in which Bond's relationships, his connection to his feelings, and his position in a continuous world illuminate shifts in masculinity in the 21st century. Of primary importance to my reading of Bond's

relationship to women is the understanding that Craig's Bond inhabits a non-serial world—one in which the events of previous films continue to matter in subsequent films. Thus, I read the four Craig films: *Casino Royale* (2006), *Quantum of Solace* (2008), *Skyfall* (2012), and *SPECTRE* (2015) as a quartet of films engaging in a larger story. One of the core stories about masculinity these films tell is about Bond and women. I use “Bond and women” specifically here to signify several things: first, that these are women in the same way Bond is a man—they are envisioned as fully-formed, complex, and sexual beings. We, for the most part, avoid patriarchal fantasies of feminine purity and fears of feminine sexuality. Second, I want to stress that not all women in these films are sexual conquests—M is a crucial figure in Bond's growth into this newer masculinity, as is Money Penny. Third, Bond's relationships with these women are core to his understanding of himself, his career, and his world. Without the women he encounters, he would be unable to process his own feelings—those very things Black suggests previous Bonds worked so hard to avoid. Finally, I believe that the larger story arc the films present is one in which Bond experiences love, loss, pain, regret, anger, detachment, and finally love again, all through his relationships with women.

Craig's Bond negotiates his growth through his relationship to three women: Vesper, M, and Madeline. Vesper represents his first love, and her death is his great heartbreak. Her existence drives his actions in both *Casino Royale* and *Quantum of Solace*, as he first loves her, then loses her, then pines for her, then gets revenge for her. M is the female driving force of *Skyfall*, as Silva believes he and Bond are like brothers and M is their “mother.” Here, Bond must confront his past, his genesis as an agent, and his deep feelings for a woman he has icily called a “bitch.” Finally, Madeline offers Bond

a chance at redemption. Blofeld remarks that as the child of an assassin, she is perfectly situated to understand Bond's interiority. In *Madeline*, Bond finds a partner who can share his pain, brokenness, and loneliness. In this section I will explore Bond's relationships with these women in the order I have outlined above. M is the first of these to appear, but her relationship with Bond does not become a focal point until *Skyfall*.

We are not introduced to Vesper Lynd until more than halfway through *Casino Royale*, yet her entrance marks a beginning point for the emotional arc of the entire Craig series. The early half of the film proceeds in normal Bond fashion: an introductory chase sequence, the title sequence, some jaunts to exotic locales, the seduction of a beautiful woman, and the elimination of a dangerous target. Vesper's entrance is also noticeable for how unremarkable it is. Lynd wears a dull pantsuit, which Bond notes must be an attempt to tone down her gender in the boys club that is MI6. Vesper's resistance to Bond's charm is both apparent and intentional. She sizes him up as someone "who views women as disposable pleasures, rather than meaningful pursuits," and tells Bond that her focus is on the task at hand and not his "perfectly formed arse." Sensing a sparring opponent up for the challenge, Bond initiates a game in which he and Vesper attempt to discern information about each other using only visual clues. The undressing we witness on the train is of the emotional and psychological variety. Bond and Vesper play at each other's weaknesses, insecurities, and vulnerabilities in an attempt to expose each other: she correctly deduces that he is an orphan, he suggests that her attempts to de-gender herself actually hold her back from promotions. Despite the playful nature of their exchange during this scene, there is still intimacy here. Both Bond and Lynd attempt to gain power over each other—power in the form of knowledge of intimate secrets—and

both find themselves equally exposed. For Bond, this is new ground—the only exposure we are used to seeing from him is his bare chest under bed sheets after a new conquest.

Initially, Bond pursues Vesper because she resists. This is nothing new for the character over the course his 50-plus years on film—Bond frequently imposes his sexual charisma upon initially unwilling women. Yet Vesper still resists. Her ability to remain detached from Bond, however, finally breaks when the two are attacked in the Casino Royale hotel. Here, Bond fends off two warlords with machetes while simultaneously shielding Lynd from their attacks in a claustrophobic stairwell. The size of the space is informative in this sense—there is little room to flee, only stairs to descend. The condensed space forces Vesper to not only see Bond’s blend of bravery and violence, but also to participate. As the trio (Bond kills the other man earlier in the scene) finally reach the basement of the stairwell, Vesper is forced to attack the warlord’s arm just long enough for Bond to escape and counterattack, choking the man to death. Vesper becomes distraught. Not only did she experience near-death, she was also forced to assist Bond in killing a man. For Bond, this is business as usual; for Vesper, this is a moment of trauma and rupture.

After Bond disposes of the bodies and plays out his hand at the card game, he retreats upstairs to check on Vesper. He finds her in the shower, fully clothed and crying. She tells Bond that “it’s like there’s blood on my hands; it’s not coming off,” and he sits with her in the shower. This moment is one of intimacy unlike anything James Bond has ever expressed. Bond wraps himself around Vesper, and pretends to lick the imaginary blood off her hand. “Better?” he asks her, like a parent who has just kissed a child’s scraped knee. He holds Vesper tenderly. “Are you cold?” he asks, and she nods ‘yes.’

Bond turns the hot water up, and the camera tracks backward into a long shot, framing Bond and Vesper alone together in the bathroom. *Alone together* is a key part of the mise-en-scene—we are meant to see them as cut off from all resources and support, and in that solitude we see them connecting. The scene cuts to the next morning, as Bond looks in on a sleeping Vesper. The camera continually lingers in close shots on his face as he looks at Vesper. This is not a face of desire, lust, or charm, but one of concern. Bond cares for Vesper; more than a simple “disposable pleasure,” he has come to see her as a partner.

Vesper returns the favor later, when she saves Bond from being poisoned by Le Chiffre. Of course, Bond returns to the game unfazed and wins the tournament, thus isolating Le Chiffre from his financial backers and painting him into a corner. During a celebratory dinner, Bond and Vesper discuss her relationship status. Bond notices the Algerian love knot she wears as a necklace—a gift from a lover, certainly. Still, he manages to confess that she has made a lasting impact upon him:

Bond: [sips his Vodka martini] “You know, I think I’ll call that a ‘Vesper.’”

Vesper: “Why? Because it has a bitter aftertaste?”

Bond: “Because once you’ve tasted it, that’s all you want to drink.”

We might imagine this as a cheesy line, and Bond self-consciously remarks “I thought that was a good line,” yet as viewers we know that the Vodka martini, shaken and not stirred, does become the only thing Bond ever drinks. *Casino Royale* positions itself as an origin story, and viewers may chuckle at being afforded insight into something as quaint as Bond’s signature drink, but viewers are also witnessing the origin of a connection that will drive the emotional arc of the rest of the series.

When Vesper is kidnapped following their dinner, Bond gives dogged pursuit. Le Chiffre dumps Vesper's body in the middle of the road, knowing that the only way to stop Bond is to force him off the road as he swerves to miss her. The two are captured and tortured, as Le Chiffre desperately tries to get his money back before the terrorists he finances come after him. The torture scene was a topic of great interest upon *Casino Royale*'s release: Le Chiffre ties a naked Bond to a chair, and cuts out the bottom. Using a knotted rope, he swings the rough end up under the chair and directly into Bond's testicles. Le Chiffre attacks his manhood, and even taunts Bond with the notion that if he does not relent soon enough, he will cease to be a man. Bond laughs at the futility of the torture, even mocking Le Chiffre for "scratching [his] balls"—until he hears Vesper's screams from the other room. Here, the camera shifts from a longer medium shot of the two men to a close shot of Bond's face. He pants and he panics, we can see the emotions on his face as he considers the pain Vesper is experiencing on the other side of the wall. For a moment, we wonder if he will crack in the face of love. Bond recomposes himself, and steels his resolve. The mission comes first; Vesper would want it that way. Just before Le Chiffre can castrate Bond, Mr. White enters and kills Le Chiffre and the screen fades to white.

Bond awakens in a daze some days later. The images are blurred and distorted, mirroring Bond's drugged and traumatized mind, but he can make out the outline of the doctors, nurses, and someone even more important. "Vesper," is his first word upon waking. From here until the end—almost 30 minutes of a two-hour film—the film drastically shifts tone in a way no other Bond film has ever done. Bond and Vesper, with Le Chiffre eliminated, grow to love each other as Bond recovers from his injuries. After

Bond recovers, they set out sailing around the Mediterranean, stopping at small ports to make love and restock food, fuel, and alcohol. Bond loses himself in these moments, and even decides to retire from MI6 so that he might live a normal life with the woman he loves. These scenes take on an idyllic, almost dream-like state, as the film progress so far into the post-climax that viewers may wonder why it has not ended already. Ultimately, what we initially believed to be the climax—the elimination of Le Chiffre—was not the action the film was building towards. Instead, these moments of serenity for Bond and Vesper are the driving point for the *actual* climax, which sets Bond upon a drastically different path than his predecessors.

Bond discovers that Vesper has not turned over the poker game winnings to MI6, and he tracks her to a back-alley where she appears to offer the money over to a man with an eyepatch. Believing that Vesper has betrayed him, he attacks the group in a partially-renovated building in Venice. As the battle proceeds, Bond shoots out the rafts holding the building afloat, and the structure begins to sink into the water. Bond eliminates the henchmen and the man with the eyepatch, before moving toward Vesper. Recognizing that she was not a willing participant in this scheme, Bond works to release her from the elevator cage in which the men trapped her. Vesper, in a moment of heartbreak, pushes Bond away before locking herself in the cage and releasing it into the water below. Shocked, Bond dives down after her; ultimately he is too late to save her and can only watch as she slowly drowns. He carries her lifeless body to the surface and desperately attempts resuscitation before breaking down in tears while embracing her. The scene cuts to later, as Bond is on the phone debriefing with M. Bond tells her that he no longer trusts anyone, to which she responds “Good. You’ve learned your lesson.” The ‘lesson’ being

that he should harden himself to the world and detach himself from emotions and connection. He attempts to prove this lesson to M by refusing to show emotion when M asks him about Vesper: “the job’s done and the bitch is dead,” yet the camera focuses on his face and the pain that still resides behind it. Bond is scarred by Vesper’s death, but also by the love and fragility he experienced with her. This is not a Bond we are used to seeing, and throughout the next three films, he will continue to try to heal from this large and overarching trauma.

Quantum of Solace is a unique Bond film because it presents 007 with a history and a continuity. Bond, out for revenge on those who killed Vesper, has shot and kidnapped Mr. White. White is the tenuous associate to a larger shadow organization—we finally learn its name in *SPECTRE*—with connections to each of Bond’s mini-adventures in the first three films. White is also connected to Vesper’s death, because *SPECTRE* was behind Le Chiffre and the man with the eyepatch in *Casino Royale*. Because he has, to this point, only encountered *SPECTRE* once and without any knowledge that they even exist, Bond’s motivation for pursuing White is to enact vengeance upon those who killed Vesper. Bond’s motives have always been crown and country—it is exceedingly rare for him to be driven by emotion, especially love.

Quantum of Solace is unique in other ways as well. There is no romantic subplot for Bond in this film—the beautiful operative Camille (Olga Kurylenko) is nothing more than a partner as Bond attempts to subvert a water coup. Bond is in too much pain to pursue a love interest, and Camille seems equally disinterested and driven by revenge. The two make an ideal pair, as Camille’s drive to kill the brutal dictator General Medrano (Joaquin Cosio) is as single-minded as Bond’s desire to strike out at the specter he only

faintly knows exists. Their relationship feels more like something out of a buddy-cop movie than the typical Bond and Bond Girl dynamic audiences are used to. There is no steam, no fire, no passion—only the desire for revenge.

Quantum of Solace ends with Bond and Camille parting ways amicably. Camille, having taken her revenge on General Medrano, asks Bond if he thinks she will find peace. Bond replies “I don’t think the dead care about vengeance,” which is meant as both a reply to her and a reminder to himself. Sensing Bond’s struggle, Camille replies “I wish I could set you free.” Bond’s prison is one of grief—a grief he is learning cannot be broken by something as simple and selfish as revenge. We next find Bond some months later, having finally tracked down the man who tricked Vesper into working with SPECTRE. Bond confronts him at gunpoint, his eyes blazing with vengeance. The scene cuts away before Bond can take action, and moves outside the man’s apartment, where M awaits Bond. Here, Bond admits that he did not kill the man and instead offered him up to MI6 for interrogation. Bond’s refusal of revenge earns M’s approval, but as the film closes and he walks away we get the sense that he made this choice for himself. Freedom from vengeance is his first step toward understanding that his grief for Vesper cannot be fast-tracked.

Like *Quantum of Solace*, *Skyfall* is notable for its lack of romantic partner for Bond. Again, we are denied a “Bond Girl.” As in *Quantum of Solace*, however, Bond still finds himself linked with a gorgeous femme fatale—Severine (Berenice Marlohe), whom he beds—and a younger field agent—Eve (Naomie Harris), with whom he develops a close friendship that lasts throughout the last two films. With Severine, as with Fields in the previous film, Bond utilizes his charm and sexual prowess as tools to gain

information or access—in this case, Severine brings him to Silva’s secret island base. Severine simply wants a way out of her situation, which Bond offers her if she brings him to the island. Here, she functions as the object of a macho pistol-shooting contest between Bond and Silva before the latter kills her with an intentional bullet to the head. Bond’s “romantic” arc lasts all of 15 minutes in this film. Instead, director Sam Mendes offers up Eve—who we later discover is the Bond franchise mainstay Moneypenny—as a novice field agent assisting Bond. Moneypenny plays a crucial role in the film—she is the one who shoots Bond in the chest, causing him to tumble into the river below and his apparent death—but the relationship between her and Bond is more akin to a master-pupil one than anything with lasting romantic impact. The two share a moment in Bond’s hotel room in Macau, but I read the scene as a brief flirtation and nothing more (an interpretation with which my colleagues sometimes disagree). I expected more tension as Moneypenny shaves Bond, and what I saw was Bond being playful and Moneypenny slapping his hand away. At the very least, the scene is ambiguous and nothing else comes from their relationship. By the beginning of *SPECTRE*, Moneypenny has an unnamed boyfriend.

Thus, Bond’s only emotional connection throughout *Skyfall* is with M. Silva’s entire revenge plot centers around punishing M for her choice to abandon him to the Chinese during the political switch-over in the late 1990s. Silva, having escaped his capture and lived through his attempted suicide, has returned to psychologically torture M before eventually murdering her. Silva’s obsession with M is infantile, as he constantly refers to her as “mommy.” The familial projection becomes a “sibling rivalry” when Silva discovers that M has found a new “favorite son” in Bond. Bond, caught up in

this strange emotional triangle, positions himself as the dutiful servant to country, and by extension, M. M and Bond's proximity throughout the film causes the lingering issues between the two—issues revolving around Bond's attitude, his carelessness, M's cold-heartedness, and her truthfulness—to boil to the surface and seek resolution. Thus while Bond rejects Silva's attempt to construct a (dysfunctional) family unit between the three—he only mentions it to mock Silva—he, like Silva, attempts to reconcile his feelings for M as a boss and as a friend. Precisely because Bond must engage with his feelings toward M, and what those feelings mean for himself as a professional and as a man, he does not require a romantic partner or conquest in this film. Where *Quantum of Solace* denied him a conquest because he was still pining for Vesper, *Skyfall* resists the typical Bond romance trope because Bond must focus inward during this mission.

M herself has a complex history with Bond. Judi Dench played M in the original Brosnan reboot of Bond and retained the role all the way through *Skyfall*, where Mallory replaces her upon her death. The audience's introduction to M in the Brosnan films was as a nightmare of second-wave feminism: the ball-busting, man-hating, cold-hearted professional woman. Certainly, Dench maintains a bit of this character during the transition into the Craig series of films, although in many ways her outlook on the world changes dramatically. In *Goldeneye*, M derisively calls Bond a "relic of the Cold War" and a "dinosaur." Similarly, she calls Bond a "blunt instrument" in *Casino Royale*, yet she also laments the order and clarity of the past when she gripes "Christ, I miss the Cold War." Thus, we see in M, as we see in Bond, a startling shift in outlook and complexity during the Craig era.

M drops her guard in *Skyfall*, in response to a broken and damaged Bond. The harsh and demanding M that emerges from the Cold War evaporates when Bond returns from his near-death experience and attempts to reintegrate into MI6. He and M bond not solely because of the mission or their similar drives, but because they both suffer from exposure in this film. M's hard demeanor is exposed as a façade—a price for a woman playing in a man's game—when she goes against protocol and approves Bond for his mission. M's belief in Bond is a belief in regeneration—he is not the most suited for the mission, but he presents some hope of redemption that M wants to see fulfilled.

Similarly, Bond's smooth, omniscient exterior is exposed. Just after being captured by Silva, Bond finds himself strapped to a chair as the two come face-to-face for the first time. Silva, attempting to recruit Bond, exposes him to the truth: he never passed his combat or psychological evaluations, and M approved him anyway. Bond's face drops at the news, not because he views this as M's betrayal as Silva does but because for the first time he must confront his own powerlessness and failure. Silva pushes further, however, attempting to weaken Bond's resolve by engaging in homoerotic seduction through soft touches, caresses, and intimate closeness. Immediately, Bond perks up and returns to his suave self. Silva, caressing Bond's face, asks him: "How you're trying to remember your training now. What's the regulation to cover this? Well, first time for everything." Bond's response: "What makes you think this is my first time?" angers Silva and gives Bond the upper hand in the interrogation for the first time. Black (2001) argues that Bond's wise cracks are a signal of his omniscience—they present the viewer with the idea that Bond is always in control of even the most dangerous situation because he is always joking and treating it like a game. Here, Mendes lends credence Black's

reading of Bond's jokes—they are simply tools in Bond's spy kit. Bond is not actually in control of his verbal match with Silva, he simply evades and redirects through emotional manipulation. More importantly, the structure of the scene, as well as the close shots of Bond's face combined with Craig's emotive powers, exposes Bond's long-held power and poise as spy games.

Silva imagines the relationship between himself, M, and Bond to be a familial one: he and Bond are sibling rivals and M is their “mommy.” What these exposures illustrate, however, is that Bond and M connect not through a bloodline but through a shared experience. M empathizes with Bond's brokenness when he returns from his injury, and that is the reason she passes him despite his poor evaluation scores. She shares in his feelings of failure, as her failure to protect the secrets of MI6 leads to a terrorist bombing of the headquarters and the exposure and eventual murder of numerous undercover operatives. M is exposed publicly: she must testify before a government inquiry as to the relevance of the antiquated and ineffective MI6—a hearing she likens to being “in stocks at midday.” For M, the question of MI6's reduced effectiveness and the antiquated nature of the spy world is a direct critique of herself. While Mallory scoffs at the need for an underground spy network, telling M that “there are no more shadows,” she holds steadfast to her belief that MI6 is the best defense against the modern threat of terrorism, retorting: “You don't get this, do you? Whoever's behind this, whoever's doing this, he knows us! He's one of us! He comes from the same place as Bond, a place you say doesn't exist: the shadows!” M's belief in Bond stems from her understanding that he *is* antiquated—he is old-fashioned in all the good and necessary ways. Her belief in his ability to recover and heal is borne from her understanding of his nature. For M, it does

not matter that Bond's aura of invincibility is broken—perhaps she uniquely understands that it never was real to begin with—what matters to M is that Bond's auras, of omniscience or mastery, allow him to perform his duties.

What Bond and M share, as they fend off Silva's vicious final assault at the Skyfall mansion, is the secret of a stone face. M is mortally wounded during the battle, although Bond does kill Silva before he can force her into a double-suicide. The film concludes some weeks later, with Bond standing atop the new MI6 building. Moneypenny brings him a package: a box M left to Bond in her will. Inside the box, Bond finds a porcelain statue of an English bulldog—a decoration he always claimed to hate, and the only object to have survived Silva's bombing of MI6. Moneypenny offers a guess that perhaps M was suggesting that Bond take a desk job. Smiling, Bond responds: "Just the opposite," and the credits roll. The bulldog serves as a symbol of stiff-upper-lip resolve that both Bond and M shared—a repression of fears or desires in service of country and duty. Bond and M suffered through the pain of trauma and of exposure, and the shared experience united them against a powerful foe. Bond's connection with M demonstrates the power of resilience—which of course necessitates a vulnerability—over a fraught and impossible invulnerability.

Skyfall ends with Bond's power restored—albeit a power through resilience rather than a power through invincibility. *SPECTRE* presents Bond with the last step of his healing process: getting over Vesper and finding love again. Here, we see the return of the "Bond girl" in the form of Madeleine Swan (Lea Seydoux). The narrative of *SPECTRE* focuses on Bond's return to his past. He pieces together clues to discover that the step-brother he thought died in a hiking accident is both (1) still alive and (2) in

charge of the shadowy terrorist organization SPECTRE under the assumed name of Blofeld (Christoph Waltz). Together with an inside man, C (Andrew Scott), Blofeld constructs a universal, multinational, and governmentally funded surveillance system under SPECTRE's control. These threats are all external to Bond, however, as Blofeld also harbors a deep-seated resentment of Bond as the "favored child," so much so that he constructs elaborate revenge plots designed to destroy his brother. Near the end of the film, Blofeld reveals himself to be "the architect of [Bond's] pain"—the man who organized the plots that resulted in the deaths of Vesper and M. Bond's journey into the past, just as in *Skyfall*, is a journey into unresolved pain. While *Skyfall* was about Bond resolving his traumatic origin as a spy, *SPECTRE* forces Bond to negotiate the relationships of his past.

Blofeld's connection and drive toward Bond is simple: he feels that Bond stole his father's love and affection, and now he wants to steal love from Bond. In many ways, he is uninteresting specifically because his aims are so reminiscent of a classic Bond villain: egomaniacal world domination. Thankfully, Bond is also forced to negotiate a more complex relationship with Mr. White—the periphery antagonist of *Casino Royale* and *Quantum of Solace*. In this film, White is rapidly deteriorating from a toxic exposure at the hands of Blofeld—a punishment for going against the increasingly extreme wishes of SPECTRE. Bond and White meet this time as peers—members of the shadowy world of spies who this time find their aims (the destruction of SPECTRE) aligned. Suffering from a mortal condition, White's desires revolve not around his own salvation, but the life of his daughter Madeleine. Here, Bond is introduced to the woman who will eventually save him from his own sadness and detachment post-Vesper.

Bond approaches Madeline as an asset: he needs her to help him find Blofeld's secret base using only sparse clues left behind by White. Madeline resists, having spent her whole life on the run as a result of her father's involvement in the espionage underworld. Yet, as the film progresses, both she and Bond begin to find something special and unique in each other. In Bond, Madeline finds a protector and an "out" from her life of hiding. While there is an element of replacement-father to her interest in Bond (very understandable given Craig and Seydoux's age disparity), he is the first man to offer her a solution to her life of solitude. Bond can defeat Blofeld. Bond can defeat SPECTRE. As Madeline begins to grasp the possibility of her freedom, her interest in Bond grows. Beyond that, Bond also reverts into his action hero self, saving her from certain death a number of times. Madeline is drawn to Bond, in part, because he is Bond—the omniscient masculine ideal in a well-tailored suit.

Bond's connection with Madeline is more complex. Following the deconstruction of masculinity that was *Skyfall*, the opening sequences of *SPECTRE* play out much closer to what audiences can expect from a Bond film: adventurous chase sequence, seduction of the beautiful girl (although this time the sex symbol is *gasp* 50 years old!), and the car chase through a beautifully-lit city. The tone of the film shifts once Bond meets Madeline, however. In analyzing how Madeline is structured in this film, I would like to pay less attention to the narrative and more attention to the framing and mise-en-scene. More specifically, I would like to examine the ways in which Madeline is presented as a "more pure" double for Vesper.

When Bond first meets Madeline, she is working as a psychologist. Her office is set in the Alps, and everything in the building is decorated in a minimalist silver-white

theme. Madeline wears black, which, set against Seydoux's milky complexion and the snowy exterior of the mountains, washes out all color and highlights the contrast of the frame. Her outfit is clinical and professional (she is at work, after all) and appears designed to work against her youthful and beautiful face in order to grant her professional cache (Bond never has to worry how his looks affect his reception). The costuming in this scene is reminiscent of the train scene in *Casino Royale*: like Vesper, Madeline plays down her looks in order to get ahead in the professional world. Like Vesper, Madeline is trying to keep a secret. Unlike Vesper, she has no interest in challenging or matching wits with Bond. Instead, Bond bluntly attempts to insert himself into her life, and she refuses. Believing herself to be capable based on her years of eluding Blofeld's men, she attempts to set out on her own and is promptly kidnapped, necessitating Bond's heroic rescue. She spends most of the rest of the film as a damsel in distress, despite her backstory as the dangerous and well-trained daughter of a master assassin.

Madeline's similarities to Vesper are highlighted further during the train scene, in which she and Bond dress up and meet for drinks in the dining car. Madeline's entrance is a thing of note, and the camera lingers for every possible second as she saunters toward Bond in a silk white figure-hugging dress. Her hair and makeup evoke a classic Hollywood look—she is reminiscent of Jayne Mansfield or Marilyn Monroe. Her red lips are the only bit of color in her entire ensemble. As she walks toward Bond, she is framed on either side by diners in all-black. Mendes wants to highlight her whiteness above all else. I read this scene in direct contrast to Vesper's entrance scene in *Casino Royale*. There, Vesper saunters through the room in a black, low-cut dress. Combined with Eva Green's pale skin, darker hair and exotic green eyes, the costuming presents Vesper as a

character with contradictions—many secrets and hidden layers. In contrast, Madeline's monochrome frames her as a simpler character. We already know her secrets. As she and Bond order drinks, their evening is interrupted by a SPECTRE assassin. The scene plays out similarly to the Bond-Vesper fight sequence in *Casino Royale*: as Bond struggles to fight off the larger man, Madeline is forced to intervene, getting blood on her hands. In *Casino Royale*, as I highlighted earlier, this leads Vesper to an emotional breakdown; in *SPECTRE*, the intensity of the moment throws Bond and Madeline into a steamy sex scene.

Beyond having the "appropriate" male fantasy reaction to Bond's violence, Madeline also plays the appropriate damsel in distress. During the film's climax, Blofeld has captured her and hidden her in the bombed-out remains of the old MI6 building. The building is rigged, and Bond has only minutes to find her. Chasing after Madeline, of course, means that he cannot stop Blofeld's escape—at least not initially. After he rescues Madeline, her only purpose in the rest of the film is a spectator to Bond's heroics, as he chases Blofeld down and ultimately decides to turn him over to the authorities instead of killing him on the spot. Madeline functions as an engaged audience to Bond's exploits, she no longer actively participates.

As a character, Madeline starts off complex: she is the daughter of a master assassin who is herself well-trained and capable with weapons. However, through the course of the film, she shrinks backward into a more traditional female lead in a Bond film: helpless and sexy. The mise-en-scene of the film structures her in a way so as to evoke nostalgia for more "classic" Hollywood eras. Taken together, her persona and her look present an image of women from earlier Bond films. Bond's women were always set

up for consumption, but Madeline is shot and structured in a way to focus that consumption through a classic romantic lens. Her contrast to Vesper is striking for this reason: Madeline is simple in all the ways Vesper is complex. The fact that Bond ends up with her—we are to presume for the long run, although we will never know since Craig has shot his last film as James Bond—illustrates a contradiction within the narrative of Bond's growth regarding women. All of his faltering, his falling, his breaking apart, his grief, and his slow rebuilding were supposed to be about deconstructing the Bond mythos. His relationship with Madeline, however, feels more like *From Russia With Love* than *Casino Royale*.

Bond and the Enemy

SPECTRE is in many ways the main antagonist of the Bond franchise. The group, headed by Bond's arch-nemesis Ernst Blofeld, replaces SMERSH as the largest threat to world security in the films. The decision to move away from SMERSH (which features prominently in the novels) and toward SPECTRE is an important one for the sake of my argument for two reasons: first, SPECTRE is a decentralized and nationless threat—one which works from all over the globe employing people of every nationality—while SMERSH is simply a Russian counterpart to Bond's MI6 or the American CIA; second, SPECTRE exists, according to the Dr. No of the film, as a third party outside of (and uninterested in) the East/West Cold War conflict. These differences are substantial because they position SPECTRE as an organization that disrupts normativity by existing outside of the confines of the traditional binaries. Bond's conflicts with SMERSH allow him to participate in a comfortable binary in which he/England/the West competes against and ultimately bests the villains/Russia/the East. With SPECTRE, there is no such

comfort to be had—Dr. No delights in the idea of the organization as “borderless.” SPECTRE is terrifying because they have no location, no discernible organizational structure, and no political allegiances.

Bond’s brand of masculinity, like all forms of hegemonic masculinity, requires an Other against which to triangulate itself. SPECTRE resists these attempts through its very existence as nebulous and fluid. Bond cannot situate himself because there is no beacon. SPECTRE is Bond’s greatest threat because of this resistance—its destabilizing influence on both gender and politics threatens to destroy the foundations of Bond’s identity. Certainly, annihilation is the goal of SPECTRE—the annihilation of government, freedom, or the world depending on the film—but I am more interested in the ways in which its very presence works to disrupt the binary world Bond inhabits in a way SMERSH did not. Ultimately, this positions Bond as an arbiter of stability in his battles with SPECTRE: his mission is always to stabilize the political situation but he frequently finds himself also stabilizing gender, sexuality, or identity along the way. Bond is the bastion of masculinity. What the films present to us, then, is an indefatigable masculinity, both in its dogged pursuit of violence and justice and in its refusal to surrender or become corrupted in the face of SPECTRE’s destabilizing influences. Of course, all of these constructions happen during the Cold War, a time when concepts like identity, stability, and borders were of immediate concern. SPECTRE does not appear in any of the Brosnan Bond films. In fact, the Brosnan films mark a return to the aggressively masculine Bond (hairy chest and all) of the Connery era. Brosnan chooses to dig into the cold detached psyche of a professional killer, leaving aside the adolescent immaturity of the Moore era.

Although every film in the Craig series revolves around SPECTRE as a shadowy threat on the periphery, it is not until the final film, appropriately named *SPECTRE*, that we finally get to see the organization. Unknown to Bond, SPECTRE is actually a family affair, and much of Blofeld's (Christoph Waltz) drive behind the scenes of the first three movies was designed around hurting James by attacking the women in his life. Blofeld fancies himself "the author of [Bond's] pain," and specifically mentions Vesper and M as the main targets of his revenge. It is here that we see the new M, so different from the old M, as a central figure in Bond's life—not a lover, not a partner, not a friend, but a mother. In these final moments of the final film in the series, we come to understand the ways in which SPECTRE and Blofeld specifically attempted to destabilize Bond's world: by removing the women in his life and forcing him to consider his responsibility. Women are not single-use products, but core people in Bond's life and identity.

It is not until *Skyfall* that we meet a villain who cares to engage with Bond. Although Silva (Javier Bardem) still works for SPECTRE, and is thus subordinate to Blofeld, he matches up with Bond because he sees the men as surrogate brothers. This film is where M's position as a mother figure to Bond is solidified, mostly because Silva pushes this idea onto them. Silva fancies himself Bond's older brother in a contest for M's affection. Silva's positioning of himself vis-a-vis Bond only indicates his belief in his own abilities—he must still present a credible threat in order to be a true Bond villain. Silva's threat is indeed remarkable: as a former MI6 operative, he has a detailed understanding of the structure of the organization, as well as intense training in all fields of espionage. What makes Silva truly terrifying, however, is his mastery over technology. Beyond being a genius-level computer wizard, Silva also possesses a complex tactical

mind, evidenced by his elaborate plans and double-moves. The combination of the two skills allows Silva to move through the world unknown and undiscoverable by either Bond or MI6. Silva functions as an apt bin Laden reference for viewers: a former Western ally gone rogue, now a terrorist operating in the shadows with a massive grudge against those who trained him. For an entire generation of Americans, this would cast him as the most terrifying man alive.

One of the key moments of any Bond film is the entrance into the enemy base. In *Skyfall*, as in many Bond films, Bond gains entrance into Silva's base by being captured. Silva's base, however, is unlike anything Bond or the audience would expect. Upon arrival, Bond discovers that the island lair is simply an abandoned town. Silva, Bond quickly discovers, does not need elaborate spaces, luxury, or high-tech security and he certainly does not need a volcano lair. Instead, the dusty and empty buildings house his computer servers, from which he conducts his terror attacks. The "humble" abode emphasizes the degree to which Silva lives outside of physical space—he is a creature of the internet, and has no use for bases of operations. Instead, Silva is terrifyingly mobile. His mobility, his inability to be located, is what makes him such a threat to Bond and MI6. Silva represents a perfect modern terrorist: able to strike at any time from anywhere, and without a discernible location against which to counterattack. Silva does not wish to fortify himself and begin a physical battle against the West, but instead, like a virus, wishes to gain access to MI6 (stealing one of Bond's signature moves) in order to strike from within. Here, Bond's signature move—being intentionally captured in order to gain access to his opponent's lair—is mirrored by Silva. Thus, the infiltration that happens in

Skyfall is Silva's—his attack on M relies on an overconfident Bond escorting him into the very impenetrable base he wishes to attack.

Silva, according to M, lives "in the shadows." This is quite an ironic comment considering MI6 is a spy organization, but her remark is meant to emphasize Silva's terrifying ability to move and infiltrate without detection. While Mallory and members of Parliament want to increase MI6's transparency, telling M that "you can't keep working in the shadows—there *are* no more shadows," M believes that the only counter to Silva is Bond, replying that Bond "comes from the same place" Mallory no longer believes exists. At first, M's claim seems specious at best—Bond is hardly ever stealthy and frequently throughout this series makes high-profile and very visible mistakes. However, when we move outside the frame of the film and instead consider the franchise, Bond indeed shares that same unbounded quality with Silva. As I have demonstrated, there is no such thing as a stable Bond (just as there is no such thing as a stable masculinity), there is only Bond as constructed in relation to the anxieties of the times. His amorphous nature is his biggest strength: he can adapt and tune himself against the particular foe of hegemony at any time.

Silva is dangerous because he resists the very identification Bond requires in order to counter. His lack of a stable base, physicality, identity, sexuality, or plan consistently vexes Bond and MI6. In many ways, Silva makes sense as a villainous foil for Bond, given that he reflects Western anxieties about global terrorism. *Skyfall* releases in 2012, just after the Arab Spring and just before the emergence of ISIS as a terror superpower. Al-Qaeda had lost its centralized grip on insurgent forces, and we saw an increasing fracturing among militant terror groups until (and through) 2014 and the rise

of ISIS. As such, the anxiety of exposure was common in the West: we knew we were in combat, but we were not sure with whom. The lack of a leader, a coherent organization, or even a battlefield exaggerated this feeling of vulnerability—America was exposed and visible, but our enemies existed "in the shadows." Thus the threat of Silva is not so much his skill with computers, or his knowledge of the inner workings of MI6, but in that fact that he cannot be attacked because he refuses to engage except on his terms. He bombs buildings, outs undercover agents, and terrorizes MI6 without ever exposing himself to counterattack. His power resides in his ethereality.

Bond finally bests Silva by forcing him "back in time." I have previously discussed how the Skyfall mansion exists outside time, so I will add here that it exists as a physical monument—one Silva cannot reach digitally. Bond returns to his roots by forcing Silva to engage with him in a physical contest: one in which guns, explosives, knives, and fists determine the winner. Here, Silva is no match for Bond, despite his superior technological advantage (and a helicopter). Bond's rugged and experienced masculinity is right at home among explosions and violence, and he has no troubles dispatching several henchmen before killing Silva with a knife to the back. Bond's kill shot serves as a reminder that there is no escape for Silva, ultimately. The digital shadows empower him, but all Bond requires is a sliver of light, a moment of physical exposure in order to enact violent revenge. The conclusion of the film functions as a fantasy of the West: the terrorist is nothing more than a sniveling child, a rat that is easily stamped out the moment it steps out of the shadows. Bond's shame, and ours, is simply that it took so long to lure him out.

Blofeld, ultimately, serves as a poor follow-up to the complex and terrifying Silva, because Blofeld feels more like a glimpse into Bond's past than an engagement with our future. He is meant to inspire terror by being the omega-level mastermind archetype I mentioned earlier: the head man at the top of the organization. *SPECTRE* fails in many ways as a follow-up to *Skyfall* (commercially, for example), but its biggest failure in my estimation is in its inability to recognize what terrifies us. Blofeld fancies himself the "architect of [Bond's] pain," and the return to a mastermind villain makes sense in response to the rise of ISIS as a terror superpower opposing the West. However, Blofeld's challenges to Bond all occur in the past tense in this film. He is responsible for Vesper's death, and M's, but his drive to monopolize a digital Panopticon does little to threaten Bond personally.

In short, Blofeld is not as terrifying as Silva because vengeance and revenge are not his primary concerns. Sure, he wants Bond to suffer, but his motives on that front are muddy at best. Rather, Blofeld desires power. His scheme involves global surveillance and the unification of intelligence gathering services under one umbrella, secretly manipulated by SPECTRE. Bond's presence in this plot is incidental—Blofeld only confronts him because Bond stumbles into the secret world of SPECTRE as part of another mission. Ultimately, Mendes attempts to tie these two threads together by presenting Blofeld as the puppeteer behind the villains in the previous three films (although it is never revealed how he connected to Silva). The efficacy of this attempt can be debated, but I find the mere attempt to be illuminating. Mendes almost self-consciously realizes that Blofeld-as-mastermind is simply not an engaging enough villain. His move to craft Blofeld as both mastermind and personal antagonist reveals the

need for the film to craft a personal relationship of vengeance and revenge between Bond and his enemy.

The attempt to craft a complex Blofeld ultimately ends up giving us two Blofelds: the one who is a global terror mastermind attempting to empower his organization through universal surveillance mechanisms, and the one who hates Bond with a personal passion and will stop at nothing to torture him psychologically. I do not begrudge a talented filmmaker like Mendes' attempt to create a complex Blofeld, but instead we get a mastermind half that feels boring and generic and a personal antagonist that feels childish and petty. Simply put, Blofeld lacks the terrifying presence that Silva embodies in *Skyfall*, and his work as a megalomaniac bent on world domination fails to frighten us without a connected physicality someone like Javier Bardem (or Tom Hardy as Bane in *The Dark Knight Returns*, see Chapter 2) can provide. Waltz is too weasley in this film—we need less Cold War Bond villain here and more of his terrifyingly calculating Nazi Colonel Hans Landa from *Inglorious Basterds* (2009). The importance of a physical threat highlights the role of masculinity in the Bond franchise's mythmaking: Bond must overcome a challenge—not just a villainous plot—in order to restore masculine order to world. Americans may fear digital threats like surveillance and identity theft, but not with the same sort of horror as terrorism or bodily threats. The failure of *SPECTRE* is in not realizing that need for an antagonist who "measures up" to Bond.

Instead, we get a power-hungry brat that Bond puts in "time out" at the end of the film. Blofeld, unlike Silva, is no danger without his infrastructure—he can live his life in jail without threat. Silva is the one who breaks out, the one who cannot be contained. He is the terrifying threat to Bond precisely because his masculinity threatens Bond's own

power. *Skyfall* succeeds because it brings Bond to the edge of destruction and allows him to rebuild himself in a new masculine image. Silva's role in this rebooting is as a terrifying foil against which Bond gets to assert his refashioned manhood. Blofeld fails to find a fit in this world. Bond does not need to travel back in time to defeat him, because Blofeld was already in the past.

Bond and the Soft Male

In the James Bond film, the meeting with Q Branch is a standard part of the narrative arc—it is during this meeting that 007 acquires some technological plot device (a laser wrist watch or an ejecting car seat) that will serve him later in the film. In 2012's *Skyfall*, Bond's first meeting with Q (Ben Whishaw) goes much differently. Bond, having just returned to MI6 and barely passed his qualification exams, is surly toward the young inventor. The two trade barbs before Q offers Bond his mission kit: a Walther PPK pistol and a radio transmitter. Bond is incredulous: "A gun and a radio. It's not exactly Christmas, is it?" Q's retort: "Were you expecting an exploding pen? We don't really go in for that anymore," marks a massive shift in the presentation of Q Branch going forward. In this section, I am interested in what Q Branch "goes in for" during the post-9/11 reboot of the Bond franchise; simultaneously, I am interested in what Bond does not "go in for" as it pertains to technology. I believe that the Craig series of Bond films presents a clash between a crumbling and decaying physical masculinity, represented by Bond, and a shadowy and fluid technological masculinity, represented by both Q and Bond's major nemeses.

While never explicitly conceived of as homosexual, the intellectuals at Q Branch fit into what I call "soft" masculinity within the James Bond mythos. "Soft" masculinities

are antithetical—and thus a threat—to hegemonic masculinity. Simply by existing they cast doubt on the axiomatic nature of the type of rigid masculinity Bond embodies. When Bond scoffs or sneers at Q or his employees, he is in part aggressively asserting his thesis that these are not men at all. What we see throughout the progression of the Bond franchise is the ebb and flow of Bond’s aggression toward Q: at times, he’s downright mean and the gadgets malfunction; at other times, Q gets to swoop in on his high-tech balloon and save the day. In those latter instances, the threat of “soft” masculinities is both heightened and embraced. Embraced, because Q demonstrates that “soft” men are still capable and competent enough to complete a field mission; heightened, because the success of “soft” men illuminates the reality that there is more than one way to be a man. Because of the complex nature of the relationship between *good* intellectuals and *bad* “soft” men, it is impossible to trace a straight line of progression or regression through the Bond franchise in regards to attitudes toward masculinities. Rather, I find it important to consider the role of Q Branch in each Bond film as a reflection of the cultural attitudes toward masculinities at the time.

Neither 2006’s *Casino Royale* nor 2008’s *Quantum of Solace* featured any interaction between Bond and Q; Bond is left to his own physical devices and his gun. In *Skyfall*, Bond’s meeting with Q happens in front of an oil painting² depicting a tugboat carrying a decommissioned naval carrier. Q laments the sad fate of the now-obsolete vessel, stating that the painting “always makes [him] feel a bit melancholy. Grand old warship being ignominiously haunted away to scrap,” before asking Bond’s opinion: “The inevitability of time, don’t you think?” Q’s question is meant to force Bond to acknowledge his place in the future of MI6 and the global fight against terrorism—he’s

² “The Fighting Temeraire” by J.M.W. Turner (1838)

the rusty old boat that no longer belongs in these new waters. Bond's sneering response—he sees “a bloody big ship”—serves as his rejection of Q's belief in the changing of the national security guard from physical agents in the field to technological drone pilots. For Bond, the ship is still a ship, and its size is all that matters.

Beyond his belief in himself and his physical gifts, Bond also distrusts technology. He and Q debate the power, efficacy, and morality of technological warfare in the following exchange:

Q: 007. I'm your new Quartermaster.
Bond: [scoffs] You must be joking.
Q: Why, because I'm not wearing a lab coat?
Bond: Because you still have spots.
Q: My complexion is hardly relevant.
Bond: Your competence is.
Q: Age is no guarantee of efficiency.
Bond: And youth is no guarantee of innovation.
Q: Well, I'll hazard I can do more damage on my laptop sitting in my pajamas before my first cup of Earl Grey than you can do in a year in the field.
Bond: Oh, so why do you need me?
Q: Every now and then a trigger has to be pulled.
Bond: Or not pulled. It's hard to know which in your pajamas.

Bond's implication—that technology divorces a necessary physicality from the business of killing—serves as a theme for the four Craig films: Bond chooses *not* to kill several villains for various reason throughout his exploits, and these decisions are predicated on his personal involvement and proximity to the case. The film immediately preceding *Skyfall*, *Quantum of Solace*, ends with Bond's decision to not kill the man who deceived and recruited Vesper Lynd (Eva Green) into SPECTRE. The choice to not kill comes from Bond's humanity—an element to the franchise we rarely get to glimpse. I examined the connection between Bond and Lynd earlier in this chapter, in the “Bond and Women”

section. In this instance, I want only to stress that the first meeting between Bond and Q serves an important line of demarcation for the philosophical differences between the “old guard” field agents of MI6 (Bond, M) and the “new guard” Q and C Branches, which seems dangerously close to the villains Bond must frequently battle in his adventures.

C (Andrew Scott) is a new character to the franchise, introduced in *SPECTRE*. He heads the new technological counter-terrorism branch of the government, and believes that MI6 and field agents like Bond are unnecessary in the 21st century. He also works for Blofeld and is a “true believer” in the former’s plan for world order through surveillance. I previously wrote at length about the threat technology played in *Skyfall*, especially in the hands of a master agent such as Silva. Silva’s terror came in the dual nature of his character (and Bardem’s performance): digital and therefore hard-to-trace and physically imposing and creepy. C offers a technological threat that hits neither of those notes. Scott is nowhere near the physical presence of Bardem, and instead plays C as an arrogant little man. C does not need to measure up to Bond because his power lies in code and screens. Most importantly, C does not have to hide from the government and MI6 because he **is** the government. He uses his connections to SPECTRE to set off a series of terror attacks in vulnerable countries in order to fan the flames of fear and cause a successful vote for his branch’s increased authority. His next move is to dismantle MI6, shut down all field agents, and make Bond into a criminal on the run.

C’s threat to Bond is not one of physicality, but one of replacement. He seeks to reshape the modern spy agency, phasing out the rusty old ships like Bond to make room for more technology and hackers like himself. In Bond’s world, hackers like C and Q are

dangerous because their power does not stem from their physicality. Both do their damage from the safety of home, and are infinitely more disruptive than a single agent with a gun. C has his branch set up to take over and manipulate governments and entire UN-type security councils, while Bond can at best kill the leader of a terrorist organization. The danger of such power, as Bond explains to Q in *Skyfall*, is the removal of the human element in pulling a trigger. This disembodied power is key to the threat that both C and Q represent. Bond's masculinity is inextricable from his body— *Skyfall* solidifies this concept by focusing nearly half the film on Bond's broken body. He lives in a world that requires punches, kicks, knives, and guns— a world that requires proximity and physical strength to go along with intelligence and cunning. The “soft males” of the Bond universe represent a threat to masculinity by pushing forward a form of power that relies on none of these embodied characteristics.

What is masculinity without the body? This is the crucial question Bond constantly evades and fights against when faced with the “soft male.” C is a much easier character for Bond to handle. Like Blofeld, he represents a call-back (and like Blofeld, not always in a good way) to a more classic Bond villain. He is an archetype more than a character, a power-mad man whose skill behind a keyboard is comically juxtaposed with his slim and boyish figure. Throughout the film, despite all the menace Scott manages to stick in his every sneering comment, we get the sense that a strong breeze could take him out, let alone the overpowering masculinity of Bond. The frustration with C comes from Bond's inability to get close enough to land a blow. Ultimately, Mallory (who replaces M after her death in *Skyfall*) and Q take out C through a combination of the former's history as a field agent (Bond-lite, perhaps) and the latter's expertise with technology.

The ability to blend with field agents is what makes Q different, and therefore safer, than C. At the same time, his heroism in *SPECTRE* works to destabilize the notions of a hegemonic masculinity. In *Skyfall*, Q plays the traditional member of Q Branch: effeminate, sexually aberrant, and possessing of a disembodied power. Like C, Q dresses like a schoolboy and possesses an even slimmer frame. To see him seated next to Bond is to see a whippet seated next to a bulldog. The only information we get about Q's personal life is that he enjoys sipping tea and his pajamas and owns a cat. As with stature, tea works as a coding device against Bond's vodka martini, and the allusions to the "cat lady" stereotype further work to present Q as asexual at best. Throughout *Skyfall*, Q adheres to this "soft male" role— assisting Bond through technology and never leaving the MI6 headquarters. However, in *SPECTRE*, Q gets to step outside the office and into the field. Not only does he align himself against C's technological new world order with Bond, he also manages to participate in a thrilling chase scene unlike anything a previous Q has ever done.

Q's participation in field work blurs the strong demarcation between body/field/masculinity and technology/home/softness that Bond films work to reinforce. If agents do not need to look and act like Bond, what does that mean for masculinity? If Q can function as an action hero, then what do we need Bond for? These films work to reinforce hegemonic masculinity, and even though Q is allowed to step out of the office, they are still careful to code his participation in Bond's heroism as potentially dangerous. In *Skyfall*, after Silva is captured (by Bond, with nothing more than the radio transmitter he complained about earlier in the film) and detained in MI6's new headquarters, Q begins to examine the hard drive on which Silva has stored sensitive information

regarding undercover field agents. In order to examine the hard drive, Q must connect it to his personal computer system. All of this, we soon learn, is part of Silva's escape plan. As soon as Q (with Bond's help) cracks the cypher protecting Silva's files, the computer uploads a virus into MI6's computer system, turning off all security and allowing Silva to escape. Upon realizing what has happened, Q leaps to rip out the cable connecting Silva's computer, but the damage is done.

The image of the cable in the computer, and Q's attempt to rip it out, are central to how the "soft male" works in Bond films. Q by himself is a helpful and functional member of MI6. Yet, as an intellectual "soft male," he is always just a connection away from the dangerous and aberrant villainy that Bond constantly works against. The connection between those two identities is literalized through the fiber optic cable, and despite Q's attempt to rip out the cord, he is still the proxy through which Silva's dangerous Otherness is able to sneak in and infect MI6. Q's "soft" masculinity is the gateway through which the virus of aberrant masculinity can spread. That Q is allowed to redeem himself in *SPECTRE* and even transverse boundaries into fieldwork must always be read through the lens of his softness being the vulnerable spot in MI6's (and the hegemony's) armor.

As the series progressed, each film became more and more formulaic. This trend continued all the way through the first reboot of the franchise in 1995's *Goldeneye*, although it was rejected by the second franchise reboot in 2006's *Casino Royale*. One of the key elements of the first act of a Bond film was the meeting with Q branch. Q Branch has always signified as a "soft" Other against which Bond's rugged and aggressive masculinity has shined. This is true from the very first meeting between Bond and Q in

Goldfinger (1964), in which Q (Desmond Llewelyn), an eccentric and effeminate old man, leads Bond around a workshop filled with gadgets and toys. Bond picks up things he's not supposed to touch, scoffs as inventions backfire, and generally demeans Q in the face of technologies that will later save his life. For Bond, the field is where men belong, not some safe laboratory hidden beneath the city. As the films progressed, especially as Connery's Bond transitioned into Moore's Bond, the interactions became more comical (this is true of the entire Moore series of films) as Q Branch became more eccentric and goofy. In turn, the relationship between Bond and Q Branch becomes more binary and distant. Q's laboratory becomes a strange space where normativity is flung aside and even the laws of physics take a backseat. The lab is a place for outcasts, and Bond does a thorough job of putting them in their place. For Bond, the visit to Q Branch is akin to a trip to the circus. While there, he takes in the sights and sounds and observes the freak show with a smirk on his face. He is careful to distance himself from the men and the technology in Q Branch, and both prove to be effective foils for his primal masculinity. Research and invention are for those who cannot hack it in the field.

In *The Politics of James Bond*, Jeremy Black examines the relationship between Bond and "intellectuals" in Fleming's novels. In the novels, there is frequently a conflation between "intellectuals" and "homosexuals." Bond sees the former as potentially advantageous, while everyone, including Bond, worries about the trustworthiness of the latter. It strikes me that these two identities are intertwined, especially as they related to the fiercely Luddite and staunchly heterosexual Bond. Black writes that "[t]he heterosexuality of Bond is a rejection of the ambiguity that Fleming saw in homosexuality, an ambiguity that was political as much as sexual." (106)

Homosexuality represents an ambiguity that was marked as especially dangerous in Cold War spy games; Bond works against this ambiguity as both a paragon and an enforcer of heteronormativity. The Cold War films use these aberrant identities to triangulate Bond's masculinity and to situate him as a "safe" bastion of Western values.

In *The Male Body*, Bordo critiques and expands upon Luce Irigaray's "The Sex Which is Not One," noting that if women are the sex which is "not one," then men must be the sex that is "one." Buried beneath Irigaray's prose is the argument that female sexuality and sexual enjoyment is polymorphous—that women experience pleasure throughout their bodies. Bordo identifies areas where we have accepted this to be true (mostly advertising), but argues that this revelation restricts men. Women and men are culturally coded as binary and opposite, and while women enjoy sexual pleasure everywhere, men are focused on the "one" area that matters: the penis. For Bordo, the focus on the penis is problematic for myriad reasons, but most importantly because it forces an obsession with the hardness and softness of the organ. Within the hard/soft binary, hardness is equated with performance, power, and strength; softness is equated with failure, weakness and otherness. What Bordo mourns is the loss of softness as a valid masculine signifier—because it is constantly cast as the Other in relation to the hard phallus, it can only be used to describe instances of inadequate masculinity.

Masculinity, then, becomes a space which is "one": singular and monolithic, binary and constrained, exclusionary and unrealistic. The same narratives Bordo traces about the penis transfer onto masculinity—the body dictates the man. As Connell writes in *Masculinities*: "True masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies—to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body." (45)

Thus, the hard/soft binary which surrounds the penis transfers onto masculinity itself. The world Bond inhabits is one where performance and potency are life and death attributes. There is no space for any form of masculinity that is not hard, rigid, or powerful. Bond's clashes with Q Branch are about reinforcing the hard/soft dynamic—by crafting a space in which hegemonic fantasies about the binary options of hard/soft are laid bare, the Bond films reify the myth that hard and soft are not only separate qualities but separate identities.

Conclusion

In a May 31, 2016 article for *The Guardian*, Paul Mason made the argument that the new 007 should “battle Trump and the oligarchs.” The idea was one based in both a desire to return the series to its roots and to maintain relevance by reconfiguring the position of Bond vis-à-vis a changing world. While the “new” Bond's future exploits are outside the scope of this chapter, I find Mason's subtext—that Bond must constantly reconfigure himself—to be an affirmation of the arguments in my project. Bond, like many icons, is thought to be “timeless”—in the sense of the word that is synonymous with “unchanging” or “rigid.” Any perusal into the history of Bond on screen (such as in this chapter) will reveal that this is not the case. The idea of a rigid and unchanging Bond is just as much fantasy as Pussy Galore. Bond is but one of the many hegemonic masculine archetypes I dismantle in this dissertation, but they all share a common cultural theme: the illusion of permanence. What my dissertation presents, instead, is the reality of hegemonic idols: they must constantly shift and reinvent themselves in the face of a changing cultural landscape. How and where those shifts occur illuminates areas of stress, weakness, or anxiety within the hegemonic structure—for Mason, it would be

class; for my dissertation, it is gender and masculinity—and the fantasies of power that play out in the films we watch expose our conservative desires to return to hierarchy.

Chapter 2: Traumatized Superheroes and Disembodied Nemeses

Introduction

The incredible popularity of the superhero film this century is beyond precedent:

Marvel's Cinematic Universe alone has produced 17 consecutive #1 films, something no actor, director, studio, or franchise has ever even sniffed. Although not at the same level, DC's Extended Universe has logged extreme financial success in otherwise down years for blockbusters. The superhero movie has become bankable. This was not always the case. In fact, before 2000, superhero movies carried the same stigma that video game franchise films currently (deservedly) do: cheaply-made, poorly-acted, empty-calorie schlock. For every standout *Batman* (1989) or *Superman* (1978), there was a *Batman and Robin* (1997) or *Superman III* (1983). Several factors contributed to the rise of the superhero film: cheaper and higher-quality CGI technology, cultural embrace of the nerd lifestyle, acquisition and consolidation of licensing rights, and successful bets on quality filmmakers in Christopher Nolan and Jon Favreau. In this chapter, I make the case for an additional factor: a zeitgeist emerging out of 9/11 and the War on Terror perfectly fit for the superhero narrative template. Superhero films after 9/11 told the stories of heroes born out of trauma (murdered parents, terrorist attacks, exploded homeworlds), battling villains who resisted identification and embraced the shadows. The form of these stories, I argue, allowed audiences to connect with Norse gods, metal-laced mutants, and billionaire ninjas because it brought them to our level: one of pain and loss, one of uncertainty. These narrative arcs became templates, as nearly every superhero film showcased a traumatic origin story as part of its character introduction. This was not always the case.

Fantasy Elsewheres, Sutured Realities

In Tim Burton's *Batman*, reporter Vicki Vale (Kim Basinger) challenges Batman (Michael Keaton) on the sanity of his actions when she asks him "you're not exactly normal, are you?" Batman's response: "it's not exactly a normal world, is it?" calls into question exactly which world he is referencing. Batman's world, after all, has occupied various positions vis-à-vis our world—at times, it is a reflection of our reality; at other times, it is a funhouse mirror. Likewise, there is a profound fascination (Uricchio 2010) with translating Gotham City into a real-world analogue: is it Chicago? New York City? These same questions arise for the homes of other superheroes—is Superman's Metropolis New York during the daytime? Where is Flash's Central City? Green Lantern's Coast City?

The desire to situate these spaces in our reality indicates a rejection of the boundaries of fantasy. Unlike Marvel, which places its heroes in real-world spaces like New York City, DC Comic heroes occupy fictional cities that exist only in the universe of the comics themselves. Arno Meteling (2010) argues: "Superheroes are not only graphically inconsistent with a realistic backdrop when wearing spandex costumes in primary colors[...] they also seem to belong to another time and to another narrative genre." (134) This clash of timelessness and recognizable urban modernity disrupts the ability to craft a realistic superhero city. Instead, directors seemed to be stuck crafting what I call "fantasy elsewheres." I use the term "fantasy elsewhere" to describe these superheroic cityscapes—the city of the DC hero, be it Metropolis or Gotham, occupies no real space and contains no real residents, nor does it always react or interact with our world. Instead, these cities become self-contained entities which house their own narratives, people, and places. The key element of the "fantasy elsewhere" is that it

progresses outside of reality—it is both timeless and removed from the politics of our world. These elements free up directors to experiment with the setting: Gotham City is always open to interpretation for each artist, and needs not bear any resemblance to any place on Earth. The “fantasy elsewhere,” then, presents a unique opportunity for a filmmaker: a modern city, with 70+ years of history and visuals, which requires no standard representation. This freedom of presentation allowed directors such as Burton to push the limits of what a city could look like, although this visual experimentation has slowly given way to a more realistic representation of the fantasy worlds of DC characters.

Gotham City is a character in the Batman mythos. In reference to Batman’s origin, the murder of his parents on the streets of Gotham, William Uricchio (2010) writes that

those same streets and conditions provide the locus, condition and cause for Batman’s obsessive battle with crime. Gotham’s value in this case is far greater than a mere setting for the adventures of a superhero: it turns on its generative relationship to the narrative, the source of the franchise’s endless iteration. (120)

Batman’s Gotham City serves as the genesis and producer of his never-ending battle. ⁵We are so far removed from this film that it may be difficult to remember how stark Burton’s changes were: an all-black, rubberized Batman suit, when all we had ever known was the navy-and-grey spandex of Adam West; mobsters and gangsters instead of childish and cartoonish villains; and most importantly, a Joker (Jack Nicholson) that was

more demonic psychopath than clown prince. Beyond these changes, Burton also chose to present his twisted gothic version of Gotham City—the skyscrapers reach toward the heavens (and bend and warp in the process); the streets are covered in dirt, grime, and an endless supply of industrial steam; the sky is eternally and relentlessly dark; everyone, save the Joker, dressed as if coming from or going to a funeral.

Beyond his version of the gothic, Burton also borrows heavily from noir film. The mobsters and dirty cops all wear suits and fedoras, drive classic cars, and meet in shady back alleys at night. While the main confrontation of the film is Batman versus Joker, the strong secondary undercurrent is public and police corruption at the hands of organized crime. The combination of the noir and the gothic is what makes Gotham City a fantasy elsewhere. Roz Kaveney (2008) argues that “Burton deliberately made a film that was set in several time periods simultaneously—the cars, the fashions and the buildings could be the 1930s, the 1950s or the near future.” (238) In other words, Burton’s Gotham is both timeless and outside of time.

His sequel, *Batman Returns* (1992) carries the timeless gothic noir elements further, even going so far as to finally give the dark detective a worthy femme fatale in Catwoman (Michelle Pfeiffer), offering a tragic foil in the Penguin (Danny DeVito), and situating the plot in a public works scandal involving the siphoning of electricity by the story’s most irredeemable character, the non-super villain Max Shreck (Christopher Walken). As in the previous film, the reality of the audience’s world is missing in Gotham—there is no Gulf War, no AIDS epidemic. This film could have released in the 1950s or in 2014 and the plot would not seem dated. Kaveney (2008), however, identifies

a small crack in the fantasy elsewhere: the feminist undertones of the Catwoman. She writes:

The Waters/Burton Catwoman is quite explicitly a reaction—not entirely a positive reaction—to feminism; at one point, rebuking a woman she has saved from muggers with the remark that ‘you make it too easy’, she goes on to say, ‘I am Catwoman, hear me roar’, echoing a well-known slogan. (242)

The crack in the façade of the fantasy elsewhere indicates that audiences and directors may not be able to work with films set in a modern world that do not at least slightly resemble contemporary culture. Is it possible to create a superhero story that does not reflect any element of our world? Burton’s decision to slip this slight referent into *Batman Returns* indicates that it may not be, at least not anymore. This small breach in the wall of the fantasy elsewhere serves as a marker for where the superhero film will go, albeit not for another eight years (and two failed movies).

The next two installments in the Batman franchise were most largely marked by the change of director—from Tim Burton to Joel Schumacher. While Burton appeared to be edging closer to the incorporation of contemporary realism, Schumacher went the complete opposite direction. The world of *Batman Forever* loses much of the dark and grimy feel of Burton’s films, but it does not move toward a more realistic depiction. Instead, the world feels plastic and shiny (Schumacher himself called it “toyetic” (Kaveney 2008)). There is still a darkness to Gotham City, but it feels like the controlled darkness of a theatre rather than the oppressive darkness of industrial modernity.

Similarly, the characterizations in *Batman Forever* feel less darkly psychological (despite Batman's love interest, Dr. Chase Meridian (Nicole Kidman), being a psychiatrist) and more comic. The character of Two-Face (Tommy Lee Jones), for example, is meant to evoke a dark struggle between Id and Super Ego; instead, Schumacher offers a brightly-colored cackling jester. In short, Schumacher's film was more comic, more ridiculous, and more family-friendly.

Schumacher's trend toward the fantastic continued even further in *Batman and Robin*. (1997) This film eschews all realism of space, and instead conceives of a Gotham City that sprawls upward toward the heavens. Burton's grey-and-black tones are replaced with incandescent blues and pristine silvers; it all feels clean and sterile. While the city is still perpetually in nighttime, it now offers a neon glow to the dark corners. The warped architecture of Burton's films is pushed to the uncanny—buildings no longer look real or even lived-in; rather, they are clean but devoid of human presence. Schumacher's final version of Gotham City is the ultimate fantasy elsewhere—no one seems to live in this massive city besides the principle characters.

Schumacher's approach ultimately failed commercially, and in the 21st century, studios began to spin narratives which "sutured" their characters to a more recognizable reality. I borrow the concept of "sutured reality" from Jason Bainbridge's concept of the city as a "suture" to reality. Although he focuses on comics, his observations apply to the film adaptations of these characters as well. Referencing Marvel superheroes' relationship to the real-life Big Apple, Bainbridge (2010) writes: "New York City is therefore not only the spine of the Marvel Universe, it is a *suture*—suturing the Marvel Universe to the real world, providing a material context for these iconic forms." (172)

The suture, then, is the bridge from the fantasy of the superhero to our world. While Bainbridge focuses on the role a real city like New York plays on this suture, I focus on the ways in which engagement with contemporary issues suture the heroes of comic films to our reality. Two franchises launched within a few years of each other—DC’s Batman trilogy directed by Christopher Nolan (*Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012)) and Marvel’s Iron Man trilogy directed by Jon Favreau (*Iron Man* (2008) and *Iron Man 2* (2010)) and Shane Black (*Iron Man Three* (2013))—illustrate both the distance superhero films have come from the fantasy elsewhere of pre-2000 and the narrative depth with which directors can suture films to our reality.

Origin Stories

Christopher Nolan’s Batman trilogy (*Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012)) has a strong focus on Batman’s origin. While previous films (the aforementioned Burton and Schumacher films) have acknowledged the trauma that caused Bruce Wayne to become Batman, only Nolan lingers on that moment. In Burton’s film, Batman is already Batman, and we see the Waynes murdered only through a brief flashback that serves a secondary plot point of identifying the Joker as the murderer. Nolan does not simply show Thomas and Martha Wayne’s murder, he situates the audience within their world. The majority of the first act presents a world not unlike 1980s America: Gotham has a terrible wealth disparity problem, causing crime to skyrocket. Bruce’s family is largely immune to the issues of that world—they are one of the wealthiest families in the world, and Wayne manor sits outside the dark slums of the city. Much of the opening act tracks Bruce (Gus Lewis) as a young boy, enjoying the

idyllic grounds of his estate. On those grounds, or rather *in* them, Bruce has his first encounter with fear: he falls into a cave and is swarmed by bats. The moment is highlighted by Bruce's inability to shake off the psychological trauma, and his newfound terror toward bats. If fear is the theme of this film, Nolan introduces the audience to it early. Here, fear is about the unknown, the shadows, and the monstrous, and it becomes unshakeable. Bruce is not simply able to experience his fear and move on, he is haunted by it, he dreams of it, and he sees it in his waking life as well. In an attempt to get him out of the house, Bruce's parents bring him to the opera. While there, Bruce again (re)experiences his terror when the actors of *Mefistofele* dress as bats and swing from wires. Bruce experiences a form of Post-Traumatic Stress, as the previous trauma he experienced with the bats now bleeds over into his waking moment, causing him to relive his nightmare in the cave.

Bruce's inability to put the moment in the cave behind him leads directly into the next, more major psychic trauma. Nolan deviates from the traditional Batman origin story in this detail—he wants to explicitly tie the Waynes' murder to Bruce's fear. Because Bruce is afraid, the Waynes leave the theatre early, because they leave the theatre early they happen upon Joe Chill (Richard Brake), and despite Thomas' (Linus Roache) attempt to diffuse the situation, Chill murders them both. As he lies on the street dying, Thomas calls Bruce over. With his last breaths, he tells Bruce "don't be afraid," re-seeding the idea that Bruce's fear and his parents' murder are connected. Although the film is titled *Batman Begins*, it may be better to think about it as "Batman beginning," in that the film details several ongoing and interconnected events that culminate in the creation of the Dark Knight. The first trauma Bruce experience—the flying bats—not

only sets the stage for the second trauma, it is instructive for him as he moves forward. His inability to face his fear of bats leads directly into the murder of parents, and for this reason he comes to view fear—especially fear of the supernatural—as a weakness. The second trauma, and his father’s last words, prepare Bruce for the beginning of his journey to becoming Batman. Bruce learns that fear is something to be mastered. Through this mastery, one becomes immune to fear and able to wield it as a weapon against those weaker.

Bruce Wayne’s journey to become Batman comes in two stages: the previously mentioned childhood stage, in which he learns about the nature of fear and discovers the need to master it, and the second stage in which he actually masters it. Nolan structures the beginning of the film so that neither stage is privileged, and instead weaves them together despite the 20-year gap that separates them. As Bruce first meets Ducard (Liam Neeson), the film flashes back to the murder; throughout his training these flashbacks will continue to tie the events of the first and second trauma to his choice to become Batman. Bruce’s initiation into Ra’s Al Ghul’s (Ken Watanabe, but also Liam Neeson) ninja group, the League of Shadows, is an initiation into fear. The skills and techniques he learns are structured in two categories: the mind and the body. His body learns to master physical weakness and become invisible; his mind learns the strength that comes from immunity to fear and the ability to inflict it. As he trains with Ducard, Bruce learns the League’s philosophies on justice, fear, and revenge. Ducard tells Bruce “your parents’ death was not your fault,” which Bruce initially receives as a reassuring statement, until Ducard continues: “it was your father’s.” While the two men swordfight on a fragile sheet of ice above a frozen lake, Ducard continues his verbal insults while Bruce defends

his father. Here, Ducard assaults not just Bruce but his fears as well. In forcing Bruce to acknowledge his father's role in his own death ("your father failed to act"), Ducard presents the League's thesis that fear is a deadly yet controllable weakness. The only cure, according to the League is "the will to act." Thomas' failure to act, Ducard argues, is as much a cause of his death as the man who pulled the trigger—*action*, then, is the only appropriate response to fear.

Beyond action, Ducard also illustrates the power of vengeance. After the sword fight, the two men sit at a campfire. Here, Nolan presents Ducard in the mentor role—he gently comforts Bruce and offers words of guidance for dealing with trauma. He is, he reveals, also familiar with extreme loss and pain: his wife was "taken" from him. Her death spurs Ducard to understand that there are evil people out there who "must be fought with hesitation, without pity." Again, action in the face of trauma is stressed, as Ducard emphasizes the need for a quick and sure response to any assault. His last comment, "without pity," also reveals the black-and-white nature of the League's world view. When imagining the enemy as evil and undeserving of pity, one can escape the moral qualms that come from violent retribution. This is where Ducard's lesson shifts slightly: he cautions Bruce that while his anger gives him "great power," it has the potential to destroy him if left unchecked. When Bruce asks what stopped Ducard's revenge from destroying him, Ducard tells him "vengeance." Here, Ducard's philosophy mirrors the Bush doctrine from the evening of September 11: the quick movement from trauma to revenge, specifically designed to take back lost power. Thomas Wayne's refusal to act caused his own death, Bruce's inability to avenge his parents' death causes

that trauma to fester, and the League of Shadows offers the healing salve of vengeance if Bruce can master his mind and his body.

The final act of training privileges the power of the mind, however, as Bruce must confront his fear in order to become a true ninja. In this scene, Bruce inhales a fear-inducing toxin and faces a wall of ninjas dressed identically. Among these masked men is Ducard, who periodically leaps from the shadows of anonymity to attack Bruce. As he fends off Ducard's attacks, Bruce slowly makes his way to a chest. Ducard instructs him to embrace his worst fear, and Bruce opens the box revealing bats. As the bats swarm him, Bruce falls to the ground in shock. Nolan edits this scene with quick-cuts back to Bruce's childhood experience in the cave—these quick-cuts last a fraction of a second and feature exaggerated volume so as to mimic the heightened sensitivity of a traumatic flashback. As he composes himself, Hans Zimmer's soundtrack crescendos into a climax and Bruce stands, empowered. The segment only lasts a few seconds, but Nolan's drive to link Bruce's ninja training with the traumas of his past serves to reinforce the League of Shadows' emphasis on the healing power of vengeance. Through his initiation with the League of Shadows, Bruce learns the physical skills that will aid him as he begins his career as Batman; at the same time, he also learns the mental skills and philosophies of the League: the connection between fear and hesitation, the need for swift action and revenge as a response to an attack, and the ability to master and instill fear through shock and awe. He learns that fear and trauma are simply temporary conditions that can be brushed away with retaliation and aggression. Most of all, Bruce learns to understand his trauma and fear as necessary components of his soon-to-be-super heroic self: he cannot master his fear and use his trauma as revenge fuel if he never experiences pain and loss.

This initiation and reconfiguration of values mirrors the experience of Americans after 9/11 and during the buildup to the Iraq War, as the Bush administration attempted to redirect feelings of vulnerability into aggressive responses.

Unlike Bruce Wayne, Tony Stark's childhood was relatively tame. Certainly, as Jon Favreau's *Iron Man* (2008) and *Iron Man 2* (2010) reveal, he has some unresolved daddy issues; however, nothing traumatic or scaring. Instead, and totally counter to how Nolan's trilogy opens, *Iron Man* begins by focusing on how great Tony's life is. He gets to ride-along with soldiers (all of whom worship him), seduce beautiful women, and drink and party to his heart's content, all while engaging in blatant war profiteering. The movie cold-opens into the aforementioned ride-along—Tony is in a Humvee in the desert, riding with soldiers. The ensuing chaos in the aftermath of a rocket propelled grenade (RPG) attack gives spectacle to a concept Americans were familiar with at the time: the terrifying unpredictability of the improvised explosive device (IED) attack. Here, Tony's world becomes shattered as he takes shrapnel to the chest and begins bleeding out through his bullet-proof vest. The film immediately reverses time to 48 hours earlier. Like *Batman Begins*, *Iron Man* can only proceed with trauma after it has chronicled how idyllic Tony's life was. This cut back in time illustrates not just the incredible luxury Tony has, but simultaneously shows how quickly this can all be ripped apart. What we see as the film begins is an innocent Tony, unaware of the evil in the world and how close it is to him. He believes himself untouchable. Through this attack, Favreau illustrates the "invincibility myth" Cavedon writes about—Americans, like Tony, believed themselves "safe" from foreign terror attacks prior to 9/11, whether by wealth, power, location, or simply arrogance. Stark ascribes to these same myths about

himself, and enjoys a naïve life of luxury and “artistic³” freedom. The realization that he can be touched, however, is not the end of the nightmare. Tony is kidnapped by the 10 Rings, an uninspired and generic take on Middle Eastern terrorists. The final scene before the film jumps back 36 hours is shot from his perspective as the 10 Rings shoot a hostage video. This video style, with a hostage on his or her knees while masked men with guns surround a single speaker reading a prepared statement, was and is instantly recognizable to Americans who have seen similar videos on television and online news.

Favreau’s choice to cut back 36 hours highlights the importance of understanding the attack and subsequent hostage situation as a massive schism in this story. For both *Iron Man* and *Batman Begins*, there is a strong need to look at the trauma and understand it as momentous. Tony’s abduction parallels Bruce’s fall into the batcave, it is Joe Chill shooting Thomas and Martha Wayne, it is the twin towers coming down on live television. Like Bruce’s story, Tony’s trauma functions as a prerequisite for his training and ascension. However, in order to highlight the triumph of the ascension, Favreau chooses to illustrate the depths of Tony’s innocence prior to the trauma. As Stark parties, drinks, and beds beautiful women, Favreau positions the audience in a position of judgement. When young Bruce Wayne enjoys the posh life of wealth prior to his traumas, Nolan never asks us to consider the moral nature of that wealth; Favreau does. In these few hours, Tony does not just have fun, he skips out on responsibilities, leaves messes for his friends to clean up, and bullies his friend into shirking responsibilities as well. The camera, and the narrative, frame his naivety and innocence not as marks of invulnerability, but rather as marks of arrogance and foolishness. Tony is being punished

³ Tony runs the family business—weapons manufacturing—for which he has a prodigious talent.

for his immorality, but the 10 Rings are unfit arbiters. Rather, we need Tony himself to stand in judgement of his past self by remolding himself into something new and greater.

The molding (or perhaps molting) occurs in the cave. Like Bruce, Tony receives aid and mentoring from an older man, Yinsen (Shaun Toub). Like Ra's Al Ghul, Tony's mentor is an Orientalized stereotype: a noble Arabic doctor who also suffers under the oppressive yoke of the 10 Rings. After Yinsen tells Tony he will see his family⁴ "when [he] leave[s] this place," he turns the statement back on Tony. Tony reveals that he has no family, and Yinsen replies "so you are a man who has everything, and nothing." Yinsen means to call into question Tony's conception of wealth, but he also draws a line between passive (accumulating inherited wealth) and active (having a family or loved ones to fight for) lifestyles. Part of Tony's training, beyond the creation of the MK1 Iron Man armor, is the shift from a passive empowered role to an active one. He needs to *use* his power, or groups like the 10 Rings will turn it against him. The hostage situation teaches Tony that his work and production has been corrupted and stolen, but it also gives him something to fight for and against: he is forced into a proximity to a terrorism he thought himself safe from. Like Bruce Wayne, Tony is touched by trauma and finds himself more aware, more resolute, and more prepared to deal with the threats which had once been invisible to him. Now, knowing the fear of victimization and understanding the evil of his foes, Tony can emerge from the cave with the resolve and purpose necessary to fight this great evil. During their escape, Yinsen eventually dies the noble and inevitable death Favreau foreshadowed earlier. A teary-eyed Tony thanks him for "saving me" before exiting the cave. There, he lays waste to the final group of terrorists, and sets fire to every bit of Stark Corporation weaponry they own. The resulting explosions from immolated

⁴Who we later learn has been killed

gunpowder create a massive blast that propels Tony to safety while also eradicating any evidence of his time in the cave.

In the flashback before Tony leaves for Afghanistan, Tony is cornered by a reporter. During her line of question, she bring up his war profiteering and the financial windfalls his family has enjoyed from American military campaigns abroad. Defensively, he cites the great contributions military technology has had domestically in the forms of medical science and automated farming. He goes on to emphasize Howard Stark's role in winning World War II, saying that his father had a saying: "Peace means having a bigger stick than the other guy." The incredible size of his phallic "stick" is a great source of pride for Tony, and certainly the events that follow are as much about regaining that stick as they are about safety or peace. Tony's stick-measuring contest with the terrorists is a one-sided battle, but only after he emerges from the cave and reclaims his power for himself. Meanwhile, his above quote both infantilizes and empowers himself: referring to his father's power and prestige situates him as the son living under the patriarchal shadow, while his implicit belief that his stick is the biggest presents himself as untouchable. Tony's thought process here is an indictment of the American invulnerability mythology Cavedon cites: he naively believes that his safety is a birthright. Just like 9/11, Tony's kidnapping at the beginning of the film is a shocking and traumatic event that forces him to reconsider this personal narrative.

Origin stories are a crucial part of superhero films after 9/11. They both acknowledge a larger history and situate themselves apart from it—we all know Batman's parents are killed, and comic fans should know that Tony Stark is an egomaniac. Nolan's and Favreau's decisions to focus on the Origin story, despite

widespread public knowledge, reflects a need for the return or rebooting of the origin to do conceptual work. There is a desire to link the hero to his trauma—to understand the trauma as part of the hero. In both these films, as well as other superhero films since 9/11⁵, superheroes are framed as not just conquering and overcoming trauma, but as owing their identities to that trauma. The traumatic origin story resonates because it reflects a shift in national consciousness following 9/11: the illusions of invulnerability safety were shattered, and in the aftermath nationalist rhetoric reconfigured itself around concepts of resolve, revenge, and steadfastness. Thus, just as Bruce Wayne and Tony Stark find themselves forever changed by their trauma, so was the American national mythos rebooted to reflect a strength of character in surviving trauma.

Disembodied Villains (The Batman Trilogy)

While the Batman and Iron Man trilogies both emphasize the traumatic origin as a genesis point from which strength and heroism emerge, no superhero film focuses exclusively on the origin or the trauma. Instead, superhero films are protagonist-driven narratives which climax in an epic battle against a “main” villain. I use the phrase “main villain” instead of simply “villain” because superhero films after 9/11 frequently feature multiple antagonists, many of whom are hidden or secretive until late in the story. In *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, and *The Dark Knight Rises*, as well as in *Iron Man*, *Iron Man 2*, and *Iron Man 3*, the hero finds himself pitted against both a traditional villain he can fight and an elusive, secretive, or shadowy villain he cannot. These second type of antagonists, which I call “disembodied villains,” are notable for their resistance to

⁵ See: *Unbreakable*, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Thor*, *X-Men: First Class* or *Man of Steel*

the hero's physical powers. The frustration Batman and Iron Man feel while attempting to battle these disembodied villains resonated with American viewers. As I have noted earlier, the War on Terror is marked as unique in many ways, but primarily among those is the frustrating nature of modern global terrorism. Terrorism is not something that can simply be battled, at least not with the conventional weapons of the American military. Where do we go? While soldiers were able to quickly oust leaders in Iraq and Afghanistan, there was no corresponding sense of accomplishment because terror cells still existed outside those borders. Who do we kill? The executions of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden did not bring down global terrorism, neither did the removal of key Al-Qaeda or ISIS leaders. Modern terrorism resisted U.S. efforts precisely because it left those questions unanswerable. Rather, as a decentralized and cellular threat, it frustrated American attempts to attack head-on. These antagonists lacked a physical location and a locatable and killable figurehead of consequence. Thus, the disembodied villain of the superhero film: an enemy which the hero cannot find, fight, or destroy; an enemy who resists identification; an enemy who works from the shadows, leaving the hero blind and defenseless.

As Americans struggled with issues of power and vulnerability after 9/11 and during the War on Terror, so too do narratives about American masculinity. When Bush pushed for action, he was relying on tropes of masculinity—namely that *real men* are men of action—to help his case. The superhero film genre is fertile ground for an examination of narratives about masculinity because it is so extreme in its saturation with masculine fantasies. Superheroes like Captain America, the Incredible Hulk, Superman, and especially Iron Man and Batman are notable in their 21st century depictions for

precisely how damaged, broken, and vulnerable they are. They are not just broken people or broken Americans, they are broken *men*. Similarly, the resistant villain I discussed above frustrates heroic masculine mythologies. Masculinity, as Connell articulates, requires an Other against which it can prove itself. In these films we find a repetition of villains/Others/antagonists who resist attempts at definition or identification. These heroes, then, find not just trauma at the realization that they are vulnerable, but they also at the realization that there is no space out there for them to prove their strength, no villain against whom they can prove their might. Thus the disembodied villain frustrates the heroic masculine reconstructive fantasy. In this section, I will not just track the ways in which the disembodied villain operates and frustrates the hero, but I will also illuminate the ways in which the disembodied villain functions as a roadmap for understanding the false starts of heroic masculinity to reboot itself after 9/11.

Batman Begins is a film about fear. As the first major superhero film to arrive after 9/11, and as the first major superhero film to deal with 9/11 (symbolically) and terrorism (explicitly), fear is an understandable theme. While I have already charted the ways in which the film deals with Bruce's fear, and how the traumas he deals with cause him to embrace and confront his fear, the film's obsession with fear continues through the depictions of villains. As with each film in both trilogies, *Batman Begins* features at least two villains: one who is immediate and apparent, and one who is shadowy and resists identification. Jonathan Crane (Cillian Murphy), a psychiatrist who works for the mob helping their low-level enforcers beat murder charges with insanity pleas, moonlights as the villain Scarecrow. As Scarecrow, Crane utilizes a specially-formulated

neurotoxin⁶ to instill fear into his subjects. The toxin, an aerosol, causes the victim to experience reactions ranging from severe hallucinations and panic all the way to complete (and irreversible) psychosis. Here, fear is portrayed as something engineered, something contagious, and something potentially fatal. Beyond simply manipulating fear through his toxin, Crane also dons a crudely-stitched mask in his Scarecrow identity. The mask serves three functions: (1) its ragged and grimy appearance increases panic in his victims, especially after they have inhaled the toxin (2) it comes equipped with an air ventilation system which makes him immune to the aerosol and (3) it conceals his true identity.

Scarecrow's mask is terrifying in its crudeness. It appears to be stitched together piecemeal, with large and erratic seams holding the cloth together. Stains and discolorations dot the surface, and it sits awkwardly on Crane's head. The material is firm enough that it does not drape over his face, but rather sticks up in sharp and jagged points. Crane tilts his head to the side, so that the mask almost appears separated from his body, and his well-tailored suit serves as a marked juxtaposition. His physical appearance is only part of the terror—Crane modulates his voice while under the mask so that it sounds much deeper and more demonic. The full power of his fear is on display when he visits the newly-arrested (thanks to Batman) mob boss Carmine Falcone (Tom Wilkinson). Falcone, previously made aware that Crane's services to his mob were at the request of the League of Shadows, attempts to bully Crane. He threatens to tell the police about Crane's work—dumping chemicals into the water system below Arkham Asylum—if Crane does not provide him with a psychiatric diagnosis. Crane, eerily calm,

⁶ Crane's toxin is a modified version of the neurotoxin Bruce inhales during his initiation with the League of Shadows. It ultimately serves as a harbinger of the League's entrance into Gotham.

pulls out his mask. Just before he puts the mask on, he remarks to Falcone that the mask “probably isn’t that scary to a guy like [him].” Immediately after putting the mask on, Crane disperses the aerosol fear toxin. The gas affects Falcone instantly, and Nolan’s camera warps both image and sound to correspond. Crane, now Scarecrow, speaks in a distorted and mechanized voice, as Falcone screams and cries in terror. The exposure, combined with Scarecrow’s disturbing monologue, drive Falcone over the edge, and the formerly powerful mob boss is reduced to a muttering shell of a man. Crane has weaponized fear.

While the mask has offensive properties, its most practical advantage is that it protects Crane from the toxin through a ventilation/filtration system. While not expanded upon in the film, the audience is to understand that Crane’s mask renders him immune to the aerosol—as evidenced in scene with Falcone when he sprays the immediate area with neurotoxin and emerges unaffected. I find it important to think about the mask as both an offensive and defensive resource, especially when we consider the larger theme of fear in *Batman Begins* within the framework of the War on Terror. In the build up to the Iraq War, the Bush Administration proceeded with a “rapid dominance” war strategy—better known by its colloquial name: shock and awe. The theory behind “shock and awe” strategies is to render the enemy incapable of mounting a resistance through sheer psychological trauma. In a rapid dominance approach, according to Harlan Ullman, the author of the Shock and Awe concept: “You’re sitting in Baghdad and all of a sudden you’re the general and 30 of your division headquarters have been wiped out. You also take the city down. By that I mean you get rid of their power, water. In 2, 3, 4, 5 days they are physically, emotionally and psychologically exhausted.” (quoted in Chan 2003)

The belief was that the bombardment would sap the Iraqi military force of its will to fight back, thus ensuring fewer battles and fewer casualties on both sides. Again, the Bush Administration was quick to present the concept at the core of their response to 9/11: *action* is the only course that can ensure safety. What they discovered, however, and what we now know, is that Shock and Awe proved largely ineffective against the Iraqi military this time around. Even more important, Shock and Awe was useless against Al-Qaeda soldiers willing to die for their cause. The size of the United States' stick (to paraphrase Tony Stark) was of no concern to these modern terrorists. Ultimately, their engagement with fear—their desire to use it as a weapon against their enemies in the West, and their comfortability with it as a resource—steeled their resolve as to make them immune to fear's effects. Nolan's Batman is a Shock and Awe hero: Bruce prefers to use his ability to instill fear and play against the superstitions of common criminals to get what he wants. His costume, his voice, and his desire to work at night are all designed to terrifying criminals into surrendering, or at least sap their ability to fight back. Like Crane, militant terrorist forces had worked with fear longer than their enemies, and were thus able to deploy it more efficiently while simultaneously remaining resistant. Crane's mask, the object that both deploys fear and allows him to remain immune, becomes a totem of mastery in his psychological battle with Batman.

Ultimately, Crane's role in *Batman Begins* ends in the very place his plot began: the basement of Arkham Asylum. Batman, having recovered from his first encounter with Scarecrow's fear gas, arrives prepared for its effects and storms the building to rescue Assistant District Attorney (and his childhood friend) Rachel Dawes (Katie Holmes). Dawes has been gassed and, suffering from overexposure, will die without treatment.

Batman makes short work of the goons, and confronts the villain. As Scarecrow attempts to surprise him with a sneak attack, Batman grabs his arm—where the toxin dispersing mechanism is hidden—and twists it back on Crane while simultaneously ripping off the mask. Delivering a cheesy one-liner—“a taste of your own medicine, Doctor?”—Batman sprays a full dose of the fear gas into Crane’s face. The ensuing interrogation—at least as much of an interrogation Batman can perform before the toxin renders Crane permanently insane—alerts Batman to Ra’s Al Ghul’s return to Gotham, and Batman rescues Dawes while leaving Crane for the police. In this scene, we see an inversion of the immunity to fear Scarecrow possessed earlier. Here, Batman, having already been initiated into the world of fear and trauma, is now experienced enough to master it in the same way Scarecrow does. Crane, on the other hand, finds himself exposed without his mask, and therefore vulnerable to his own fear toxin. This iteration illuminates a rebooting of the Shock and Awe fantasy—namely that it requires both mastery *and* knowledge. Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the ways in which the elusive Other frustrates the mythmaking of masculinity—here we see the fantasy of that hegemony: a villain exposed. The exposed villain, we learn, is neither terrifying nor immune, and can be dispatched with minimal effort. When Batman unmask Crane, Scarecrow ceases to exist, and we are left only with a frail and powerless psychiatrist. In relation to Crane, Batman is powerful; in this scene, Nolan acknowledges the masculine fantasies of 2005: a villainous Other exposed for the weakling he is, and the protagonist’s mastery rewarded in his dominance over his foe.

And yet, Batman’s victory over Scarecrow is simply an interlude to the true conflict of the film: the League of Shadows’ return to Gotham. The League intends to

release a massive amount of Crane's fear toxin over the entire city, causing mass fear and death throughout the city. We learn of this plot at Bruce's birthday party, where he is introduced to a mysterious man going by the name Ra's Al Ghul. As the man turns, he reveals himself to be Ducard. When Bruce says that he watched Ra's Al Ghul die, Ducard counters with the notion that "Ra's Al Ghul" was simply a figurehead character and Ducard was always the leader of the League of Shadows. This decentralized leadership, in which one member of the League of Shadows can step in whenever the leader is killed or deposed, strongly resembles the infrastructure of the modern terrorist cell. While not completely adaptable in the way the League of Shadows is, contemporary terrorist cells still operate independently enough that a War on Terror becomes nothing more than a murky engagement with different (and at times conflicting) ideologies, locales, and militant groups. Ducard's League of Shadows is not dangerous simply because they are well-trained, ruthless, or powerful; rather, they are dangerous because they resist the types of head-on, face-to-face engagements Batman is equipped to fight. What Bruce learns after the League burns his mansion to the ground and leaves him for dead, is that he cannot fight this battle with his conventional Shock and Awe tactics—he needs to build a coalition; he needs help.

The key cog in Bruce's coalition is Lt. Jim Gordon (Gary Oldman). While Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman) is crucial for his ability to invent new gadgets and create Batman's arsenal, and Alfred (Michael Caine) is helpful for his emotional and fatherly support, Gordon's assistance is important because of his status as a police officer (and later police commissioner). As an agent of the law, Gordon simultaneously legitimizes Batman as an agent of good and casts him as a rebellious outsider taking action in the

face of a passive and useless system. The first distinction does not just mark Batman as morally good, it also distinguishes him from the villains who also wear masks and operate in the shadows. Considering the understandable dissonance a Shock and Awe strategy would cause in a nation concerned about terrorism, the distinction was crucial for audiences. The second distinction operates to cast Batman as an effective actor in the interplay between good and evil in Gotham. Batman becomes someone who *takes action* in the face of evil, and his resolute ability to act without regards to rules and laws makes him the exact hero Gotham needs. He becomes the perfect hero of the Bush Administration's response to terrorism: a morally good agent who responds to terrorism with Shock and Awe (and righteously distinguishes between the two) and takes action when others are content to sit passively. His recruitment drive is as much about helping those in other positions of power understand the necessity of his actions.

Batman Begins ends with a climactic chase through Gotham City, as Ducard pilots an elevated rail car through the city, spewing Scarecrow's weaponized fear toxin over the citizens of the city. Gordon, against the orders of the Commissioner, assists Batman in chasing down Ducard—while Batman fights the villain aboard the train, Gordon pilots the Batmobile toward Ducard's target and lies in wait. He shoots out the foundation of the rail line, causing the car to plummet to destruction; at the same time, Batman gains the upper hand in his fight and jumps out of the car at the last minute, leaving Ducard. Ducard taunts him in his last minutes: "Have you finally learned to do what is necessary?" (meaning killing Ducard to save innocent lives) to which Batman responds, "I won't kill you, but I don't have to save you." The distinction Bruce makes is important to understanding this film as engaging with the anxieties of 2005 America and

the War on Terror. Batman does not save Ducard because he cannot and should not—Ducard is beyond saving, he is corrupted and evil. The distinction allows Bruce to break his “rule” against killing by allowing Ducard to plummet to his death specifically because Ducard is irredeemable. This imagining of the villainous Other as beyond redemption is a key element of the ability to enact violence against them—violence the morally good actor would normally have issues with. Beyond this attempt to assuage guilt, Gordon’s role shift is an important shift for the rest of the series. While Bruce “recruits” Gordon early on, it is not until this final sequence that Gordon must make difficult choices between his official duties and his conscience. Gordon takes the Batmobile and orders the drawbridge separating the drugged citizens from the rest of Gotham because he understands that Batman’s action is the key to saving the city. The police were content to sit passively while the League of Shadows infiltrated every echelon of both the criminal underworld and the government, corrupting and preparing Gotham for its downfall. Batman’s decisive actions become a call to action—an attempt to lead by example and gain followers to who understand that only action can protect the city from terrorism.

The film concludes by setting the stage for *The Dark Knight* (2008). In this short sequence between Gordon and Batman, we learn that the lieutenant has commissioned a “Bat-symbol” as a means of contacting the caped crusader. During the second sequence of exposition of *The Dark Knight*, we see the ways in which that symbol also serves as a visual reminder that Batman is protecting the city when a criminal decides not to go out looting because the symbol reminds him of the threat of running to our hero. Before *Batman Begins* ends, Gordon introduces Batman to the Joker (Heath Ledger), and connects the two by saying “he has your flair for the dramatic.” This connection will

serve as the existential conflict for *The Dark Knight*: are Batman and the Joker really two sides of the same coin? If so, how different are those sides? In *The Dark Knight*, the Joker's resistance to identification shines a bright light on the very same shadows Batman likes to operate within. As in *Batman Begins*, and as we will see again in *The Dark Knight Rises*, the immediate threat (in this film, the mob) serves only as a disguise for the more severe and dangerous threat of the Joker, and Batman's misreading of this situation is at the crux of the trauma he faces during this film. In *The Dark Knight*, Batman's emergence is part of Joker's genesis—he does not *create* the Joker, but he certainly *inspires* him—while Nolan's narrative toys with the very concept of an “origin story.” The Joker's continuous repetition of the phrase “do you want to know how I got these scars?” reflects both an impulse to know (on the part of the viewer or listener) and a rejection of historical identity (on the part of the Joker). In these ways, Joker is the perfect—and by perfect, I mean most terrifying—post-9/11 villain we can imagine. He both literalizes the struggles of the United States against global terrorism and creates a sense of purposeful and intentional resistance to the Bush action agenda.

Nolan is right to start the film with the Joker; he is the force around which the rest of the story revolves. To add to the un-verifiability of the Joker, Nolan has us meet him without knowing it. The entire bank heist that begins the film is performed by men wearing fake Joker masks; the trick is that the Joker is one of those men. We first glimpse him from behind, Joker mask in hand as he waits for a van to pick him up. There is nothing notable or remarkable about this figure—and this feeling is shared by the men in the van, who openly deride the Joker by commenting on his lack of fortitude to join them on the heist. The Joker—the terrorist—could be anyone on any street corner, and we

would never see him coming. Throughout the film, the Joker asks his victims “do you want to know how I got these scars?” Certainly, Joker’s facial scarring is meant to be noticed—his facial makeup purposefully highlights the scars on the side of his mouth with bright red paint. Intentionality is important because it directs us to understand that the Joker *wants* people to notice his scars. The question itself is rhetorical—both because he is going to tell his victim anyway and because he is aware that they (and by extension we) want to know. And yet what he delivers is a long ruse. Each time the Joker tells the story of his scars, the narrative changes—first, it’s because his abusive father cut him with a knife; next, it’s because he wanted to make his disfigured wife feel less self-conscious. The joke, however, is totally lost on the characters because no one character gets to hear the different stories. Instead, this joke is meant for the audience. Joker’s rejection of identity is a game he plays with us. Certainly, it is terrifying—a villain with no history, no identity, and no home mirrors the frustrating and horrifying engagements with the terrorist cells the United States has engaged with since 2001. But it is not enough for Joker to simply resist identification; he also attempts to unmask Batman. Throughout the film, he calls for the Dark Knight to “take off [his] mask” and answer for his vigilantism. Joker’s move here is reflexive: he turns the audience’s desire to identify him and turns it back toward them via the protagonist hero, Batman. In doing so, he both subverts any ability to determine his identity and exposes Batman as a potentially knowable entity. Of course, since neither Batman nor Joker are identified, they also occupy similar spaces in the shadows. Joker’s endgame, beyond simply frustrating attempts to know him, is to connect himself and Batman ideologically.

A key sequence in the film, immediately after Batman captures Joker, illustrates this intention. In this scene, Joker is held in an interrogation cell, while Gordon rushes in. At this time, even the audience is in the dark as to the suspense, until Gordon informs Joker (and the audience) that neither Harvey Dent nor Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal) returned home safely that night. Everyone knows the Joker is responsible, but no one knows how to make him talk. This scene is loaded with tension, precisely because Nolan has conditioned his audience to understand the Joker as untouchable by conventional means. His immunity is a combination of insanity, ideology, and the same immunity to fear Batman possesses. Gordon uncuffs Joker, and leaves the room while Joker mocks him “the ‘good cop, bad cop’ routine?” The scene is darkly lit. Only one light, a desk lamp on the table Joker is seated at, shines. The lamp is dim, and pointed slightly downward, so that all we see is Joker’s face and head. Nolan has literalized his disembodiment—he is a floating, detached head in a sea of darkness. What lighting we have is low-key, so that only portions of Joker’s face are lit. Through the cinematography of the scene, Nolan presents us with a disembodied villain, while simultaneously exaggerating an inability to see him for who he is. The Joker remains unverifiable, despite being the only lit object on the screen.

The lights come on, and reveal Batman standing directly behind the Joker a second before our hero slams the villain’s head into the table. What follows is an ideological exposition between Batman and the Joker. In the attempted interrogation that follows, Batman asks questions—attempting to find out where Harvey Dent or Rachel Dawes are—while the Joker attempts to connect the two men through their iconography. “I don’t want to kill you,” he says, “what would I do without you? You *complete* me.”

Through his monologue, we understand that Joker sees himself as a child of Batman's ideology—someone who has also thrown off the shackles of civilized living and embraced the darkness and violence within. "These mob fools want you [Batman] dead so they can get back to the way things were," Joker tells Batman, "but I know the truth: there's no going back. You've changed things. Forever." The refrain "9/11 changed everything" was a common one from the Bush Administration⁷. The implication was that the United States occupied two existential spaces: the first, the pre-9/11 space, was one of peace, safety, and security; the second, the post-9/11 space, was one in which our eyes were opened to the horrors of terrorism. In this sequence, Joker inverts the narrative: Batman is the traumatic event which destabilizes and shocks the world of organized crime. In essence, his entrance into the world of crime was the inspiration for the Joker's terrorist rampage during the events of *The Dark Knight*. Horrified by the implication, Batman denies this connection, telling the Joker "you're garbage who kills for money." His attempt to distance himself from the Joker relies on a moral code: Batman neither kills nor takes money. And yet, the Joker's kidnapping of Dent and Dawes is meant to set up a "Sophie's Choice" dilemma in which Batman can only save one of his friends. This choice, the Joker argues, is tantamount to killing, as the friend he does not try to save will die. Filled with righteous anger, Batman begins pummeling Joker while demanding the location of Dent and Dawes. In an incredibly unsettling moment, the Joker only cackles hysterically at Batman's fury: "You have nothing! Nothing to threaten me with! Nothing

⁷ The genesis of this phrase is nearly impossible to track down. We can read inferences to it in Bush's "September 11, 2001 Address to the Nation" that I reference earlier, but the phrase pops up almost simultaneously in press tours by Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Bush himself during the campaign for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

to do with all your strength!” The sheer impotence of Batman’s power, his training, his technology, and his skills is exposed.

In the Joker, we see a darker twin to Batman’s Shock and Awe campaign. Like Crane, the Joker is a master of fear and therefore immune to it; unlike Crane, Joker’s immunity is not based on artifice or technology, but on a disembodiment which prevents Batman from being able to strike back. By 2008, the impotence of the Bush Administration’s rhetorical machismo was similarly exposed. A majority of Americans preferred a withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, as yet again the might of the American military was ill-suited toward an engagement with leaderless, nationless, guerrilla fighters. The Joker, a model for the decentered terrorist cell, pokes holes in Batman’s mystique and challenges his mastery over fear. In the end, Joker bets his ideology against Batman’s in a contrived prisoner’s dilemma pitting a ferry full of convicts against a ferry full of citizens. Nolan cross-cuts the action of Batman and Gordon attempting to track down the Joker with the relative inaction of the ethical dilemma aboard the ship. Ultimately, Batman is forced to use a top-secret cell phone hacking program Wayne Industries developed for the United States military in order to track down the Joker. For the first time, post-9/11 domestic politics make an appearance in Nolan’s trilogy. Wayne Industries’ cell phone hack transmits a sonar signal, allowing whoever holds the program to create an instantaneous and constant-updating three-dimensional map of the city. When Bruce presents this technology to Lucius, Fox is horrified by the possibilities of such information in the wrong hands. In this cell phone program, we see the residue of—and reaction against—the Patriot Act of 2001. The Patriot Act was a key component of the Bush Administration’s response to 9/11 and the

War on Terror; however, an in-depth analysis of the ways in which the law affected life in the United States is beyond the scope of this dissertation. At the very least, the Patriot Act shifted the focus of concepts like “intelligence” and “surveillance” to domestic interests as well as foreign interests. At the same time that American soldiers were putting boots down in Afghanistan and preparing to do so in Iraq, the public was coming to understand the war in terms of data and information-gathering. Bruce’s cell phone program represents the worst fears of Patriot Act detractors (of which there were few)—an American surveillance state illegally watching its citizens.

And yet, with Lucius’ help, Bruce is able to track down the Joker. Here, Nolan whitewashes Batman’s privacy violations—the cell phone surveillance program is both *totally necessary* to catch the Joker and is immediately destroyed by Fox upon Joker’s capture. Thus, the citizens of Gotham had nothing to worry about: Batman was never interested in spying on their personal lives, he only wanted to catch the bad guy. Such a fable seemed far-fetched even in 2008, but this sequence is crucial as the trilogy shifts to its final installment. Nolan cements Bruce as aligned with an outgoing and out-of-touch surveillance-happy administration; he situates him against the turning tide of public perception of the War on Terror. Bruce is too aggressive, too vengeful, and too focused on the enemy to consider how his crusade destroys those around him. As *The Dark Knight* draws to a close, Gordon eulogizes the end of an era for Gotham City by telling his son that the police must now denounce Batman. Obama’s election later that year served as a public referendum on the Bush years—the nation wanted out of the war; fear stopped selling.

The Dark Knight Rises cold-opens with a glimpse into the prominent antagonist, Bane (Tom Hardy). Bane is a menacing figure, large in stature with bulging muscles and a grotesque face covered by a terrifying ventilator mask. Like the Joker, and Ducard before him, Bane's voice is disembodied, this time by the mask that keeps him alive. The mask creates a strong modulation effect, so much so that I found it difficult to even understand him during my first viewing in the theatre. My own aural shortcomings aside, the pitch and tone of Bane's voice frame him as a cyborg: his voice is mechanical and inhuman, standing in stark contrast to his swollen and exposed body. Bane's voice works to contrast his body; it seems to come from somewhere else. This is *The Dark Knight Rises*' trick: here, the disembodied voices are twofold. Unlike the two previous films in the series, Bane, he of the modulated voice, occupies the role of the immediate and apparent threat; it is Miranda Tate (Marion Cotillard) who functions as the shadowy and severe threat. Miranda is the embodied vengeance of Ra's Al Ghul—literally his daughter—come to finish the destruction of Gotham her father started. Thus, the levels of disembodiment are both nuanced and plural. Miranda is the leader of the new League of Shadows, but Bane operates as its visible figurehead. He verbalizes her ideas; in many ways, he is her ventriloquist dummy. The terror of this relationship is that Bruce has reached a point where even the disembodied villain voice is levels removed from the ideology, and the puppet master is someone incredibly close to him.

Batman rarely appears in this film; unlike *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*, *The Dark Knight Rises* is more about Bruce than his alter-ego. As a long-retired former hero, Bruce must first negotiate his return both physically and psychically. Physically, he must deal with the fact that as a man in his late-30s, his body is already far from its peak;

the years of jumping off buildings, absorbing gunfire, and kicking and punching countless criminals have only accelerated this process. Psychically, Bruce must deal with his lack of knowledge of the criminal underworld, combined with his dwindling contacts within Gotham's police force. Dent and Rachel are dead, Lucius' gadgets sit collecting dust, and Gordon is practically comatose after a run-in with Bane's men in the sewers. Bruce must now go it alone. Or perhaps it is better to say that Bruce *believes* he must go it alone—despite the status of his body and his alliance, he maintains a brash confidence in his abilities. His confidence is his undoing, ultimately, but it also causes him to ignore the potential new alliances that present themselves in the form of Catwoman and Officer Blake (Joseph Gordon-Levitt). These allies prove crucial for Bruce at the film's climax, as he comes to recognize their value after he is broken and alone.

The aforementioned undoing comes at the hand of Bane. Bruce disregards Alfred's warnings about Bane's viciousness, instead focusing on the fact that Bane was excommunicated from the League of Shadows for being too extreme. For Bruce, extremism is a disqualifying factor, rather than a point of concern. His naiveté has physical causes, as his showdown with Bane beneath Gotham City is a culmination of his age, his arrogance, and his weakness alongside Bane's strength, viciousness, and skill. In the sewers, Batman comes face-to-face with the first foe of the entire series who can match him (or best him) in strength, martial skill, stealth, and fortitude. Bane does not just pummel Batman, he toys with him, he taunts him, and he psychically tortures him. At one point, Batman attempts to use mini smoke bombs combined with a gadget that knocks out the lights in order to disorient Bane and creep into the shadows. Bane scoffs at his attempt: "Oh, you think the darkness is your ally, but you merely adopted the dark.

I was born in it, molded by it. I didn't see the light until I was already a man; by then, it was nothing to me but blinding! The shadows betray you, because they belong to me." As with the Joker, Batman sees his Shock and Awe techniques neutralized; unlike with the Joker, Bane is able to ignore Batman's attempts to instill horror because Bane himself has mastered them. In a recent lecture, Professor Mahmood Mamdani from Columbia University spoke about the rise of Daesh in the wake of United States' wars in—and eventual withdrawals from—Iraq and Afghanistan. Specifically, he argued that there is a link between the rise of ISIS and American war policies under the Bush administration: "I think of these people [ISIS] as Rumsfeld's children in many ways because the Rumsfeld doctrine, 'shock and awe,' that's what ISIS has adopted: shock and awe. Violence must be a performance, as it was for Rumsfeld." Bane and Batman share the same mentor, Ra's Al Ghul, and the same techniques. There is little distance between Ducard's "theatricality and deception" and Mamdani's argument that for Rumsfeld violence should be a performance. Both rely on psychological domination—attacking an opponent's willpower before their bodies—as a means to combat foes while minimizing risk to the self.

In Bruce, Bane, and Ducard, we see a complication of the relationship between the United States and ISIS Mamdani articulates. Mamdani traces a linear/patrilineal sequence of cause and effect: Rumsfeld's notion of Shock and Awe, meant to psychically dominant the enemy, was experienced and then refashioned and appropriated by those same men. They are his "children" in that they learned the lessons of the "father" and turned them back against their mentor. In Nolan's films, the relationship is not so simple. Ducard may serve as a patriarch, but his identity is muddy throughout the films—we

know he adopts the mantle of Ra's Al Ghul, but *The Dark Knight Rises* implies that he was *always* Ra's Al Ghul⁸. Thus, we are unable to even trace the “theatricality and deception” of the League of Shadows to a single point. Even more complicated are the “children” in this scenario. Bruce and Bane are in nearly every way opposites, and yet, they share the teachings of the League at their core. As Bane says to Bruce: “Theatricality and deception are powerful agents to the uninitiated... but we are initiated, aren't we Bruce? Members of the League of Shadows!” I discussed the elaborate initiation ritual Bruce undergoes in *Batman Begins* earlier in this chapter; it is telling that Bane finds this ceremony important enough to cultivate a bond between the two men. Bruce again rejects his connection to the League, but Bane does not buy the distinction. For him, the only difference between himself and Batman is Bane's willingness to do what is necessary to cleanse Gotham of its moral corruption. Bruce's rejection of his connection to Bane and his rejection of his roots with the League of Shadows are both ideological defense mechanisms. He is incapable of tracing the lines connecting him to his enemies without also understanding him as connected to their violence and their evil. For Bruce, the League is a foil against which he proves his strength, his righteousness, and his mastery; for Bane and Ducard, Bruce is either a failed prodigy or a weak predecessor. Most importantly, Bruce sees his war against these enemies as a process through which he can enjoy his ascension into power, while the members of the League see the war as a battle between two sides of the same coin: one weak and one with resolve.

⁸ In *Batman Begins*, Ducard implies that Ra's Al Ghul is “immortal” not because the man himself cannot die, but because his name is inherited by the succeeding leader of the League of Shadows upon his death. However, in *The Dark Knight Rises*, the narrative advances as if Ducard and Ra's Al Ghul have always been the same person. This distinction is especially important because Miranda is the daughter of Ra's Al Ghul, and her attack on Gotham is meant as retribution for both Bruce's rejection of the League and his complicity in her father's death.

Bane breaks Bruce's body in the sewers, but his ultimate prize is Bruce's spirit. After the fight, Bane transports Bruce to an ancient prison in a nondescript Middle Eastern village. The prison is more of a pit; a place where Bruce will learn "the truth about despair," which is—according to Bane—that "there can be no true despair without Hope." Bane's subsequent invasion of Gotham, complete with massive explosions and a ticking neutron bomb, is meant as a spectacle for Bruce to watch on television from his cell in the pit. The spectacle is carefully orchestrated, according to Bane, to cause Bruce to suffer the most agonizing spiritual torture. Before he leaves Bruce to mount his attack on Gotham, Bane offers him insight into his plan:

“[A]s I terrorize Gotham, I will feed its people hope to poison their souls. I will let them believe they can survive so that you can watch them clambering over each other to stay in the sun. You can watch me torture an entire city and when you have truly understood the depth of your failure, we will fulfill Ra's al Ghul's destiny. We will destroy Gotham and then, when it is done and Gotham is...ashes... then you have my permission to die.”

Bane's focus on Hope as a driving force for terror and despair is crucial to understanding this film within an American political context in 2012. Obama ran and won in 2008 on a campaign heavily saturated with the rhetoric of Hope and Change. Although he would win a reelection later in the year, by 2012 the Obama campaign had reduced the rhetoric

of Hope and Change to almost zero⁹. Hope was not seen so much as *poison* as it was *naïveté*—the machinations of a younger generation who was too far removed from the horrors of terrorism to remember why Americans were dying in Iraq and Afghanistan in the first place. It is through this prism that Bane works to critique the American left of 2012; the fact that he incites an “Occupy Wall Street”-style uprising among Gotham’s criminal class functions as a blunt-force criticism for those unable to grasp the not-so-subtle Hope dig.

This film does not just excoriate the Obama Administration’s response to global terrorism, it champions the Bush Administration’s action response to trauma and terror. What *The Dark Knight Rises* presents audiences with, then, is a warning. Gotham, confident in its security after Batman took down the Joker and the mob, forgets that vigilance and action necessary to win the war against evil. Batman, as the embodiment of that action ideology, languishes in a city that no longer needs him. Bane, sensing this weakness, uses the newfound naïveté of Gothamites to stage a spectacle designed to both destroy Gotham and torture Bruce’s soul. What could be worse for a man of action than to be stuck in a pit, unable to act to save his people? Thus, Bruce suffers in his cell while Bane takes Gotham and corrupts it with a toxic combination of fear and hope. In his cell, Bruce is reduced to passive observer; like so many Americans on the morning of September 11, 2001, he is forced to watch the horrific events unfold on television. “Forced” in this sense is not figurative—Bane instructs Bruce’s captors to ensure that he sees the destruction live. It is at this point that Bruce begins to recapture his power, by healing through action. Bane broke his back, and Bruce is aggressive in recovering from

⁹ In fact, as Joan Didion notes in her talk at the New York Public Library Symposium given just days after the 2008 election, Obama’s aides set to work “tempering expectations” almost as soon as the election ended. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2008/12/18/obama-in-the-irony-free-zone/>

the injury; he has the guards suspend him from a rope so that he may learn to stand again, and at one point has a guard smash a compounded vertebrae back into place. Once he can walk again, he begins (re)mastering his body. Nolan shoots a training montage where Bruce completes two actions: in the first, he sculpts his physical form through pushups and sit-ups; in the second, he attempts to escape the pit by climbing up the jagged wall. His attempts to escape are intercut with two other sequences: normal cuts to the events in Gotham as the situation there degrades, and flashbacks to Wayne Manor and the scene in *Batman Begins* when Bruce first fell down the hole into the batcave. The flashback sequences work to situate Bruce's current struggle within the narrative of his life—his father repeats the lesson: “Why do we fall? So we can learn to pick ourselves up.” Nolan casts Bruce's current predicament as yet another instance where he must take action (picking himself up) in order to overcome the trauma of having fallen (or having been knocked down). Bruce fails to scale the wall twice before his sage mentor in the pit tells him to make the climb without a rope. “Make the climb... without the rope. Then fear will find you again,” the man tells him, emphasizing that fear—the mastery of fear—is what will empower Bruce to do what seems impossible. This is the same philosophy of fear Ducard preaches to Bruce during *Batman Begins*.

Bruce escapes, finds his way back to Gotham, and begins his quest to overthrow Bane with a spectacle of his own: he burns a massive Batman symbol into the side of a bridge, so large and bright that all in Gotham can see. The fistfights these men have are done in relative secret: the first happens underneath Gotham in a sewer, the final one happens in the middle of a mob so dense that no one could follow and observe. The real battle these two engage in is an ideological one, the type of battle that requires

performance, symbols, and staging. Nolan frames the final battle around concepts of opposition: Batman and the police are fully dressed in uniform, advancing on Bane's ragtag group of mercenaries and misfits. Bane's group passively waits, while the action of engagement is controlled by Batman's side. After Batman pummels Bane into submission, Miranda slips behind Bruce and slides a knife between his ribs. Bruce, stunned with both agony and the depths of her betrayal, can only listen as she gloats about her ability to maneuver unseen through Gotham despite being the mastermind of Bane's plot. It was Bruce's actions during *Batman Begins* that drew her and the reformed League of Shadows back to Gotham, she explains. His decision to oppose the League and allow Ducard to die drew her ire.

Batman escapes, captures the bomb, and, as he did with her father, allows Miranda to die. Realizing that he cannot defuse the bomb, Batman flies it out over the bay and it explodes harmlessly off shore. Seizing the opportunity, Bruce chooses to fake his own death and live out his life anonymously. The film's extended ending situates its characters in this new post-Batman world: Gordon mourns for a friend he never truly knew, Blake takes his first steps toward assuming his mantle as Batman's successor, and Alfred mourns that he could not protect Bruce from himself—until he spots Bruce on vacation and shares a knowing glance about his former master's new life. Gotham City also mourns Batman, revealing a memorial statue of him inside City Hall and embracing the narrative that “Batman could be anybody.” The memorializing of Batman feels odd for a city that just a few months ago was hunting him down and branding him a vigilante. And yet, it fits within Nolan's larger take on post-9/11 politics and action: Batman's Shock and Awe approach to combating evil is always necessary, but only appreciated

after moments of extreme trauma. His approach to combating terrorism in Gotham was to master fear and use it as a weapon against his enemies—a strategy that ultimately caused as many problems as it solved. For Nolan, however, the drawbacks to Batman are far outweighed by his benefits, and this is evidenced by the shaky nature of the “peace” Gotham experiences after Batman wins his war against the mob. In a war on terror, peace is simply a respite before the next attack, and only those who pursue action ever understand this fact. Nolan’s films cultivate a fantasy of masculine response to trauma after 9/11: taking swift, vengeful, and decisive action allows the survivors to accelerate the healing process by regaining power. Simultaneously, this trilogy also presents the horrors of stagnation, the fears of imperceptible enemies, and the worry that we are complicit in our own destruction. Ultimately, Nolan’s Batman is presented as a romantic hero, one who deserves the happy ending he receives; his action allowed him to unmask and defeat his enemies.

Techno-Masculinity (The Iron Man Trilogy)

Like Batman, Tony Stark is a man of action—brash, bold, and eager to jump into the fray. Unlike Nolan’s Batman trilogy, however, Marvel’s Iron Man trilogy does not revel in Stark’s action. Instead, *Iron Man*, *Iron Man 2*, and *Iron Man 3* reimagine masculine heroism as something cerebral and advanced. Technology drives Stark’s armor and his heart. The man and the machine become indistinguishable in these films—Tony builds and wears the suits, but he also integrates the machinery into himself as well. In Nolan’s film, Bruce Wayne and Batman are different characters when they are on screen; in Marvel’s films, Tony Stark and Iron Man are the same public identity all the time. While

I can make a distinction between Bruce and Batman at any point in the films, it can be difficult to extricate Stark from his metallic exoskeleton¹⁰. This hybrid, cyborg-like existence also provides Stark with a fluid adaptability that makes him the perfect machine to combat global terrorism. If Nolan's trilogy is captivated with the Bush Administration's action doctrine following 9/11 (and I believe it is), then the Iron Man trilogy is reflective of the Obama Administration's emphasis on drone warfare as a "safer" alternative to dead soldiers on the ground. Stark's desire is almost the exact opposite of Batman's: while Bruce seeks the righteous purpose for which to enact his strength and power, Stark seeks to build technology so advanced that he can prevent war before it starts. This is drone warfare wrapped in a candy red and yellow shell. Iron Man's villains, while also disembodied in similar ways as Batman's, are not agents of evil and chaos—they are businessmen, inventors, and war profiteers who seek to sow discord and sell their technologies to the highest bidders. The Iron Man trilogy reflects shifting anxieties about the War on Terror— anxieties about where all our action has gotten us; anxieties about finally getting to the core of terrorism and finding ourselves at the root.

Perhaps the greatest moment of fantasy in any of the films I have discussed or will discuss in this project comes in the middle of *Iron Man*. In this scene, Stark is taking the prototype Iron Man suit out for a spin in Afghanistan. Cross-cut with his joy ride is a scene of terror in a village—the same group of terrorists that captured Stark earlier in the cave have set upon this defenseless village and are terrorizing and killing its inhabitants. As Stark approaches, he makes sure to cause a spectacle of his arrival, coming in hot so

¹⁰ For this reason, I will likely use "Stark" and "Iron Man" interchangeably in a way that would not be possible for Batman trilogy.

as to cause a sonic boom and landing with a loud thud in the town's center. A man opens fire on Iron Man, and Stark makes sure to take enough of the gunfire to the face to illustrate his complete imperviousness to bullets before punching the man through a wall. He blasts a few more terrorists before the remaining members grab civilian hostages. This is the crucial moment of this scene. Here, the camera switches from an external medium shot to a point-of-view shot from within Stark's Heads Up Display. The shot pulls back to a long shot, although the screen space is bordered by the HUD. Quickly, the Iron Man suit uses facial recognition software to identify the people in front of him. Then, the computer somehow identifies and labels each face on the screen with two tags: CIVILIAN and HOSTILE. Almost instantaneously, a secret compartment on the shoulder slot emerges and fires precision projectiles, killing the terrorists and leave the civilians unharmed. A boy rushes to his father, hugs him, and gazes thankfully at Iron Man before Stark blasts off to head home.

There are several fantasies occurring simultaneously in this scene. The primary fantasy is one of knowability. Like Batman, Iron Man is fighting against a force that resists identification—guerilla fighters who refuse to wear uniforms and engage in “civilized” warfare. While the entire Batman trilogy is wrought with the anxieties of fighting such an enemy, *Iron Man* solves this problem about an hour into the film: let the computer take care of it. The Iron Man suit is the same sort of hybrid man-machine system as a drone; while the pilot (Stark) is on location as opposed to thousands of miles away, he is still safe in his indestructible suit. Drones are desirable for their safety and their precision, and this scene takes this fantasy to a rewarding end. In fact, a computerized targeting system is more accurate than a human hand, and has the benefit

of being immune to fear, stress, or panic. Similarly, the drone is safe in that the pilot operates from the safety of a room hundreds or thousands of miles away. Where *Iron Man* provides the fantasy, however, is in the ability to identify and select targets with perfect accuracy. The second fantasy is one of safety. After 9/11, the Bush Administration put forth the notion that the relative safety Americans enjoyed before the attacks could be regained through action and vengeance against the guilty. While comforting, this notion has yet to provide the promised sense of safety. What the drone provides is a form of safety structured around reducing American casualties. If we eliminate boots on the ground through drone strikes, the net result is the same as if we equipped each soldier with a tank-proof suit of armor. Thus the fantasy that safety can be provided with no discernable cost.

The final fantasy of this scene is a flash of a moment at the end, just before *Iron Man* leaves the village. Here, the camera lingers on the young Afghani boy as he embraces his rescued father. As *Iron Man* walks by, the boy opens his eyes and stares at him. The boy's eyes follow Stark, slowly but steadily. His face is one of gratitude, respect, and appreciation. Here, Favreau presents drone intervention as welcomed by those it saves. Certainly, the boy is glad to have his father alive and the terrorists killed, but the look extends beyond simple gratitude—there is an appreciation of *Iron Man*'s power and his ability to act quickly, effectively, and without error. Civilian casualties are incredibly high in counter-Shock and Awe campaigns, and these engagements frequently create conditions that further the battle: innocent survivors of anti-terrorist violence make for easy recruits to the cause. In this scene, Favreau works the “hearts and minds” concept at the core of both the Bush and Obama administrations' efforts in Iraq and

Afghanistan to its desired endpoint: the boy has been swayed through the positive interaction with a militaristic arm of the American government. We do not see a future terrorist, but rather a future ally. Iron Man's intervention (unsanctioned though it may be) creates an image of the United States as powerful, just, and righteous in its violence.

Ultimately, these three fantasies are all products of the hybrid man/machine nature of Iron Man. The technology allows the user to correctly identify and precisely strike against targets with zero civilian casualties, while the pilot provides the drive and desire for vengeance that utilizes the suit for a just purpose. The suit itself is also hybrid in nature. The titanium plating, shields, and filtration systems create a safe environment for the user—the suit is a piece of armor against a dangerous world. At the same time, the propulsion blasters, missiles, and advanced targeting systems make the suit a deadly weapon against Stark's foes. The weapon/armor dynamic is crucial to understanding the growing appeal of the drone in recent years. While the Bush Administration was focused on action and vengeance as means to safety, the Obama Administration's focus has been on balancing this action with a reduction in casualties both civilian and military. Thus the Iron Man suit is the fantasy of the Obama Administration's engagement with global terrorism in the same way that Batman was the fantasy of the Bush Administration after 9/11. The balance between action and safety is here represented by Stark's ingenuity, creativity, and technical wizardry. Iron Man is military automation personified.

The advantages of a hybrid structure, as opposed to the rigid action/vengeance structure we see with Batman, is that the hybrid structure is malleable and adaptable. Nowhere is this more evident than in the way Stark iterates upon and names his Iron Man suits. Each suit is specifically designed to combat a flaw in a previous iteration, whether

that flaw is one of offense, defense, flight, or power. At the same time, each suit is seen as a direct improve over the last: Mark 1 (MK1) becomes MK2, which becomes MK3, et cetera. This structural design allows for us to imagine a “final” iteration somewhere in the future while at the same time presenting the idea that combating evil is an ongoing and iterative process. While each Iron Man film follows the same villain/hidden villain structure I chronicled in the Batman trilogy, the way Stark deals with the “disembodied” villain is always through adaptation and technological advancement. In these portrayals, we can understand the fantasy of the Obama Administration’s War on Terror is one in which superior minds, not superior actions, win the day.

Beyond the simple mapping of Batman or the Iron Man armor to the Bush and Obama Administrations, I would also like to consider the ways in which these films chart shifts in masculinity during the War on Terror. The same rhetorical shifts I chart for the nation after 9/11: the adoption of concepts of resilience, perseverance, or revenge, take root in social concepts of masculinity. For Iron Man, the importance of hybridity would at first seem to be a large and positive step forward for conceptions of masculinity. Connell writes that “[h]egemony... is a historically mobile relation,” (77) referencing his belief that while mass culture may believe masculinity to be a rigid and easily-definable concept, the reality is the hegemonic masculinity adapts to threats and challenges by reforming itself invisibly. Certainly, a suit of armor—a perfected extension of the male body—which adapts to challenges would seem a perfect vehicle for illuminating the shifting nature of hegemonic masculinity; however, I do not believe that in these post-9/11 presentations of masculinity we see any movement toward a deconstruction of the hegemony in favor of a concept like Connell’s “masculinities.”

Instead, in the films I examine here and throughout this dissertation, I see rising from damaged and broken states a “resilient,” “indomitable,” and “vengeful” masculinity that is still hegemonic. After 9/11, the gendered social structure changed, and hegemonic notions of what it means to be a man changed with it. The shifts I chart in these films reflect not an open and plural set of masculinities, but a new norm of manhood in the early 21st century. The War on Terror in which characters like Iron Man emerge is still exclusionary to women—the films¹¹ reflect this—and it is still exclusionary to minority masculinities. The conflict itself is constructed across ethnic (white versus Arab) and cultural (The West versus Islam) lines so that black, Hispanic, or gay voices are silenced along with women. The trauma and brokenness that Bruce or Tony must overcome is still limited to powerful, white, heterosexual men, and perseverance in the face of struggle—something women and minorities understand best of all—is similarly limited to hegemonic identities. Thus the Iron Man armor, hybrid though it may be, fulfills the fantasies of a hegemonic masculinity: it is all-knowing, all-seeing, and all-powerful in its ability to combat this new threat.

In *Iron Man*, after the events in the cave and the events at the village, Tony discovers that the moves made by the Ten Rings organization were all set up by his mentor and business partner Obadiah Stane (Jeff Bridges) as a way to get Stark out of the picture. Stane had been selling weapons and equipment to the terrorists in a war profiteering scheme in which Stark Enterprises (which Stane runs while Stark invents cool stuff in the background) would supply both sides of the battle. Stane becomes the template for the disembodied villain in the Iron Man films: a

¹¹ The only female character Tony does not have sex with and then dump, Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow), functions as a mother-girlfriend hybrid shrew for Stark to comedically ignore as he goes on to do whatever he wants.

businessman/capitalist/inventor who uses terrorism as a means to gain wealth and power. Here we see what I call the “Home-Front Villain.” The Home-Front Villain becomes a trope following the Administration shift, as Americans became familiar with words like “Halliburton.” Regardless of the logistics of the scandal, Americans now had a vision of a domestic source of foreign terrorism: a white CEO in a nice suit. The Home-Front Villain is defined by his ability to utilize foreign terror agents as a means to disguise his own nefarious dealings—frequently using actual acts of terrorism as cover for financial misdeeds. These villains are “disembodied” in that they work through proxy terror cells, shielding their true identities from the heroes. As one of the first Home-Front Villains, Stane is also the perfect template. His misdeeds are invisible even to the audience until the moment he strikes at Stark midway through the film. The climax of *Iron Man* is not a battle against the 10 Rings, as we might have imagined from the outset, but a battle for technological supremacy between Stark and his male role-model and father figure, Stane. After stealing Stark’s heart/powercell, Stane inserts it into an older model of the Iron Man armor. Stark utilizes his newest invention (an even more powerful powercell) in a newer armor model. While Stane’s model is older, it also differs from Stark’s in that it is designed more aggressively and offensively than Tony’s. The suit is bigger and bulkier and has more ordinance than the sleek and balanced suit Stark wears.

The difference in silhouettes synergizes with the difference in philosophies: Stane sees the suit as a weapon to destroy while Stark envisions the suit as a line of defense against enemies. As the two battle, Tony’s suit fails him. Slowly, he loses functionality; bit-by-bit, the suit falls apart. Realizing he does not stand a chance against Stane’s onslaught, Tony decides to overload the Arc Reactor powering his facility—the same Arc

technology that powers his suit. Stark designed the Arc Reactor as a technology of peace: something that could end the world's dependence on energy and with it the need for conflict over oil territory. Just before Stark fries the reactor, Stane taunts him: "You finally outdid yourself, Tony. You made your father proud." Certainly, he is referencing Howard Stark, Tony's father. And yet, Stane's love of this new weapon combined with his role as father figure for a bulk of Stark's life add an Oedipal tinge to Tony's actions. After the building explodes, killing Stane, Tony lies on the ground with his armor in shambles. The only thing that still functions is the Arc Reactor—the one element of the suit not built for either war or defense. Rather, the Arc Reactor represents Tony's hope for a future where technology affords the privilege of *inaction*. In order to work toward this peace, Stark must first remove his connections to war and war profiteering—an action that becomes literalized when he kills Stane and reclaims the Stark mantle for himself.

In the subsequent two films, Stark engages with male antagonists in similar battles of wills and minds. *Iron Man 2*'s Ivan Vanko (Mickey Rourke) and Justin Hammer (Sam Rockwell) force Tony to continue to innovate technologically, while *Iron Man 3*'s Aldrich Killian (Guy Pearce) forces him to confront his own trauma and fragility as Stark becomes increasingly machine-like. In many ways, *Iron Man 2*'s conflict and antagonists are subpar compared to the patriarchal threat of Stane in *Iron Man*. *Iron Man 3* is a different beast than *Iron Man 2* in that the antagonists feel both dangerous and immediate. However, the early portions of the film revolve around Tony's ignorance to the larger villainous plot around him in favor of further developing his hybrid tech-body. His adaptation in this film is a full fusion between his body and the suit as he injects

himself with nanites which he can use to summon and control the suit remotely using just his body's motion. Through the trilogy, the suit transitions from a piece of technological armor (*Iron Man*), to a symbiotic exoskeleton (*Iron Man 2*) to an internalized part of Tony's body (*Iron Man 3*). At the same time, the suit undergoes numerous adaptations,¹² each one designed to combat a specific threat or fix a deficiency in the previous model. *Iron Man 3* takes place chronologically after the Marvel film *The Avengers* (2012), and the deficiency Tony is struggling with here is space and time. Essentially, Stark's post-invasion anxiety¹³ revolves around the concept of safety and his inability, as just one man, to be anywhere at any time to combat threats. Thus, Tony spends his time obsessively toiling away in his workshop, building numerous versions of the Iron Man armor each designed for specific purposes. Each of these suits is linked to Stark through his JARVIS (voiced by Paul Bettany) Artificial Intelligence system. Tony's fantasy is to transition away from the "soldier in armor" identity of Iron Man into the "drone operator overseeing multiple missions from the safety of home" identity. While he becomes more connected to his suits than ever before (through the internal nanites, which house the Iron Man technology in his blood), *Iron Man 3* is the film with the least amount of screen time for Iron Man.

Instead of zipping around the skies and blowing up tanks, Tony spends the majority of the film playing detective and digging through his past sins. Tony's past is a crucial element of *Iron Man 3*— for as much as *Iron Man 2* promised to engage with a

¹² Each new suit goes by a "Mark" designation, so the first suit is MK1 and the 20th suit is MK20. In *Iron Man 3*, Stark is developing MK42

¹³ The film presents Stark as suffering from severe panic attacks and goes as far as to insinuate that he is suffering from PTSD. I find these portrayals to be done poorly and for plot and comedic effect—there is little effort put forth toward developing Tony's stress and struggle to re-acclimate to the post-invasion world with depth and care. By the end of the film, he seems "cured" for no reason.

“sins of the father” story arc and failed, the final film in the trilogy set as its unifying principle the idea that Tony’s brash arrogance before becoming Iron Man is the root cause for his struggles. The film opens with a voice-over narrative from Tony, struggling to find the words to describe his struggles with identity and power, and ultimately deciding he needs to start his story over and “track this from the beginning.” The film then re-opens in 1999, at a technology conference in Bern, Switzerland, where a drunk and exuberant Tony blows off a young scientist named Aldrich Killian (Guy Pearce) and beds a young botanist named Maya Hansen (Rebecca Hall). In the morning, before ditching Maya in bed, Tony solves an equation that had been plaguing her research. While the joke appears to be that Tony is a bad-boy alpha genius who can solve in seconds equations that have flummoxed other brilliant minds for years, the setup is actually much darker. Killian, left waiting on the roof of the hotel, resolves to see his idea for a regenerating/enhancing serum to completion. When he returns 12 years later, he is completely physically transformed from a toothy social outcast into a suave and handsome CEO, a fact that everyone notices but no one questions. Tony views his life as a split between his pre-Iron Man self and his post-Iron Man self. He ignores Killian as the villain amasses power, wealth, and secret government contracts, but finally takes an interest when Killian comes for Tony’s most prized object: Pepper.

Tony’s focus on Killian shifts after a terror attack on the Chinese Theatre in Hollywood by the notorious terrorist The Mandarin¹⁴ (Ben Kingsley) injures Happy. The Mandarin is the film’s “traditional” villain, while Killian is the film’s “disembodied” and

¹⁴ The Mandarin moves beyond a simple “nod to” Osama bin Laden and toward an outright rip-off. He is a charismatic figure who anti-West ideology pervades his speeches and recruiting videos. He attempts to engage with the West on a media battlefield, working to sow seeds of doubt into the minds of citizens while simultaneously luring in new recruits with savvy and slick videos following each “terror attack.”

“Home Front” villain. In a rather self-aware move, *Iron Man 3* literalizes the fabricated nature of the “traditional” villain— The Mandarin is nothing more than a character played by an actor using psychological profiles dreamed up by Killian’s think tank. Killian uses The Mandarin as a shield for his shady dealings, and The Mandarin’s “terror attacks” are attempts to cover up experiments gone disastrously wrong (people blow up). The interplay between the villains represents a final push of the Home Front villain and a plea for America to look inward for the source of its never-ending war on Terror. Killian and The Mandarin represent a rejection of the “over there” notion of terrorism, in that the “threat” of The Mandarin is nothing more than an after-the-fact cover-up for Killian’s experiments.

Both villains, however, also force a call for Tony to look inward to understand the cyclical nature of his actions. Tony snubs Killian in 1999, pushing him to the edge of suicide. Killian, spurned but inspired by Tony’s arrogance, creates his think tank and begins experimenting with his super-soldier serum. Realizing that the super-soldier serum causes massive explosions that will cause authorities to investigate his illegal experiments, Killian creates The Mandarin as a way to shift blame to a terrorist— a narrative he knows Americans are programmed to believe. Killian launches an attack on Tony (under the guise of The Mandarin), destroying Stark’s mansion, severely damaging the suit, and igniting a PTSD episode so extreme Tony ends up in Tennessee with broken armor. From an outsider’s perspective, we have a terror attack by a foreign agent against Tony’s home, the disappearance of the old and arrogant Tony, and the reemergence of a new and humbled Stark. The experience is the same for audience as well, as there is no dramatic irony until Tony uncovers the mystery of The Mandarin himself. The climactic

battle between Tony and Killian begins with no Iron Man. Stark is disarmed and out of his (titanium) shell. His physical exposure is a call to the rawness of his psychic experience throughout this movie. The process of examining himself and the role he played in creating this mess has left Tony bare.

At the climax of the film, Tony's fantasy of himself as drone commander is revealed— his army of dozens of Iron Man suits, all empty shells operated by his voice commands and JARVIS' artificial intelligence arrive and take down Killian's enhanced soldiers. Following Killian's defeat, Tony makes the "romantic" choice to destroy all of his suits of armor in order to prove to Pepper¹⁵ that he is renouncing his obsession with protecting the world from itself. There are several levels of commentary here, both apparent and subconscious. Tony's obsession with "put[ting] a suit of armor around the world¹⁶" and his belief that drone infantry is the way to do so are direct reflections of the Obama Administration's focus on drones and drone strikes as a method for conducting warfare with fewer American casualties. Similarly, the film works to make a point about the root of the evil we are fighting resting in our own soil— a more sincere reflection of Obama's nuanced humanism follow a black-and-white administration. Tony's decision to expose himself and destroy his suits, however, is both where the analogies fall flat and where they are most biting. Outside the context of this film, we know that Tony's next move is to work on the creation of an Artificial Intelligence, which becomes the supervillain Ultron.¹⁷ While *Iron Man 3* presents a solid character arc for Tony: he learns that he does not need the suit, that the armor is a dangerous weapon, that no man should

¹⁵ Pepper's "Christmas gift" from her billionaire boyfriend is the promise that he will stop building million-dollar death machines

¹⁶ Tony's full quote, from *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (the film that succeeded *Iron Man 3* is: "I tried to create a suit of armor around the world...but I created something terrible."

¹⁷ This is the plot of *Avengers: Age of Ultron*

have that much power. However, his appearance in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* proves he has not really learned anything about power— instead, he’s shifted his focus on control and consolidation of power away from physical suits and toward cyber warfare.

This contradiction between Tony’s actions exposes the problem inherent in the role of superhero films after 9/11: when violence is our only answer to trauma, struggle, and healing, it forces us into a never-ending loop of carnage, destruction, and death. From the beginning, these films have told stories about broken and damaged men who rise up from their trauma and acquire power through vengeance and violence. This model for power requires a constant stream of enemy Others against which we can pit our heroes. When Tony attempts to break that mold by rejecting violence, he is forced back into masculine violence because his pacifist heroism ends up creating the very villains he must destroy. Tony cannot heal his trauma— his need for safety and protection— through peaceful measures; each attempt to manipulate and work against the violence inherent in the world only results in a greater need for violent solutions. He is stuck in a situation that we both recognize as bad and lack the imagination to rectify— the story of both the Bush and Obama administrations during the War on Terror.

Conclusion: Strength through Struggle

These limited options persist throughout both the Bush and Obama administrations, and only recently appear to be cracking. 2016’s *Captain America: Civil War*, released in the last few months of Obama’s presidency, is the first superhero film to present us with a scenario in which violence is not the answer (and is ultimately **the problem**), and 2017’s

*Spider-Man Homecoming*¹⁸ is the first solo superhero film to forego an origin story (an especially notable event given how crucial Spider-Man's origin story is to his character). Tony's role in both films¹⁹ situates him as a seasoned and grizzled veteran superhero, but also as a man (and an ideology) on the way out. *Civil War* sets up three ideological shifts that I find interesting moving forward. First, it presents the quest for violent revenge as the problem. Zemo's (Daniel Brühl) villainy in the film has little to do with fighting the Avengers (he has no superpowers, after all), and everything to do with triggering a series of vengeful outbursts from the individual members against each other. Rather than remedy trauma, the violence in the film exacerbates it. Second, it sets up a scenario where violence is not the cure for trauma. The main villain in the movie, Zemo, achieves his goal of vengeance without resorting to violence against the Avengers, and he wins. Finally, it shows us that we can opt out of violence and vengeance in order to heal our trauma, as Black Panther (Chadwick Boseman) does when he refuses to enact vengeance on Zemo, likening revenge to poison.

Both Bruce Wayne and Tony Stark experience extreme trauma on the way to their rise into superhero-dom. What I find interesting about their stories is the desire by both Nolan and Favreau to link the trauma to the power. In Batman's case, trauma presents him with drive necessary to discipline his mind and body in order to overcome fear. For Iron Man, the trauma shakes him from his idyllic life and awakens him to the necessity of action. These films, emerging out of an America struggling to rebuild its sense of identity after 9/11, present trauma as a prerequisite to strength—thus crafting a world in which

¹⁸ This version of Spider-Man first appears as an extra character in the aforementioned *Captain America: Civil War*

¹⁹ although technically a "Captain America" film, the civil war referenced in the subtitle is an ideological struggle between Tony and his faction and Captain America and his faction; Tony recruits Spider-Man in *Civil War* and is the mentor and benefactor for Peter Parker in his solo movie

the attacks were merely Part One of an ascension. At the same time, these films fixate on the need to negotiate damaged masculinities resulting from that same trauma. Both men combat both foreign forces and father figures in their attempt to rebuild themselves post-trauma. This rebuilt masculinity, however, remains conservative and hegemonic in its mythology—the films present violence as only method available for masculine power and healing. Thus, just as Bruce Wayne and Tony Stark find themselves forever changed by their struggles, so was the mythos of masculinity rebooted to reflect a strength of character in surviving trauma.

Chapter 3: We Have to Go Back!

Introduction

During a presidential campaign rally on August 3, 2016, Donald Trump suggested he could have prevented the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. While wild, the claim hardly made news both because Trump's campaign was an exercise in saying wild and terrible things and because this sentiment was not new. In an interview with Time magazine in 2015, Trump made a similar claim: "I believe that If I were running things, I doubt that those people would have been in the country," (Santucci et al) 'those people' being the terrorist hijackers. This assertion is textbook Trump: awash in narcissistic fantasy of his own masculine power; however, I find it striking that Trump's words stray so far into fantasy that they rely on time travel. He is not interested in talking about 9/11, thinking about how to heal from the trauma of 9/11, or discussing what we learned from 9/11, instead, he wants to *erase* 9/11.

Erasure is a complex concept for a party that has spent so much effort to keep 9/11 alive through political discourse, and it runs contradictory to how previous presidents have imagined national tragedies and war. George W. Bush's famous 2003 "Mission Accomplished" speech and photo-op became notorious for its poor timing, but it was rooted in ideas of closure-- he imagined that the Iraq War, and by proxy the trauma of 9/11 that the Iraq War was meant to heal, was over. In a previous chapter, I argued that 9/11 becomes a cultural wound, and that representations of 9/11 in the following years are attempts to find a narrative that can heal and close the wound. "Mission Accomplished" was Bush's attempt to do just that-- a punctuation mark on a sad sentence. Although not totally like his son, president George H.W. Bush also conceived of the need for closure following a tragedy. In this case, the tragedy was the Vietnam War, and the closure was Bush Sr.'s Gulf War victory. In a 1991 speech, Bush concluded

his remarks on the Gulf War by remarking that “by God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.” (Bush) Here, Bush Sr. looks to reframe the trauma of the Vietnam War-- a trauma of failed national ideology and indestructible masculine fantasy about the military body-- as a “syndrome” or a brief illness for which the Gulf War was a booster shot. Where Bush Jr. sought to craft a narrative of closure, Bush Sr. sought to imagine his actions as part of a healing process. Healing and closure both look to place a trauma in the past, and in doing so they concretize the trauma. Trump’s words, his desire for erasure, his fantasy that he can make it as if 9/11 never happened, strike me as dangerous for that very reason: they seek to hide the wound rather than acknowledge it.

Trump’s time-travel desires have a media analogue. Two films from this decade, 2011’s *Source Code* and 2014’s *Edge of Tomorrow* deal in the same sort of fantasy time-travel scenarios where wounds-- even death-- can be erased. These “time-loop” films, as I will call them (more on the distinction between time travel and time loop films later) follow soldiers who gain fantastical abilities to travel into the recent past in order to make small changes and influence the outcome of events: a war against aliens in *Edge of Tomorrow* and a terrorist attack in *Source Code*. Unfortunately for the protagonists, their time traveling powers come at a cost: each man must die before he can travel back again. Thankfully, by the conclusion, each man has mastered the time loop scenario with such skill that he is able to not only achieve his immediate goal (defeat the aliens, stop the terrorist before he can bomb again), but he also finds a way to erase the trauma itself. Not only are the aliens defeated, but our hero never had to fight against or die to the aliens in the first place; not only is the terrorist captured, but the initial attack never happened. In short, through time travel, the heroes of these two films discover a method to *erase* their

trauma. These erasures encompass both large-scale and personal traumas: our hero in *Source Code* creates an alternate reality where he lives outside the source code and manages to save the city of Chicago from two massive terrorist attacks; the protagonist of *Edge of Tomorrow* rewinds time far back enough that he never loses his privileged officer status nor has to fight against the alien horde, and on top of that, he defeats the aliens before they can even launch the offensive that wipes out France.

The conflation between national or cultural traumas such as large-scale terrorist attacks and personal traumas the soldiers experience is an important point I would like to consider. While my close readings of these films will examine the emotional and psychological trauma the protagonist soldiers experience, I will extrapolate these representations in media outward to culture itself and consider the rising anxiety of the American public as it faces an increasingly large influx of veterans with PTSD. In short, I'm interested in these films as cultural narratives that express desires for healing, closure, and, yes, erasure with regards to trauma. Before I advance to the films themselves, I would like to situate the arguments I will be making within contemporary concerns regarding disability-- specifically the notion of the supercrip, or the disabled person who possesses extraordinary powers which allow him to "overcome" his disability-- and the role of the disabled veteran in igniting American anxieties about trauma and the mind. These grounds will prove crucial to framing my argument's purpose. I am not simply critiquing films; rather, I am examining the *narratives* about trauma that these films expose.

So what is a "supercrip" narrative? Joseph Shapiro highlights the focus on an "inspirational disabled person" (quoted in Schalk 16) in media as the key element. More

specifically, a supercrip narrative is one in which a disabled person learns to overcome their disability and live a “normal” or even exceptional life despite their disability. These narratives frequently focus on work ethic fantasies, in which the disabled person emerges victorious through hard work in other areas of their life. Sami Schalk writes that

“these representations rely on concepts of overcoming, heroism, inspiration, and the extraordinary [...] these representations focus on individual attitude, work, and perseverance rather than on social barriers, making it seem as if all effects of disability can be erased if one merely works hard enough.” (73)

By shifting the focus away from issues of access of social barriers and onto the individual’s work ethic, supercrip narratives reveal their audience and purpose. The narrative is not for disabled people, but for able-bodied people; it is not designed to further understanding of the struggles disabled people face, but to shift blame away from an ableist society that produces these structures of inequality and onto the individual, whose laziness is to blame for their failure to overcome.

Schalk goes on to create a modified version of Amit Kama’s typology of supercrip narratives, with these ascending (descending?) levels based on how exaggerated the “super” portion of the supercrip becomes. Her first level is the “regular” supercrip narrative, which Kama defines one in which the person with a disability gains attention for “mundane accomplishments, which because of their impairment are considered exceptionally successful.” (454) We see these narratives in news stories about an autistic boy who hits a 3-pointer in a high school basketball game or a girl with

Down's syndrome who becomes prom queen. These types of narratives, Schalk emphasizes,

“both normalize and [Other] people with disabilities because although the representation shows a person with a disability doing something ‘just like everyone else,’ the creation of the representation is premised upon the ableist assumption that people with disabilities do not do these things and are thus not just like everyone else.” (79)

Her second tier of supercrip narratives are those which glorify actions. Here, I would imagine a news story in which a wounded veteran with no legs runs a marathon. Schalk asks us to picture Christopher Reeves. For her, this tier of supercrip narratives are defined by the ways in which they suppress privilege. Reeves becomes an instructive example because media representations of his struggles with disability ignore his class, racial, and gendered privileges in an effort to focus only on his bravery in trying to relearn how to walk. Here, Susan Wendell illustrates the danger of this type of representation when she argues that it “may reduce the ‘Otherness’ of a few people with disabilities, but because it creates an ideal that most people with disabilities cannot meet, it *increases* the ‘Otherness’ of the majority of people with disabilities.” (64) We learn to respect Reeves and his struggle without actually understanding anything about the struggles of the majority of people with similar ailments. His sanitized image becomes a stand-in for those millions of Americans with disabilities.

Schalk's final tier of supercrip narratives is the most interesting for this chapter. The third tier is Schalk's own creation, and adds a further level onto Kama's original: the

superpowered supercrip narrative. This level is striking for several reasons: first, this representation strays completely outside of reality. While tier one and tier two were at least partially based in a person's lived experience, tier three occurs only in fiction. Second, and most striking, is the way in which this type of supercrip representation attempts to erase disability completely from the individual. Quoting Jose Alaniz, Schalk writes that in Marvel comics for example, superpowers

“‘overcompensate’ for a perceived physical defect, difference, or outright disability. Often, the super-power will *erase* the disability, banishing it to the realm of the invisible, replacing it with raw power and heroic acts of derring-do in a hyper-masculine fashion.” (81)

Here, I would imagine a fictional character like Professor Charles Xavier from Marvel's X-Men comics and films. Professor X is both disabled and superpowered: he is paralyzed from the waist down and he has incredible telepathic and mind-control powers. The mind-body split here is fascinating, as Xavier's gifts and disability work along competing spectrums-- at times, he finds his incredible mind trapped within a malfunctioning body. More often, however, his disability is an afterthought in the face of his exceptional mutation. Thus, the disability becomes a plot device, useful only when the writers need to provide a counterpoint to his overwhelming abilities.

In this chapter, I will look at Schalk's third tier of supercrip narrative as it plays out in both *Source Code* and *Edge of Tomorrow*. In both these films, the disabilities the men face-- being psychologically traumatized by death and the compelled return to the scene of their deaths-- are erased by the presence of their incredible time-reversing

powers. To add an additional layer to this representation, the time travel superpowers these men possess are directly connected to their trauma. Their pain and suffering as a result of their death and the compelled return to the scene of their death becomes subordinated to the spectacle of their newfound powers. Audiences are encouraged to look past the psychological torture these men must be experiencing and instead enjoy watching them accumulate additional power by using their time travel abilities to assist them in their missions. This is the erasure Alaniz and Schalk reference: the disability becomes simply a catalyst for the accumulation of power, strength, or mastery. In the case of these films, discipline and mastery are gained through repeated returns to the same scenario, and function as stepping stools to power.

Finally, before I can begin my analysis of these films, I must first articulate their cultural significance in relation to the disabled veteran. The primary²⁰ disability experienced by the heroes of *Source Code* and *Edge of Tomorrow* is not physical, but mental. These traumatic experiences, I argue, mirror the anxieties of Americans in recent years, as the “problem” of the disabled veteran rears its head following the decade-plus War on Terror. The use of the term “problem” in this chapter refers specifically to the conundrum America faces: how to negotiate the need for more soldiers with the near-certainty that many of those soldiers will come back dead or disabled and in need of permanent care? In his book *Paying With Their Bodies: American War and the Problem of the Disabled Veteran*, John M. Kinder details “how disabled vets are constructed as problems within American culture-- problems to be solved, problems to be exposed, and

²⁰ Since these are action movies, the heroes become bumped, bruised, and bloodied at various times throughout. As is the case in many action movies, however, something as serious as being shot is frequently treated as a paper cut. When I define the “primary” disability here, I am referencing the trauma that drives the narrative, the trauma that forces each man to act in order to resolve his pain.

problems to be ignored.” (8) Furthermore, he reflects on the contradictory treatment of returning veterans: “While disabled vets continued [after World War I] to be singled out for public praise, many in the United States began to associate war-related disability with a variety of social ills: pathological dependency, compromised masculinity, and the crippling legacies of foreign intervention.” (3-4) Here, the problem arises from the social ills associated with returning disabled veterans and the inextricable certainty of bodily and psychological damage during war. America will always need new soldiers, so the anxiety arises from balancing that need with the near-certainty of injury or death. For Kinder, the problem of the disabled veteran is certainly not new, yet neither is the contemporary reaction to the massive influx of physically and emotionally disabled young men and women into American society. While Kinder is primarily interested in the shift in public attitudes toward disabled veterans after World War I, he does focus on-- and even begins his book with-- the War on Terror. Kinder tells the tale of Christian Bagge, a wounded veteran, who, in the second-tier supercrip archetype, goes jogging with President George W. Bush despite having lost both his legs in combat. The role of these supercrip representations, Kinder argues, is to assuage growing public anxieties about the nature of loss and combat. While he stressed that war *is* trauma, Kinder acknowledges that the role of the inspirational disabled veteran in public is to lessen that blunt reality:

“[Wounded service members] have been greeted by a steady stream of magazine articles, Internet videos, public pronouncements, and television newscasts dedicated to

honoring their injuries and assuaging Americans' fears
about the bodily toll of military intervention overseas.” (3)

The “problem” of the disabled veteran is multivalent: there is the problem of what to do with them, how to treat them, and what to expect from them when they return home; there is the problem of making them visible to increase military enrollment or reinforce nationalist narratives of heroism and patriotism, while also making them invisible to hide the horror of war from an increasingly anxious public; finally, there is the problem of what to do with them once the war is over. Kinder is clear that he seeks to dismantle common “metaphors of ‘healing’ and ‘closure’ to describe war’s immediate aftermath,” because “some bodies never heal; some wounds never close.” (12)

While Kinder primarily²¹ reads history, advertisements, and new media to make his arguments, I will look inward, toward the sorts of stories our representations and fantasies tell us. The use of the time-loop structure to tell a story of a traumatized veteran is, I argue, relevant in the way it mimics experiences of post-traumatic stress. In my next section, I will use Cathy Caruth’s work on trauma and fiction-- *Unclaimed Experience*-- as a method for understanding why a film about repetition, compulsion, and mastery aligns with anxieties about PTSD and returning veterans. Ultimately, I hope to articulate the dangers of erasure fantasies, whether they be propagated by presidential candidates, news media, or science fiction films. PTSD is difficult to understand because it so stubbornly resists our narratives about trauma-- that it heals and that it ends. When forced to confront the notion of a never-ending trauma, we must reject the desire for closure or erasure and instead focus on changing our world to remove the barriers in place that

²¹ For example, in his final chapter, he conducts a brilliant, albeit brief, reading of James Cameron’s 2009 film *Avatar*.

prevent victims of trauma and disability from receiving assistance. Unfortunately, by trafficking in supercrip fantasies, the films I examine here only reinforce the fantasy of traumatic erasure.

The Unclaimed Experience

During my discussion of Caruth, I would like to keep three progressing ideas at the forefront:

1. Freud's observations in "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through" and "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" that victims of trauma frequently find themselves compelled to return to the scene of their trauma in dreams and nightmares. Freud believes this forced return is the subconscious' way of understanding and remembering the events, which are lost during the traumatic experience itself.
2. Caruth's work pushes Freud's outside of the embodied experience of the trauma survivor and into society at large. Instead of examining how individuals respond to trauma, she observes the compelled return in literature and history.
3. My chapter looks at two films as a way to understand how American mass culture responds to both the trauma of 9/11 and the "problem" of the disabled veteran. The time loop fantasy is a perfect metaphor for PTSD because the protagonist, like the trauma survivor, is compelled to return to the scene of his death until he can master it.

As Caruth deals extensively with Freud, we must begin there as well. His contribution, in my mind, is in the way his work allows us to see narrative repetitions as the manifestation

of some larger “social unconscious” that works through its anxiety in literature, art, or film.

Freud’s work in “Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through” and “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” focuses on the drive exhibited in his patients away from a pleasure-seeking behavior and toward what he describes as a “death-seeking” behavior. As with most of his work, these behaviors are seen in his observations of a very rigid social caste of wealthy white clients. Their relevance to my chapter only exists in the way they reinforce the behaviors Freud observes in “neurotic” veterans of World War I. In these men, Freud finds an irresistible compulsion to return to scenes of particularly gruesome trauma-- terrifying battles, macabre gore in the aftermath, et cetera. He identifies this compulsion as existing outside the (conscious) mind-- in other words, the men do not wish to return to the scene of trauma, but cannot seem to resist. Searching for a rationale, Freud hypothesizes that the subconscious mind returns to these scenes in dreams and fantasies in order to properly “experience” or “remember” them. The mind, he argues, never fully experiences extreme trauma-- the sensory overload combined with the existential threat short-circuits the brain. Caruth describes Freud’s observations:

“[When trauma] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor ... so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not

known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor
later on” (4)

Thus, the compelled return is the mind’s attempt to remember-- or better yet, craft a narrative about-- the trauma. I stress the concept of narrative because this is where Caruth’s work comes in. For Caruth, “The return of the traumatic experience in the dream is not the signal of the direct experience but, rather, of the attempt to overcome the fact that it was not direct, to attempt to master what was never fully grasped in the first place” (62) What we end up with is a fantasy or nightmare which comes to stand in for memory-- the “remembering” Freud describes is simply an act of crafting a story that fits.

The search for the right story, however, is where the “repeating” and “working through” come in. Caruth fixates on these moments between the event and the final (if it ever comes) construction of a narrative about the event that satisfies the mind:

“Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. The repetitions of the traumatic event—which remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight—thus suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known, and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and

incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this
repetitive seeing” (91-92)

In this quote, Caruth uses the term “belatedness,” but she more often describes this interim period as “latency.” Latency is that crucial period during which the events of the traumatic experience are not available (through a memory) to the subject. During this period, the subject must return, again and again, to the moment of trauma (through dreams, fantasies, or waking nightmares) in order to process and understand it. What is crucial to understand, however, is that there is no way to “re-experience” that moment. The brain cannot time travel. If new information is gleaned, we must understand that it is crafted by the mind in order to fill in blanks. Because of this, I conceive of Caruth’s latency period as one of storytelling and crafting.

While Caruth and Freud focus on smaller-scale histories, I would like to expand the concept of latency outward to mass culture and the narratives it constructs. In an earlier chapter, I constructed a representation of 9/11 as a “cultural wound” -- a traumatic experience shared by members of society. In the aftermath of 9/11, many attempts were made to “understand” the events in news media, politics, art, and popular culture. A cultural wound requires a cultural narrative, before which we are stuck in a period of latency. Rather than being narratives which “heal” or offer “closure” to 9/11, I believe *Source Code* and *Edge of Tomorrow* are narratives about erasure. In each case, the event in question (the terrorist bombing of a train, the alien invasion) is modified through continued return until an “acceptable” narrative is realized in the end. What these films do differently, however, is that the final scenario is not memory at all; rather, these films present fantasy conclusions in which the subject erases the trauma completely. These

films ultimately present a supercrip narrative about PTSD and trauma recovery. By placing the power to erase their own trauma-- and thus remove the need to return to the scene of the trauma-- these films place the burden of healing on the trauma victims themselves. Disability, in the world of these films, is merely the first step in an ascension toward power. The flaws they presume to expose are not those of a society unwilling to provide support for traumatized individuals, but in lazy trauma victims who refuse to utilize their powers to stop the events in question from ever having happened.

Compelled Return

Both *Source Code* (2011) and *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014) feature soldiers who become stuck in a time loop²². That these men are soldiers is important to my reading, as is the

²²I need to distinguish the time-loop from time travel. Time-loop films certainly feature a character traveling through time differently than the linear journey through history we all experience, and as such can be classified as “time travel” films. However, time travel films typically involve a jump to a moment in the past or future, followed by a linear narrative in which the protagonist attempts to fix a problem, right a wrong, or simply find his or her way back home. The ensuing linear journey through time following the jump in time is exactly what is missing from time-loop films, and why I seek to distinguish them from a traditional time travel film. In the time-loop film, the protagonist becomes stuck in a moment in time-- a day, a week, a few hours-- that he or she consistently repeats until the problem is solved. Typically, the nature of the problem is the great mystery of the film, and much of the narrative revolves around the protagonist discovering what must be fixed. The most famous example of a time-loop film is 1993’s *Groundhog Day*, a lighthearted comedy in which scumbag weatherman Phil (Bill Murray) must learn to stop being a jerk so he can escape the never-ending loop and return to his normal-- although now less scumbag-y-- life. *Groundhog Day* highlights many of the key elements of the time-loop film, but most key for this chapter is the reform narrative. A time-loop film frequently structures itself around discipline and mastery. The protagonist must learn to assess the problems he or she encounters with every repeat of the loop in order to condition his or her responses in a way that allows him or her to progress further into the scenario. In *Groundhog Day*, our protagonist simply learns to be nice to other people; in other films, the protagonist might need to gather information, train their body or mind, or overcome impossible odds. Thus, while the time travel in a time travel film serves as a

function of the time loop, but both protagonists also find themselves stuck outside of time in the same way: they die. Both deaths are traumatic, although *Edge of Tomorrow* spends the first half-hour in a slow-burn build to Cage's (Tom Cruise) agonizing death at the hands of an alien invader while *Source Code* more quickly introduces us to the flash of a moment in which Colter Stevens (Jake Gyllenhaal) dies during a terrorist attack. Director Doug Liman (*Edge of Tomorrow*) utilizes the slower pacing of his introduction in order to develop Cage's character: he's a smug coward who works in Public Relations for the U.S. Military. His attempts to evade his duty, fronted by Cruise's trademark toothy arrogant grin, frame his death as a comeuppance-- a price to be paid for his sins. While the build to his death is slow, the actual death scene is hectic, frenetic, and disorientingly quick. Cage, having watched his squadmates die, finds himself cornered by the alien "mimic." In a last effort (we might even categorize this as a heroic death), he detonates an explosive charge in the alien's face, killing both himself and the monster in a sudden explosion. The camera slows down as we watch Cage's face melt-- a last drop of sadistic joy for the audience-- and then quickly snaps the audience back to 24 hours earlier as Cage wakes up alive and with knowledge of the future.

Source Code operates under slightly different parameters. Here, Stevens does not just find himself in a past time, but in a different body as well. He inhabits two bodies for a majority of the film²³: his "real" body, where he finds himself stuck in a small, dark,

narrative device to place a character in a new or convenient location, the time travel in a time-loop film functions as a scenario the protagonist learns to master and overcome.

²³I will write more on the gruesome disabled body reveal at the end of the film later.

Stevens works through the two bodies I outline above, but in reality is simply a vegetative husk hooked up to a virtual reality machine in a nondescript military base. A secondary plot point in the film is him discovering that he was reported Killed in Action.

and increasingly cold room, and a man named Sean Fentress' body moments before Fentress is killed in a terrorist attack on a train. Thus, Stevens experiences a time loop into the recent past, with a reset back to his present "room" in between each leap through time. Cage encounters no such respite, and must continually experience the time loop until he either dies or defeats the enemy.

Beyond bodies and times, it is also important to note the differences in methods of these films. Cage receives his time traveling powers from the alien beings themselves. The invaders are a hive-mind organism, and their "Omega" possesses the ability to reset the day each time an "Alpha" soldier is killed. When Cage dies, some Alpha blood mixes with his own and he inherits the ability to loop time back to the beginning of each day. I will discuss the intricacies of Cage's powers later, but for now I simply wish to stress that he inherited his abilities from the aliens themselves. Stevens, on the other hand, is an unknowing participant in a government experiment which uses nearly-deceased and vegetative soldiers. The soldier's consciousness is then "uploaded" into the brain afterglow (a scientist asks a military overseer to imagine the lingering light after one switches off a lamp) of a terror attack victim. Through this process, as it is theorized, the soldier can experience the memories of the deceased. The goal is a simple observe and report mission, but Stevens quickly discovers that he can actually change the outcomes of events. Thus the time loop works for the eight minutes between when Stevens is uploaded and the bomb on the train explodes.

Each man finds himself stuck in a time loop. In this section, I would like to examine and place stress upon the "stuck" portion of the previous sentence. The

The reveal of his actual body at the end of the film reveals in the gore of his twisted and mangled disabled body.

stickiness of the time loop stems from control-- specifically where that control rests and where it does not. In *Edge of Tomorrow*, Cage is not in control of resetting the day. Neither, however, is the Omega alien. Cage has unwittingly stolen its power. The problem, for Cage, is that he has no control over his time-reset powers-- the day resets when he dies. Perhaps, then, I should say that he has control over when the day resets, he simply has to kill himself. Unfortunately for Cage, until he wakes up at the reset, he experiences both pain and terror during each death. Each reset begins with him waking up violently, as though he were experiencing a terrible nightmare. Even though he does not permanently die, experiencing death is something Cage works hard to avoid, for obvious reasons. Thus, he is stuck in his time-loop. The film ping-pongs between the treatment of his situation as a comedy and as a tragedy. After his second trip through the day (after he resets time the first time), Liman presents a short montage. The montage works through repetition and sound more than image or narrative. Liman presents short fragments of experience, as Cage manages to live a little bit longer each time before being killed in some sudden and silly manner. First, he pushes a fellow soldier out of the way of a falling airship, only to be crushed to death by said airship. Next, he escapes the falling airship, but is crushed by truck as he blindly crosses a road. Each scene fragment is punctuated by a drill Sergeant screaming "Get on your feet, maggot!" as Cage wakes up, the day reset. As the montage crescendos, the scenes and the resets become quicker and more fragmented: "Get on your feet, maggot!" becomes "On your feet, maggot!" and eventually becomes a fragment of the word "maggot!" The audience is meant to laugh at the comical deaths Cage stumbles into, in many ways like we might laugh at a Looney

Toons character plummeting off a 1,000-foot cliff: because there are no permanent consequences, there is no trauma.

Cage's face, however, tells a different story. At first, he is understandably confused. He just lived through this day, then died, then woke up to re-experience the exact same events. Yet, since he is the only one who knows what is about to happen, the behavior of his colleagues appears robotic; like the "Small World" ride at Disneyland they move through the same motions over and over again while Cage passes through. His responses also seem to not matter. When he attempts to warn everyone that the impending military assault on the beach is a bloodbath because the Mimics know in advance, he is simply gagged and forced into his dropship. Terrified, he can only sit and watch as his ship is hit by an explosive and plummets to the ground. There, he can only watch as his fellow soldiers are slaughtered and the Mimics expertly counter the offensive. Each time, he flails about with his newfound knowledge, doing just enough to live through each individual near-death experience only to succumb to the next threat on the horizon. His experience at this point in the film is akin to imagining if a video game character could remember his past saved-game lives. Each time, the player gets a little farther, but never manages to complete the game. Cage's movement through the levels is both frustrating and traumatizing. Frustrating, because he has no idea how to control this power, how to leverage it in some way to prevent his next painful death; traumatizing because he must experience and re-experience both the hellscape of war and the pain of death an infinite amount of times.

Cage is compelled to experience the trauma of his death over and over again. He must, like the survivor Carruth describes, return to the scene of his trauma. Through each

return, he attempts to discern new information or discover a way to deal with his pain and fear. Each return offers only frustration, however, as he lacks the tools to properly utilize his power. Finally, fed up with attempting to work through the losing efforts on the battlefield, Cage simply gives up. Instead of causing a scene or trying to warn everyone about the impending doom, he simply sneaks off the base quietly (or rather, in a slick leather jacket on a motorcycle, because Cage is still Tom Cruise) and escapes to nearby London. There, he pouts in a pub with a pint while a TV covers the lead up to the assault on Normandy beach (where he should be). Several World War II veterans²⁴, wearing their old regalia, debate the offensive with bravado, while a woman expresses fear and anxiety if the operation fails. The veterans single Cage out, asking him why he is not out there fighting. Cage is defiant, telling them he has seen more action than they can imagine. His posturing fades when the city is attacked. Horrified, Cage scrambles to a bridge, only to see the Mimic horde approaching the city. One of the minion leaps out of the water at Cage, killing him and resetting the day.

I find this sequence to be one of the more important in the films, because it illustrates just how stuck Cage is in his time-loop. When the trauma victim feels compelled to return to his “unclaimed experience,” it is part of the brain’s fact-finding mission. The subject is not compelled by some outside force, yet he simultaneously does not willingly return to this moment. He returns and continues to return until his mind can solve the mystery of the missing experience. In order to negotiate how the trauma victim is compelled, we must make important distinctions between the subject and his unconscious mind. The subject wants peace, escape, or just a night without terror, but the

²⁴ Because apparently mentions of a battle at Verdun and a landing on Normandy beach were not enough to evoke images of World Wars.

mind requires resolution. In reading this film, I feel that must distinguish between Cage and his power to reset time. Cage's power forces him to return to the beginning of his day each time he dies. It forces him to continually return to the moments before his death and start over again until he dies. It does not, however, force him to get on the dropship and land on Normandy during the siege, as the London sequence clearly illustrates. He is free to do what he wishes once he wakes up. In this scenario, he simply opts out. Fed up and frustrated, he refuses to engage with the rules of the game and runs away. However, the London sequence also enlightens Cage about the stakes of the offensive: if it fails, nowhere is safe. The mimic horde will engulf the planet if they are not stopped. Cage, like the trauma victim, seeks peace, escape, or a moment without agonizing pain. However, like the victim, he learns that without resolution (or in his case, victory) there will be no peace. In order to escape the scenario, Cage must beat it-- this is how he is compelled to return. Cage learns to compel himself to return, because there is no other option. After his escape to London, Cage never again shirks his responsibilities; instead, he begins the next sequence of the film focused on trying to overcome the enemy and training his body and mind to win the war.

While Cage's realization functions as a crucial transition point between acts, in that it moves the film away from a slapstick comedic mode into a serious and investigative mode, it also presents the first of many problems with regards to trauma and post-traumatic stress. Earlier, I wrote about the importance of separating the subject from his unconscious mind. This, I argued, was a crucial step in understanding the nature of compulsion in response to traumatic stress: the subject does not want to return, but feels compelled; this is the mind. I then made a distinction along similar lines between Cage

and his power to reset the day. The day resets regardless of Cage's desires, and he is compelled to return to that morning over and over again. The problem arises when we consider Cage's response to his death in London. After London, Cage resolves to begin fighting against the scenario-- he attempts to learn it, master it, and eventually escape it by winning.

When we consider the film in regards to the understanding of trauma, this moment represents a step away from lived experience and into the fantasy of an ableist society. Cage makes a choice-- a conscious action, followed by moves to improve his body and his mind in order to overcome the trauma he experiences. This presentation moves increasingly closer to a supercrip understanding of disability-- a narrative in which Cage's trauma is not a detriment, but rather a first step toward superhuman improvement. Dying and experiencing the pain that goes along with it are no longer negatives, but learning experiences that allow Cage to better respond to the scenario next time. This portrayal of the "compulsion" trauma survivors experience shifts control of the experience from the unconscious mind to the subject, thereby shifting notions of power and agency back onto the trauma victim. If the compulsion to return is not compulsion but rather desire, then the subject is solely responsible for returning. Therefore, the subject returns because he wants to, and in the ableist imagination, this desire steps from a drive to improve oneself and overcome the disability.

I find this fantasy to be toxic toward our understanding of post-traumatic stress. Supercrip narratives work to shift blame to disabled individuals by suggesting that their conditions are simply a case of will, resolve, or fortitude. If they changed their attitude, and attempted to find strength in spite of their disability, the thinking goes, they would

discover something even more special inside themselves. These stories do nothing more than excuse ableist apathy toward the daily struggles of disabled individuals. Negative attitudes, after all, can be dismissed as weakness, ugly character, or defeatist self-fulfilling prophecies. Cage's escape to London is one of those instances. He runs away because he is too weak to utilize the great power inside himself. His reverse choice-- to embrace his secret inner power-- works as an affirmation of supercrip ideology: he is choosing to overcome his trauma by become stronger and more powerful than he would have been before his injury. His disability makes him super.

Source Code's Colter Stevens faces a similar choice. Perhaps the most profound difference between Stevens and Cage is that we are not meant to hate Stevens. While *Edge of Tomorrow* takes a slower approach to its character by first showing him to be a slimy coward-- a part Cruise is born to play with his used-car-salesman grin-- *Source Code* injects the audience into a confusing in medias res. These diametric approaches stem from their purpose: the audience needs to get to know Cage so that we can properly hate him, while the narrative breaks Stevens gets between each leap back in time allow for a more gradual character development throughout the film. Thus, *Source Code* cold-opens into the train. Stevens, confused and disoriented, cannot understand where he is or why a woman he does not know is calling him "Sean." Stevens tries to get his bearings, but finds himself continually distracted and unusually sensitive to external stimuli: a woman spills some coffee on his shoe and the droplets hit with an exaggerated thud, a man's cough from across the car sounds as if it happened in his ear, and the woman's touch causes him to react violently and defensively as he shoves her hand away.

The heightened sensitivity Stevens experiences reminds me of the sensory experience of trauma that Carruth highlights. For the trauma victim, the sights, sounds, and feelings of trauma are so overwhelming that it is never actually experienced. The subject's brain essentially stops processing external stimuli because of the overload. This arrested processing is what leads to the "unclaimed experience." The subject, having never fully experienced the traumatic moment, finds himself compelled to return over and over again to the traumatic moment (through dreams, nightmares, or waking visions) in order to piece together the mystery of what happened. He needs to craft a narrative to help him understand the overwhelming, confusing, and sometimes contradictory emotions and sensations he experienced during the traumatic episode.

The trauma subject's need for narrative and investigation also plays out during the opening credits sequence of *Source Code*. Here, director Duncan Jones juxtaposes overhead establishing shots of Chicago (the train's destination) with helicopter and crane panning shots of the train moving through the suburban (and sometimes outright rural) landscape outside of Chicago. Sound comes to the forefront in the absence of action, and the bellowing horns and aggressively sharp strings feel like something out of a Hitchcock film. Stevens, then, becomes a ragged Roger O. Thornhill (and Gyllenhaal a scruffy-bearded Cary Grant), although instead of being mistaken for the wrong man, he actually inhabits the other man's body! Music and direction combine, in the opening credits, to craft a sense that this film will be a suspenseful psychological thriller. This notion is not terribly far from the truth, although Stevens, for all his military background and support system outside the Source Code simulation, is just as poor a detective as Thornhill. Like Thornhill, Stevens finds himself wrongly identified, and like Thornhill, Stevens' mission

is to discern the identity of another man. The similarities end there, because Stevens, like the rest of the passengers on the train, blows up when a dirty bomb detonates.

After a momentary black screen, the setting shifts and Stevens finds himself stuck in a small, cold room, strapped into a chair and wearing his pilot's uniform. Here, he can communicate with a woman outside the room (Colleen Goodwin, played by Vera Farminga) through what appears to be a closed-circuit television. These are the only two spaces Stevens inhabits throughout the film, although ironically neither of them are where his physical body resides. As the setting shifts back and forth between the train and the small room, Stevens slowly begins to piece together the nature of his situation: he is part of a military experiment. There was a terrorist attack on a train just outside of Chicago. The military suspects that the attack on the train is but the first of a series of attacks. Stevens has been selected to function as a time-traveling and body-inhabiting detective in order to discern the identity of the attackers.

Stevens also discovers the other key elements to his situation: he has no choice. Scared and confused, he begs Goodwin for information about where he is, what happened to his squadron, or who is in charge. Failing that, he asks her to call his father. Goodwin appears to struggle with his pleas, but ultimately finds her hands tied. Time is of the essence, and Stevens needs to be sent back in time again and again until he can gather the necessary information to prevent the next attack. As he pleads with her for information, Goodwin launches him back into Sean Fentress' body, eight minutes before the bomb explodes on the train. Like Cage, Stevens is not in control of when he jumps back in time, although unlike Cage this time the compulsory force has a face, a name, and an agenda. The tension for Stevens, beyond simply being forced into a dead man's memories against

his will, comes from the reality of his body's condition outside the simulations. The small room, he learns, is simply a mental projection. He was mortally wounded during an operation abroad, and he is being kept on life support in order to feed his brain into the source code. His body is deteriorating rapidly, and the room becomes colder and more constraining the more time he spends jumping. Stevens is working against time, and his only promise comes from Goodwin, who assures him that once he catches the terrorist, he will be released. Thus, like Cage, Stevens discovers that for all his newfound power in the simulation, he cannot escape.

Adding tension on top of his already compelled and time-limited situation, Goodwin informs Stevens that a second attack is imminent. The second attack mirrors the events in London in *Edge of Tomorrow*: it serves as a concrete barrier which forces the protagonist back into the game. It also allows the film to be longer than 30 minutes, as Stevens quickly discerns the location of the bomb on the train and, with Goodwin's aid, figures out how to disarm it. The London sequence in *Edge of Tomorrow*, I argued, was important because it forced the protagonist to begin looking at his compelled situation as a boon: he starts to harness his time-loop abilities as if they were super power. For Cage, this means conditioning his body and mind through trial and error and many deaths to anticipate and counter threats before they even happen. Stevens, however, has already removed the threat to his life from the equation. Once he discovers the bomb and disarms it, he is able to move around the space of the train-- and even leave the train-- freely. Moreover, he discovers that while Goodwin assures him that these events are in the past, he is able to massively change the outcome of events-- disarming the bomb and stopping the first terrorist attack being chief among those changes.

The two men, then, face similar but vitally different challenges: Cage must discipline his mind and body through experimentation and failure-- each death teaches him how to avoid a new obstacle-- while Stevens must become a detective in a tightly-constrained space and time. The threat of the second attack, like Cage's realization that he cannot escape the mimic horde, compels Stevens to solve the mystery of the terrorist's identity so that the government can stop him before the second attack. Stevens, like Cage, begins to embrace his new power as he sets out to not only discover the terrorist's identity (his official mission) but also rewrite history and disrupt the very nature of reality and time by saving everyone on the train (his personal mission) even though they died hours ago.

Discipline and Mastery

"Power and potency are constitutive discourses of masculinity," writes Yvonne Tasker in her book about male bodies on film, *Spectacular Bodies*. While I agree, I want to focus on mastery and discipline, the fertile soil from which power and potency bloom. The fable of masculinity has many forms, but a crucial portion of it is the combination of power with discipline. In *Source Code* and *Edge of Tomorrow*, our protagonists are gifted with god-like powers over time. Yet, it is not until they begin disciplining their bodies and mind and mastering said powers that they ultimately resolve their conflicts. The previous section focused on their compelled returns and on the moments in which they realized that the only escape from their temporal prison was to solve the scenario presented to them. Each film begins its second act with the protagonist humbled and focused. Cage, realizing that he cannot outrun the mimic horde, steels himself and begins

to utilize his powers over time to train his weapons skills. Stevens, realizing that stopping the initial terror attack outside Chicago does nothing to stop the second-- and larger-- attack in Chicago, resigns himself to follow Goodwin's instructions and solve the mystery of the terrorist's identity. In each case, the larger danger is known and the protagonist decides that his mastery over time is not a burden, but a gift. This shift in perspective about a condition which had previously been a burden marks the shift in these films from a depiction of the horrors of PTSD to a fantasy about supercrip identities.

Stevens begins²⁵ his arc with two major plot points: 1. He needs to find the identity of the terrorist, and 2. He wants to find out what happened to him, he wants to know why he is stuck in a cold room without any outside contact, and he wants to talk to his father. I identified the split between large-scale and personal motivations earlier in this chapter, and these are Stevens' large-scale and personal drives. This distinction is important because it frames the split between compelled actions and character desires. In Stevens' case, plot point 1 is what he is compelled by an outside force (in this case, Goodwin and her bosses) to do, while plot point 2 is where we gain insight into his character. As we will see in both films, plot points 1 and 2 ultimately converge, and the hero is able to resolve them both simultaneously and satisfactorily. Cage has a similar split between his plot points: 1. Find some way to kill the mimic Omega and stop the alien invasion and 2. Get the girl. Plot point 2 may come as a bit of a shock, given that I have not mentioned any female lead at this point, but that is because the film has yet to introduce her by the beginning of act two.

In both films, women play specific roles for the protagonists. Rather than existing as complex or interesting characters, the women in *Source Code* and *Edge of Tomorrow*

²⁵ I say "begins" because he eventually acquires a third goal: save the girl.

function as rulemasters, mentors, or guides at their best and tag-along puppy dog lovers at their worst. What I find striking about the rulemaster/mentor relationship is the very way it restricts the women from participating in the acquisition of power along with the protagonists. Goodwin cannot enter into the Source Code because only Steven's brain is a match for one of the victims; Rita Vrataski (Emily Blunt) actually possessed Cage's time-looping power in a battle that pre-dates the film, but lost it when she was injured. Thus, both women possess insight into the form and function of the time loop scenario (hence, rulemasters), but are denied access to the "power and potency" it provides. Instead, it is the men who are afforded these gifts and whom the mentors must train in order to solve the large-scale plot point.

In his book *White Guys*, Fred Pfeil describes an emergence of the salt-and-pepper (black and white) buddy cop film of the late 1980s and early 1990s. In these films (he cites the *Lethal Weapon* and *Die Hard* franchises), a white protagonist was assisted in his exploits against terrorists by a black sidekick. Pfeil's crucial observation is that the black sidekicks were both domesticated family men, while the white protagonist was always a "wild" man. The relationship is such that the sidekick's domesticity-- exaggerated by his Othered race-- creates a safe space for the wild white man to express emotions without becoming emasculated. This distinction, Pfeil argues, allowed men to respond to the increasing calls for sensitivity as a result of the second-wave feminist movement while still maintaining (and being lauded for) their "innate" masculine rage and aggressiveness. I see a similar role playing out for the mentors and rulemasters of *Source Code* and *Edge of Tomorrow*-- their function in these films is to allow the protagonist a space through

which he gains both power and freedom²⁶. Most importantly, the women serve as the mediators between the large-scale plot point and the personal plot point. Vrataski is the personal plot point for Cage (she is the girl he gets) and the means through which he hones his skills; Goodwin helps Stevens understand his situation and even helps him escape the Source Code, but only after she guides him through the scenario and explains the guidelines.

Stevens' journey through the Source Code is, unlike Cage's journey through the battlefield, mediated by pit stops back to present time. These jumps between time allow the film to slow down and develop Stevens as a character, Goodwin as an arbiter, and the Source Code as a space of trauma that Stevens does not wish to reenter. His palpable and vocal resistance to being forced into the past affects his time there as well. Instead of "focusing on the mission," as Goodwin frequently begs him to, Stevens spends a large amount of time attempting to understand his situation in the present from his only station of agency: the past. The need to know himself, or at least where his body is, is tantamount to Stevens because he begins to suspect that Goodwin's promise to free him after he completes the mission is empty. Thus, the disciplining actions Stevens undertakes are in regards to his environment; the mastery he gains is over knowledge of his present.

The film corroborates this focus on the present. During the "discipline and mastery" montage of the film (both films have these sequences, and these montages are a staple of the time-loop film) the audience never sees Stevens' trips back to the past.

²⁶ As to why it is now acceptable for women to stand in as the "buddy cop" I can only offer a hypothesis. Pfeil argues that the tension of the cultural moment must be mediated by an Other. The primary tension Pfeil identifies is between a fantasy of masculine "wildness" and feminine "softness" in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of second-wave feminism. I would argue that the primary tension of the War on Terror is one of race, not gender. Therefore, a racialized Other will not suffice, but a gendered Other will.

Instead, the montage focuses exclusively on Stevens awaking from the past into the present (having presumably just died horribly) and being immediately grilled for information by Goodwin. Stevens begs for time and bemoans the enormity of his task: “there are hundreds of people on that train!” he cries at one point. Goodwin remains gentle and nurturing, despite insisting on more information and forcing him back into the Source Code. Eventually, Stevens get Goodwin to give him enough information about his present-- namely, that he is a brain-dead husk hooked up to a virtual reality machine, and that his small cold room is merely a manifestation his brain has created to process his situation. Armed with this information, Stevens agrees to find the identity of the terrorist, as long as Goodwin promises to remove him from life support after the mission is complete. She agrees.

Where Stevens and Goodwin disagree, however, is on the impact of the Source Code. For Goodwin and her superiors, the Source Code is a tool for the future: they can utilize information gathered from the program to prevent future attacks. For Stevens, it is a tool for the past and present as well: he believes that he can actually change the events of the past, creating an alternate simultaneous reality. After quickly discovering the identity of the terrorist (as I said, the movie does not linger on his building of mastery within the Source Code, only outside it), Stevens returns to the present with the attacker’s identity, location, and even the license plate of his vehicle. Utilizing this information, the military is able to track down the terrorist and prevent the second attack. While Goodwin’s superiors celebrate what will undoubtedly be a massive new governmental contract (this film’s attempt at political commentary), Goodwin lingers behind to debrief with Stevens. Stevens asks to be sent in one more time before she pulls his plug. She

hesitates, but agrees. After launching him into the Source Code for the final time, she discovers that her boss, Dr. Rutledge (Jeffrey Wright) intends to wipe Stevens' mind and keep his body for future missions. Horrified by this breach of his agreement with Stevens, Goodwin retreats to the room that houses Stevens' body and prepares to pull the plug.

Source Code's fixation on the ability of the time-loop to impact the present is a reflection of supercrip fantasies about PTSD. In this version of the narrative, all the trauma victim needs to do to heal and recover from his emotional wound is to embrace the compelled return. Through embracing it, he can learn to gather the necessary information and fill in the blanks in his memory. Eventually, this action of mental resilience will allow him to fix his present and escape his continual returns to the past. Equally troubling is the simultaneous reveal of Stevens' "real body" at the film's climax. Just before Goodwin pulls the plug, the camera pans over what until then had been a nondescript grey container. As the camera moves upward and tilts downward, it reveals Stevens' body-- or at least the half the remains. The gore of this scene is meant to shock; Stevens' body is mutilated and cut off at the torso, with a transparent plastic shell holding in his guts. At the back of his head, the skin has been removed and wires plug directly into his brain. His body squirms in discomfort and the camera closes in on his face so the audience can see rapid eye twitches (a sure sign that he is dreaming in there). After Jones has had his fill of presenting Stevens' body, Goodwin shuts down the life support systems, killing him and freeing him.

Stevens' bounty for escaping his mental prison is plentiful. In the immediate aftermath, his mangled body is no longer suspended in a state of forced living; however, he also gains a second life while putting a bow on his old one. At one point in the film,

Stevens mentions that the last time he talked to his father they had a fight. He regrets this action, especially now that he knows he is, for all intents and purposes, dead. During his final trip into the past, before he stops the first bomb from going and before he stops the terrorist from escaping to initiate the second attack, he borrows a phone from a fellow passenger. For a chunk of the eight minutes he has left, Stevens calls his father and poses as a squadmate. During the call, he delivers a by-proxy apology²⁷ and gains valuable closure on a nagging emotional wound²⁸. Having saved the day, Stevens takes the last few seconds to spend time with Christina (Michelle Monaghan), the girl he has fallen in love with (who still thinks he is Sean Fentress), asking her on a date and planting a kiss on her lips right as Goodwin pulls the life support plug and kills his body. Except, Stevens does not die. Time briefly freezes, and then restarts. The day continues, and Stevens gets to continue living in Sean Fentress' body. No thought is given to the ethical considerations of such an exercise (what happened to that alternate reality's Sean Fentress' mind?), and Stevens gets to live a new life with a new body and a girlfriend. Here again, the supercrip narrative regarding disability manifests. Except, instead of simply reaching closure regarding his injury, Stevens gets to erase it entirely. No longer does he 1. Have a mangled body 2. Have to experience death and pain in the Source Code or 3. Have to choose between vegetative life or death; instead, Stevens' mastery of the Source Code has allowed him to prevent not only the second terrorist attack in Chicago but also the initial terrorist attack in the past. He erases the very event which tossed him

²⁷ Using his fake identity as Stevens' squadmate, he tells his father that Colter regretted the fight and loved him.

²⁸ Stevens' apology, and the presence of closure complicate my reading of the fantasy at the core of these films. Certainly, understanding the necessity of closure is a progressive move, and Stevens needs this closure— to acknowledge that he died and that his father is gone from his life— in order to move forward. However, the fact that he gets to move forward at all still makes this ending a fantasy of the supercrip for me. It is simply not at the level of escapism as *The Edge of Tomorrow*.

into the Source Code in the first place, and his reward for solving the scenario is a new life free from both physical and emotional trauma.

An even more dramatic erasure occurs at the end of *Edge of Tomorrow*. Here, Cage, having attempted to escape and failed, focuses his efforts on mastering the scenario in order to defeat the alien menace with the help of Vratasky. Like Goodwin, Vratasky functions as a nurturing guide as Cage begins to understand and utilize his new powers. Unlike *Source Code*, however, *Edge of Tomorrow* is entirely interested in documenting the experiences of Cage as he slowly overcomes obstacles through the help of his foresight. Essentially, the film presents Cage's resilience and overcoming of his condition through three montages. The first montage I covered in the previous section-- it follows Cage through his failures and repeated comic deaths. Act two begins with a montage of Cage and Vratasky slowly working their way through the invasion on the beach. This montage is less humorous, and cross-cuts between the action sequences on the beach and pre-battle planning sessions during which Cage uses his oracle power of foresight to explain exactly what to expect during battle in a step-by-step fashion. Here, we see Cage attempting to discipline his body and mind (and help Vratasky discipline hers), but still coming up short. The montage winds down slowly (this is the longest montage of the film, covering several minutes) by emphasizing Cage's increasing emotional connection to Vratasky. Lyman does this by condensing the action sequences and refocusing them away from the glory of battle and instead toward Cage's face as he reacts to Vratasky's dead body moments before he also dies and resets the day. The close-up shots of Cage's face are cross cut with Vratasky's lifeless face, and the sound washes out and dulls in favor of somber music. Put together, the montage ends by establishing a new set of stakes

for Cage: he cannot simply kill the mimic Omega, he must make sure Vratasky-- the woman he now loves-- survives as well.

Cage's new dilemma sets up the final montage sequence of the film. This sequence immediately follows the second montage, and culminates an extended portion of action and character development without any dialogue²⁹. At some point, after watching the woman he cares about die over and over again, Cage decides he has had too much and decides to go it alone. He is able to escape the conflict on the beach, secure a helicopter, and track down what he thinks is the location of the mimic Omega all by himself. The montage again moves forward with muted action sound, and Cage's face is emotionless and weary. This is peak discipline-- he robotically and effortlessly mows his way through his foes because he has memorized their every movement and can anticipate how to defeat them. However, Cage discovers he has been lured into a trap and escapes capture by the alien horde by killing himself and resetting the day. This moment forces Cage to learn the lesson of the "wild man" Pfeil writes about in *White Guys*: the nurturing "buddy cop" is a necessary connection to the world; powerful men need a conduit through which they can throw off the veneer of stoicism and instead embrace their emotions. Cage has the *power* necessary to win the day, but he still requires the support that only his buddy cop can provide.

The three montages that precede the climax serve to emphasize Cage's progression toward mastery of both his powers and his body and mind. In order to raise the stakes, since otherwise we have an unkillable protagonist who will eventually win simply through attrition, the film strips Cage of his powers before the final battle. Like

²⁹ I note the lack of dialogue simply to emphasize director Doug Lyman's exceptional visual narrative during this section of the film. The romantic connection Cage feels toward Vratasky, as well as his choice to prioritize saving her, are all communicated clearly to the audience solely through editing and acting.

Stevens' discovery of the terrorist in *Source Code*, this event sets up a first supercrip narrative arc: this time, Cage will learn that his powers were nothing more than an avenue through which he realizes that the ability to prevail was inside him the whole time. In other words, he finds out that he does not need time-reversing powers to defeat the aliens, he simply needed to learn resilience. I identify this point as a supercrip narrative because it supposes that the PTSD victim needs only to "power through" or learn resilience in order to overcome his disability. The horrific nightmares the trauma survivor experiences are simply empowering moments that test his will and allow him to emerge stronger and more focused on the other end. In short, they create a binary situation in which the subject either heals and overcomes because he is strong, or continues to suffer because he is weak.

The similarities between the two films do not end there-- *Edge of Tomorrow* also features a second and more extreme supercrip narrative of erasure, in much the same vein as *Source Code*. After Vratasky sacrifices herself in order to buy time for Cage to plant grenades on the Omega alien (she, like Goodwin, must give up everything for the hero), he manages to blow the monster to pieces. A heroic sacrifice to be certain-- he and his team give their lives to destroy the central "brain" of the entire invasion, saving the world. And yet, what is sacrifice without reward? As he dies, the blood from the Omega engulfs Cage, re-granting him his powers over time and resetting not just the day but several days. He wakes up not on the day of the invasion but in his cushy helicopter on his way to meet with a general as part of his cushy P.R. job with the military. This leap back in time ensures that Cage is never stripped of his titles, his wealth, or his prestige. It also ensures that he never has to go to battle and fight ever again. The film ends with him

approaching Vratasky-- not as a private, but as a decorated officer-- secure in the knowledge that the story he is about to tell her will sound completely insane to anyone, except her. As with my other readings of these films, I believe this sequence establishes a supercrip narrative about PTSD, healing, and erasure. Here, Cage solves the scenario of the time-loop so masterfully that he effectively erases the trauma that granted him his temporal powers in the first place. That is to say, these films both end with the fantasy that with enough discipline and mastery over the body and mind, the trauma victim can not only heal from their wound but can eventually erase that wound from history. I find these fantasies frightening because, as I have stated above, they imagine that the lack of erasure signals a weakness or deficiency on the part of the trauma victim.

Conclusion

Both these films place the trauma survivor in a contradictory bind. Each man is scarred by his initial death, and his trauma is continually replicated because he is forced to relive it over and over again. At the same time, the films also frame the compulsory returns as genesis points for superpowers: in Stevens' case, and especially in Cage's case, the ability to return (albeit forced and painful) grants special abilities and unnatural foresight that aides in the mission. However, the bind loops back on itself, because each man's mission also involves discovering a way out of the time loop! Thus, the acquisition of power is reluctantly embraced only so that each man can then eventually renounce his special abilities.

The situation of the protagonists is not the only thing contradictory about these films. In constructing the experience of trauma, specifically post-traumatic stress, as a

precursor to superpowers, the films advance supercrip narratives regarding military resilience and discipline. Both Stevens and Cage experience extreme physical trauma (the most extreme form: death) and psychological trauma. While the injuries to their bodies are temporary (a fantasy of the prosthetic³⁰) the injuries to their minds linger and are exacerbated by the forced return to the moments of pain and suffering. Bodily injury and bodily resilience are easy to measure. Is his arm missing? Are his nerves damaged? Can he see or hear? Similarly, do we have a prosthetic for that? Can a machine allow him to strive for a “normal” life? Resilience is then measured by the space beyond “normal.” If he lost a leg, does he train so hard he can run a marathon? If his spine is injured, does he learn how to walk? The narratives produced out of these questions and presentations illuminate a world so hostile toward disability that the disabled individual must not only live with his disability but strive to perform at superhuman levels in order to be accepted.

Emotional and mental trauma offer no such easy measures. Because there is no physical evidence, the injury to the psyche must always first pass through the skepticism of believability: how can we “know” this person is actually disabled? These processes are less empirical than their physical counterparts, and the need to prove places additional burdens upon the trauma survivor. Beyond that, injuries to the mind also lack traditional supercrip narratives. If someone loses a leg and yet trains so hard that he can run a marathon, we can understand that as “overcoming” the disability. These narratives whitewash the everyday experience of being disabled, but for this essay I would only like to stress that they are ubiquitous and readily available to the average American.

³⁰ Kinder writes at length about the fantasy of the prosthetic. In this fantasy, American technological superiority is such that eventually every injury will be treatable. The goal of this fantasy is to remove the “problem of the disabled veteran” -- namely the problem that he returns from war as a burden upon society instead of a contributing member. Thus, the fantasy of the prosthetic is one in which all injuries are temporary, treatable, and fully healed.

Narratives about the disabled mind are less common, and when they do appear frequently describe the “savant” character whose mental or emotional disability also afford unique intellectual (almost always mathematic) advantages³¹. There is no supercrip narrative template for the increasingly common post-traumatic mind, however. At least, I argue, not until the emergence of the time-loop film. These films imagine the compelled return of the traumatized mind as the gateway toward hyper knowledge. In the narrative of these films, the trauma itself forces the soldier to re-experience the moment so much that he is able to overcome and even fix the injury itself. As I illustrated, both films go so far as to craft a narrative where the soldier erases the trauma from ever having happened-- sheerly through mastery and discipline. In this fantasy, the “overcoming” of the trauma happens so literally that it becomes time travel: returning to the scene is not a moment of horror, but one of knowledge and empowerment. While the films present a happy ending where Cage and Stevens refocus themselves and begin to use their time-looping abilities to their advantage, I would like to keep at the forefront the fictional idea that these narratives privilege of a presentation of trauma as a gateway through which those strong and resilient few can learn to become super. The danger in that fantasy is what it allows us to think about those who do not emerge from trauma with any special powers.

³¹ See: *A Beautiful Mind*

Chapter 4: Knowing is Half the Battle

Introduction

In a January 2006 speech to the Heritage Foundation, Vice President Dick Cheney praised the increased surveillance capabilities the USA PATRIOT act had provided to the intelligence community and even fantasized about a pre-9/11 American with those same capabilities:

If we'd been able to do this [extrajudicial surveillance] before 9/11, we might have been able to pick up on two hijackers who subsequently flew a jet into the Pentagon. They were in the United States, communicating with al Qaeda associates overseas. But we did not know they were here plotting until it was too late.

At best, Cheney's memory is fuzzy: the 9/11 Commission concluded that the FBI and other agencies suffered from communication breakdowns more than lack of information. In addition, the types of surveillance Cheney describes were legal before the passage of the Patriot act, as long as the administration sought court permission. The purpose of Cheney's speech was not to fantasize about alternate timelines (although he did do this) or to shift blame for 9/11 away from the administration (although he did do this as well), but rather to angrily remind members of a growing opposition to the Patriot act that surveillance and intelligence were the keys to winning the War on Terror. While describing opposition to the law as a "policy of passivity, resignation, or defeatism in the face of terror," he highlighted how the Patriot act "removed the artificial barrier that used to exist between law enforcement and intelligence." To Cheney, opposition to unchecked domestic surveillance was the result of the years of peace and safety that very

surveillance had provided. Likewise, he wrongly categorized the increased surveillance power the Patriot act provided as a simple removal of red tape barriers.

Despite Cheney's dreams for the Patriot Act, the split between enforcement and intelligence remains both in practice and in cultural imagination. This chapter will examine the ways in which an increased focus on surveillance-- and a resulting reduction in focus on enforcement-- impacted public perception and cultural production during the War on Terror. More specifically, I will look at war films of the 21st century and read them against genre tropes which have been molded since the Vietnam War. In doing so, I illuminate the drastic shift in the narrative structure of the war film-- from the more typical "band of brothers" storyline to the solitary and paranoid experiences of the women and men who watch and gather data. While I will reference many films-- from *Lone Survivor* to *Zero Dark Thirty*-- the bulk of my chapter will read two films which present drastically different visions of surveillance and intelligence: *American Sniper* and *Good Kill*. Each film confronts the psychic disruptions that emerge from a war without borders, enemy combatants, or paths to victory. My readings seek to expose the fantasies of knowledge and certainty that emerge out of the dissonance of the War on Terror, and in doing so, understand the impact of an endless and confusing war on the formulation of masculinity in the 21st century.

Anxieties of Uncertainty

Throughout this dissertation, I have situated fantasies of masculine heroism in the context of both 9/11 and the War on Terror. Fantasies about the power of knowledge and the potency of surveillance arise in the face of an enemy Other that resists or disrupts our ability to see and gather intelligence. When we are afraid of an enemy we cannot identify,

we invent heroes who possess a supernatural ability to see; in the face of uncertainty, we seek out those who can know. Susan Jeffords, in her essay “Terror, the Imperial Presidency, and American Heroism,” identifies many of the paths Americans sought out in both politics and popular culture as a means of combating the fear of the unknown. For Jeffords, the quest for certainty manifests itself in the act of naming someone a “terrorist.” Marking the 2010 Terrorist Expatriation Act, which stripped terror suspects of their citizenship, as a flashpoint, Jeffords argues that the term ‘terrorist’ (or ‘enemy combatant’) is “a category of uncreation of the individual, the space in which one becomes purely and only an ‘other’ and from which it is almost impossible-- both categorically and physically-- to return.” (4) Here, she critiques the tautology of the creation of a terrorist through labeling: the person is stripped of the very rights and due process which would allow them to prove their innocence.

The labeling does more than strip an individual of rights and ease the burden of prosecution, it also allows the entity doing the labeling (in this case, the federal government) to assert power and control through the illusion of certainty. If a suspected terrorist cannot prove that they are *not* a terrorist, then the government was always correct to label them a terrorist. This circular logic loop posits a strength (we are always correct when we label someone a terrorist) while simultaneously exposing a weakness (we have no idea how to identify someone as a terrorist until they commit a terrorist act). Jeffords argues that the anxiety about identifying terrorists causes the United States to present itself as the arbiter of truth regarding identities: the government is the one who knows the terrorists. She writes “the necessary impermanence of the space of the Terrorist requires mechanisms to ease the anxieties created both by what comes to be

called ‘fear’ and by the uncertainties of the Terrorist category.” (5) The category ‘terrorist’ is presented as stable, knowable, and easily readable by government operatives, but beneath that surface lie the anxieties that breed such a fantasy.

In order for the fantasy of the knowable terrorist to take root, however, it must be performed beyond a simple label. This requires the primary “uncreation” Jeffords describes in reference to the Terrorist Expatriation Act, but also a secondary and simultaneous re-creation through narrative and history. This act is played out through the close reading of the terrorist’s history-- the person becomes text. Each act, no matter how innocent can now only be read through the lens of this person as a terrorist. Jeffords argues that media investigations into terrorist’s backstories frequently obsess over capturing the moment the person was ‘radicalized.’ She writes that the terrorist “becomes known only by unknowing his previous identity and, by back-formation, recreating past actions as inevitable propulsions towards ‘becoming terrorist’.” (3) These readings of a person’s history function to assert a knowledge of terrorism that can possibly work to pre-empt attacks. If those signs of ‘radicalization’ existed, then it is only a matter of observing them, interpreting them, and acting on them before the terrorist strikes. Each terrorist’s history is imagined to be a Rosetta stone-- each bit of information inching us closer to cracking the code and decrypting the signs of a future terrorist.

The insatiable drive for information and knowledge about the enemy, Jeffords believes, helps frame the strange decision by the Bush administration to attack Saddam Hussein in 2003 instead of focusing on capturing Osama bin Laden. Certainly, Hussein’s defeat, capture, and execution proved to be far easier and more manageable than the decade-plus hunt for bin Laden. However, Jeffords believes that it was Hussein’s status

as knowable, identifiable, and (most importantly) locatable that drove Bush to focus on the dictator instead. Hussein, who Jeffords describes (accurately) as “an authoritarian, secretive, territorially-defined and demagogic president,” more closely mirrored Bush’s idea of himself than bin Laden, who Jeffords describes as “curiously reclusive, amorphously defined, and territorially diffuse.” (16) Both sides of this argument are important, as Hussein’s stable and understandable evils become of heightened interest only when contrasted with a foe who is unidentifiable and nationless. The identification of Hussein as a villain was not enough, however, as Bush sought to empower his presidency by asserting a powerful foe. According to Jeffords: “Saddam Hussein became for George Bush the embodiment of a ‘superempowered terrorist,’ but also, more appropriately, an equally powerful single figure against whom Bush could be defined.” (15) A superpowered enemy necessitates a superpowered hero, and there is much to suggest that Bush saw in himself special characteristics. Jeffords reads Bush’s self-characterization as ‘The Decider’ as an extension of his administration’s drive to increase presidential power outside of the checks and balances system. For her, his decider role developed a symbiotic relationship with global terror: “it was terrorism that enabled the creation of this persona [The Decider] and terrorism that sustained it.” (13)

I find Jeffords’ analysis of the role of terrorism in Bush’s administration to be erudite and accurate, but I also believe that her explicit focus on the “imperial presidency”-- and the rights and legalities his administration asserts belong to the president-- over the man himself opens an area for investigation. I capitalize ‘The Decider’ whereas Jeffords does not because I am interested in reading Bush’s persona as exactly that: a role or identity he adopts and performs. ‘The Decider’ possesses an

uncanny ability to cut through noise and find the truth, as Bush argued in a 2006 press conference: “I listen to all voices, but mine is the final decision [...] I’m the decider, and I decide what is best.” Several elements are at play in Bush’s adoption of the ‘Decider’ persona. Jeffords rightly identifies his administration’s meta-goal of increasing presidential power outside of the checks and balances system. I want to stress the role of masculinity in shaping Bush’s actions. Bush’s religious upbringing is no secret-- he was open and vocal about his Christian faith-- but his belief in a “muscular Christianity” was decidedly less transparent. Followers of this version of Christianity believe in a “tough-guy” image of Jesus Christ, one in which he was an aggressive defender of the weak and a vengeful punisher of bad guys. With this interpretation in mind, I find Bush’s ‘Decider’ persona to be an adaptation of that aggressive masculine defender: a morally righteous hero who uses his special talents to defend the weak. In this case, Bush uses his gift of clear sight to defend innocent Americans from evil terrorists.

Bush’s ‘Decider’ persona, however, comes late in his presidency and only presents a single version of masculinity. Masculinity is complex, despite what hegemonic norms might suggest, and manhood is often a process of becoming. It is through that lens of becoming that I also want to focus Bush’s masculine posturing in relation to the War on Terror. One of the strangest moments of Bush’s presidency was also one of the most honest. In a September 2002 press conference, Bush referenced Hussein as “the guy who tried to kill my dad.” (King 2002) My initial reaction upon hearing this was something along the lines of ‘it may be true, but can he *say* that?’ As I think back to that moment, the word that sticks out the most is ‘dad.’ Here, Bush situates himself in nearly unprecedented territory: no one would be shocked to hear that his father was George

H.W. Bush, former president of the United States, but the deeply personal use of the word 'dad' chilled me precisely because it implied a motive. Although implicitly acknowledging his role as 'son' infantilizes Bush Jr., his ability to exact revenge on the man his father famously did not capture allows him to assert a more powerful masculinity: he signals that his capture or killing of Saddam will resolve his father's failure. This transition from a regressed child-like state to one of usurping his father mimics a hegemonic notion of "becoming" a man: one must acknowledge and revere the father, but must also always look to surpass him in order to "claim" the masculine power he represents.

Through these two acts-- adopting the mantle of 'The Decider' and situating himself in the process of becoming a man by avenging the attempt on his father's life-- Bush develops a conception of masculinity that closely mimics the new iteration of national identity Jeffords articulates. In the face of unprecedented uncertainty, a heroic masculine identity was crafted with a focus on those with the supernatural ability to see, know, and act in the best interest of those who could not protect themselves. Jeffords writes, about the narrative time space between the identification of the 'terrorist' and the delve into his personal history to find the moment of 'becoming':

In such an amorphous and slippery space, expertise and authority become even more important, as the only linkage between these time shifts is the expert who has access to 'evidence' (that citizens do not have access to) and the authority who acts on the expert's information. (18)

Her “expert” and “authority” are close analogues for the “knowledge” and “enforcement” areas that I detailed in my opening pages. The heroes in these fantasies provide stability where there is none, shield the weak where they are most vulnerable, and root out and eradicate evil even when it appears invisible to the naked eye. The War on Terror is an extended and unprecedented moment of national anxiety in American history-- one which still has no end in sight-- and the fantasies that arise out of these anxieties are ones of clarity, knowledge, and omniscience. In films about the War on Terror, these anxieties and fantasies are resolved by heroes who possess supernatural abilities to see and identify the enemy.

War Films Since Vietnam: Masculinity Lost

American cinematic obsession with war dates back to at least *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), and has maintained its popularity through the ages (unlike, say, Westerns) and even in times of relative peace. This chapter intervenes during one of the least peaceful and most unstable periods of American Military history-- a time period that is ironically light on films about the current conflict. In order to best understand the shifts and regressions in war films of the 21st century, we need to look back to the ways American cinema has responded to major wars in the past. Because I am interested in depictions of “modern” war, I will begin my analysis immediately after the Vietnam war and track forward.

I select Vietnam as the “modern” starting point for a number of reasons: first, Vietnam is unique in its status as a war America “lost.” That status marks a shift in public perception about war, soldiers, and national identity-- if a country that defined itself by military victory suddenly lost, how does that country come to understand itself moving

forward? This question is crucial to consider as we move forward to our current unending and unwinnable War on Terror. The second motivation for beginning with the Vietnam War is that it marks the failure of the United States' preemptive imperial interventions for ideological conflicts. The "Domino Theory" held well during the Korean War, but suffered after the Vietnam War both because America failed to purge communism from Vietnam and because that failure did not tip the rest of the East into communism as the West had feared. While the War on Terror arises out of a direct attack on American soil, it is maintained through a callback to the rhetoric of Domino era in suggestions that conflicts abroad are necessary to ensure safety in the homeland. Finally, I begin with Vietnam because the role of embedded reporters and the immediacy of images and video from the front lines initiated the strong role of the media in understanding, critiquing, or justifying war for civilians at home. Since Vietnam, the government has tightened restrictions on press and civilian access to the front lines in an effort to control the narrative. The combination of these three factors marks Vietnam as a fulcrum point from which we understand nationalism, ideology, and media differently than we did before. It is, at the very least, unlike any war Americans fought previously, and the lessons learned from Vietnam are in play in nearly every conflict in which the United States has engaged since.

Beyond the political shifts I track in Vietnam, there are also strong shifts in the films about the war that follow the end of the conflict in the late 1970s. As I prepare to discuss the films of the War on Terror, I must first situate those films within a historical context that begins with *Apocalypse Now* in 1979 and works up through films about the War on Terror. In this time period-- roughly 1979 to the present-- I track four distinct

eras: the Vietnam era, the fantasy Post-Vietnam era, the Gulf War, and finally the War on Terror. Most notably, I make a distinction between films about the Vietnam War, such as *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *Platoon* (1986), or *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), and films about the fantasy of nationalism and masculinity after Vietnam, such as *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), *Commando* (1985), or *Missing in Action* (1984). I also choose to focus only on films about contemporary wars-- this means no *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), or *Black Hawk Down* (2001). It would certainly be fascinating to examine how contemporary films “retell” the stories of older wars, but this chapter excludes these films because I am interested in the role immediacy plays as cultural producers seek to portray and understand conflicts of their time.

Vietnam

More than any of the reasons I list above, Vietnam shattered the fantasy about the role war and military service played in building boys into men. For generations, service in the great American conflicts was perceived as an easy avenue into unquestioned masculinity. Because America “lost” the war, and because media portrayals of the conflict and our soldiers’ responses to the horrifying traumas of the battlefield, war was no longer a place where masculinity was gained. Instead, it became understood as a place where men were destroyed both physically and emotionally. Trauma in Vietnam functions in a set of dual locations: in the body/in the mind, and over there/back home. While I find problems with notions of body/mind dualisms, they are entrenched enough in Western thought that I do not feel the need to spend much time explaining how they function in portrayals of war: the soldier is damaged in his body (arm, leg, spine) or in his mind (PTSD, emotional trauma) and those are seen as different types of disabilities. The over there/back home

split, however, I find particularly compelling for the purposes of this chapter. Over there refers to injuries that occur on the battlefield-- either damage to the body or damage to the mind during combat or simply through the constant state of uncertainty and horror that is life in a warzone. Back home is more complex, in that the nature of home is often disrupted for veterans because the space they return to often does not resemble the space they left. Here, I examine the problems caused by the shattering of war's role in attaining masculinity. The trauma these men experience when they come back is-- among numerous other traumas-- the need to negotiate the difference between the fantasy of war relayed to them as children by their fathers and by media (mainly war films) and the reality that the power promised to them upon their return was thwarted.

While films like *Born on the Fourth of July* do an excellent job of detailing the traumas that erupt when expectations and fantasies about war are thwarted, I believe Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* does the best job of critiquing the harm those fantasies do. Among other things, Kubrick's choice to focus on basic training as the initial site of trauma makes it the most compelling film with regards to the ongoing traumas experienced by soldiers. Kubrick does not simply present basic training as a time where fresh cadets are molded into soldiers, nor does he suggest that basic training is a location separate from the traumatic combat zones of Vietnam. Instead, Kubrick juxtaposes the experience of basic training with the experience of war itself. In this space, we find horror, pain, trauma, and death. Rather than watching the boys become talented soldiers, we watch as they are broken down into subhuman "maggots" and then built into detached and submissive military automatons. Privates Joker (Matthew Modine) and Cowboy (Arliss Howard) are the protagonists of this film, but Kubrick's tools for

presenting his image of military trauma are Private Pyle (Vincent D'Onofrio) and Animal Mother (Adam Baldwin). Each character is subjected to a single space (basic training for Pyle; the jungle for Animal Mother), and that space allows Kubrick to critique the narratives that interlock masculinity and war.

In his essay "Phantom Weapon Syndrome," former Gunnery Sergeant Travis L. Martin chronicles the ways in which military basic training since World War II has sought to combat a phenomenon in which soldiers passively refuse to follow orders to kill by intentionally firing over the heads of their targets. Part of the military's response, he argues, was to adopt and incorporate Psychoanalytic theories into basic training--effectively forcing new soldiers into a regression back to childhood through continual psychic trauma. This process, which we see play out through Private Pyle in *Full Metal Jacket*, involves dehumanizing the men until they become reliant on what Martin calls "mother military." After being broken down to a malleable psychic state, the soldiers are given a communal family-- mother military-- which they desire to protect as it protects them. As they exit through the end of this program, they are given what Martin denotes is a fetish transitional object, their gun, which becomes a safety blanket through the horrible traumas of war they will soon experience. While Kubrick's film predates Martin's essay by several decades, a rereading of Pyle's journey through basic training illuminates the key elements of Martin's arguments.

Kubrick's choice to focus so much time and attention on Pyle is perhaps the most significant contribution *Full Metal Jacket* makes to the war film genre. Pyle arrives in a pre-masculine state: unlike Joker or Cowboy, he is unable to even fake a confident or capable veneer. In *Reel Men at War*, Ralph Donald and Karen MacDonald outline

various masculine archetypes in war movies-- Pyle, upon his arrival at basic training, falls strictly under the "Sissy" trope. For them, the Sissy serves two functions: (1) a caution against the dangers of undeveloped or failed masculinity and (2) an opportunity for the writers to evoke pathos when this innocent character is killed by the enemy (which he almost always is). Because of Pyle's inability to perform simple tasks or even a coherent masculinity, Gunnery Sergeant Hartman (R. Lee Ermey) singles him out and marks him as a target for the other cadets. It is not enough for Hartman to simply punish Pyle for his failings, he must also set Pyle up as the object of scorn for the other men. Pyle stands alone as a symbol of the weak and feminine masculinity that will get them killed on the battlefield. He is subjected to increasingly humiliating and emasculating public punishments, including one instance where he is forced to march behind the other cadets with his pants around his ankles while sucking his thumb. Hartman's choice to present Pyle as someone who never left his infantile state disguises the truth of military basic training according to Martin: all these men are being broken until they regress to this developmental stage. It is only after they have their humanity wiped away that they can be rebuilt into the types of obedient soldiers the Army prefers.

The most shocking part of the basic training sequence is not the yelling, homophobia, misogyny, or racism that Hartman spews, but rather the way Kubrick presents just how successful these tactics are in molding Pyle into the perfect weapon of war. Prior to reaching his breaking point, Pyle cannot properly clean or assemble his rifle, cannot complete endurance courses, cannot fire his weapon accurately, and cannot even keep his shoes clean and shiny. After he is broken, however, Pyle suddenly begins to excel at all the tasks necessary to become an ideal soldier: he assembles his rifle with the

efficiency of an assembly line, he barrels through endurance courses, he calmly fires his rifle, and his living space is spotless and immaculate. At the same time, he also becomes more mechanical in his motions. Kubrick intends to critique the industrial nature of modern warfare, and presenting the soldier-- the lifeblood of the military-- as a mechanical object illustrates the horrific nature of the contemporary military. Through basic training, Pyle's body has been molded into a sleek killing machine and his mind has been transformed into a cold, logical killing computer.

Sometimes, computer programs malfunction, however. Kubrick rebels against the conception of a human being as something that can be programmed, by showing the darkest side of a glitched system. When Pyle skulks off to the bathroom in the middle of the night with a loaded rifle, he does not show outward evidence of the stress and trauma the psychological conditioning of basic training have caused him. His resistance of emotional response to hardships aligns him with traditional masculine values, as described by Samuel Stouffer (1949):

Conceptions of masculinity vary among different American groups, but there is a core that is common to most: courage endurance, and toughness; lack of squeamishness when confronted by shocking or distasteful stimuli; avoidance of display of weakness in general; reticence about emotional or idealistic matters; and sexual competency.

Private Pyle has thrown off the childishness he entered with and has adopted a masculine mantle. That it took abuse and trauma for him to do so speaks to the toxic nature of military masculinity. Pyle is not enlightened by his ascension into manhood; instead, he

“malfunctions,” just like my word processing program might, and robotically moves through rifle drills while shouting slogans beaten into him over and over before committing a grisly murder-suicide with Hartman. What lessons are to be learned from this encounter? Do any of the characters remark on the regressive nature of the basic training sequence? On the failed attempts to strip down and rebuild men into perfect fighting machines? No. Instead, the tacit understanding is that the flaw was not with the program, but with Pyle himself. The evidence takes the form of his initial identity: the failed man; the Sissy. His weakness and effeminate childlike nature mean that he was never cut out for the Army, not that any problem exists within the training structure.

Unlike Pyle, Animal Mother is a bastion of aggressive military masculinity. We never see his experience in basic training, but we can imagine it would have filled Hartman with a swelling, almost fatherly pride. If Pyle is a glitch in the system of basic training-- an unfortunately corrupted entry-- Animal Mother is the proof that the system works. In him, we see the older notions of heroic nationalism and aggressive machismo that defined masculinity in war. In many ways, he encapsulates the qualities of Donald and MacDonald's (2014) “Hero” archetype. In the fantasy of war films, Donald and MacDonald describe the “Heroes” as “men serving with distinction, bravely assaulting the enemy's bastion, saving their comrades, and winning the day.” (102) Animal Mother bravely assaults the fortified sniper's nest at the film's climax, saving his friends and helping kill the enemy. He checks off every box, and yet, he also functions as the worst example of the man in war. He is all those things taken to their most extreme and sociopathic level: anger, hatred, bloodlust, and the power to enact all those violent tendencies on both enemy combatants and civilians without guilt or remorse. In this way,

he also fits the label of “The Woman Hater and the Psychopath.” Donald and MacDonald focus exclusively on the misogyny of this archetype-- and *Animal Mother* certainly displays misogyny when dealing with the Vietnamese prostitute-- but I find that his presentation of psychopathy is more emphasized in the joy he experiences (or pretends to experience) in killing. His casual racism-- both to the Vietnamese and his fellow soldiers-- is but a part of the ways in which Kubrick presents the horrific mindset of a character who perfectly performs the heroic masculine traits we expect out of war heroes.

Kubrick’s film is but one example of the ways in which films about the Vietnam War bucked trends and resisted clean archetypal definitions. Instead, these films critique and tweak such a belief system by crafting stories in which that very moment of masculine ascension is the tragedy of that character’s life. Similarly, men who embody the Hero archetype-- thought never faultless, even in the pre-modern era-- were presented as monstrous sociopaths. *Animal Mother* is but an example, we also have characters like *Platoon*’s Sergeant Barnes (Tom Berenger) or *Apocalypse Now*’s Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando) who function to closely link success in war with psychopathy. More than anything, the run of films about the Vietnam War from 1979 to the late-1980s criticized the war by criticizing war: they illuminated the toxic and dangerous values we espouse when we cheered for American soldiers as they killed enemy combatants. What I find most fascinating about this period is the way it coincided so exactly with a run of genre films that simultaneously valorized the very traits Kubrick, Coppola, and Stone set out to dismantle.

Post-Vietnam

Ironically, the films I categorize as “Post-Vietnam” actually begin releasing before many of the films I would categorize as “Vietnam” movies. Of the many stand-alone and franchises that fit under my Post-Vietnam distinction, the Rambo film series is the most fascinating. Beyond Stallone’s career arc before and after *First Blood*, the dramatic shift in the image of the male action star (particularly his body), or the seemingly unaware unironic use of phallic weapon imagery, the most shocking element of *First Blood Part II* is how dramatically it swings the narrative away from the original anti-war message of *First Blood*. For much of the original film, John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) attempts to avoid conflict and simply wants to be left alone. His reluctant return to the violence of war only occurs after he is backed into conflict by the town’s sheriff. In fact, an original cut of the ending featured Rambo begging Trautman (Richard Crenna) to kill him-- and eventually forcing Trautman to pull the trigger. This version more closely resembles the “broken soldier” narratives, which argue that rather than building boys into men, war actually destroys the lives of even those that survive and come home. Instead, test audiences revolted, and the studio decided to film the ending we see in theatres: Rambo gives up his gun and turns himself in peacefully. This twist functions not only to set up the character for future sequels (we get two more movies, some video games, and even a television show), but also to shift the rhetoric of the film toward a rehabilitation narrative.

Rehabilitation is at the core of the fantasy behind these action adventure Post-Vietnam films. When Rambo, in *First Blood Part II*, asks Trautman “Sir, do we get to win this time?” there are several implications behind this statement. First, and most primary, is the recognition of loss, and of the lingering traumatic effect of having lost the war. Vietnam represents the shattering of the fantasy of America’s military invincibility--

it was the first time we were forced to understand that we could “lose” in battle, despite having overwhelming might and power. Winning “this time” indicates that Rambo, and by extension American audiences everywhere, believes in the restorative, healing power of victory. The fantasy of this question imagines winning as a salve that functions to erase the scars of previous traumas. Finally, there is the most pointed section of Rambo’s sentence: “get to.” This is where the aggressive hyper-masculinity of the Reagan era is imagined as restorative and rehabilitary. “Get to” implies that the reason we lost in Vietnam was not because of our soldiers, or because the military was ill-equipped to fight this type of foe in this type of locale with this type of armed force; rather, the reason we lost was because someone (some structure) prevented that victory by handicapping our military’s efforts. Although Rambo never explicitly blames a particular group or institution, the implication is that the anti-war movement and liberal politicians-- those “Girlie Men” Arnold Schwarzenegger mocked during the 1988 and 1992 American presidential campaigns-- were the root cause of the emasculating loss that was Vietnam. Attempts to heal that loss sought to combat the perceived feminization of America through a rebooted hyper-masculinity that found its home in the swollen and muscular bodies of actors like Stallone, Schwarzenegger, Chuck Norris, and Jean-Claude VanDamme. Through the bodies of these actors (and their similarly bulging and exaggerated weapons arsenals), the fantasy of war-as-healing was solidified. When Rambo “get[s] to win this time,” his victory is restorative-- the sins of the loss in Vietnam are washed away, allowing him to recapture his pride, his honor, and his masculinity.

In the war films of Vietnam, and in the action films of the Post-Vietnam era, there exist two major oscillations that I find instructive as we move forward to the films about

our current conflict: first, the oscillation between a need to understand the war through a commitment to honest and introspective realism, as we see in films like *Full Metal Jacket* or *Born on the Fourth of July*, and a need to rehabilitate the losses of the war through an excursion into fantasy and myth-making, as we see in films like *Predator* or *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. Second, I identify an oscillation between the meaning and significance of the home front and the war zone. For the films about the Vietnam war, the home front often represents a safe origin space (before deployment) or a space to process the mental and emotional trauma of battle (upon return). The war zone, meanwhile, is only ever conceived of as a space of corruption and damage. Nothing is preserved here, and even the most stable of ideologies such as masculinity or patriotism, are broken and destroyed. Conversely, the fantasy action film imagines the home front as a den of snakes, full of those too weak to take the necessary action to heal and resolve the trauma, while the war zone is presented as the only space in which proper recovery and healing can occur. These oscillations are a crucial component of understanding films that emerge during the wars that follow.

The Gulf War

Relatively few films exist about the Gulf War. Even fewer of those made noteworthy impacts. Of those, *Jarhead* (2005) releases well after the beginning of the War on Terror, making it difficult to distinguish between the film's commentary on Operation Desert Storm and Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. Instead, David O. Russell's *Three Kings* remains as the most important film from the inter-war period about the first Gulf War. Russell's film at times combines and at other times reframes the two distinct oscillations I charted after Vietnam. With regards to fantasy and reality, the film takes a

blended approach-- offering moments of realism and grittiness mixed with other moments full of action genre tropes and comedy one-liners. Location is reframed. Russell offers a glimpse into the logical conflicts that arise when the thwarted desires for hyper-masculine fantasy brush up against the obligations of the media and soldiers themselves to produce a narrative of healing and redemption for the civilians back home.

Attempting to fit *Three Kings* into a genre is rather difficult. Its IMDB page lists it as “Action, Adventure, Comedy.” No mention of “war” in the header, despite the film being specifically about the final days of the Gulf War. Despite its genre agnosticism, the film borrows its structure from classic road trip war movies such as *The Guns of Navarone* or *Saving Private Ryan*, where a small group of soldiers take on an important task behind enemy lines. However, in *Three Kings*, the mission is an illegal and self-serving heist to steal millions of dollars’ worth of Hussein’s gold. Thus, the film at times plays like a traditional war film: we get a “band of brothers,” we see the complex and grey morality of war, and the Sissy character-- Conrad Vig (Spike Jonze)-- manages to get himself killed, but not before attaining manhood through a heroic sacrifice. On the other hand, these dark and gritty elements of war films are juxtaposed with lighthearted moments of comedy and masculine fantasies of action. Russell’s editing is perhaps the most apparent sign that the film works to blur the lines between a realistic war film and an escapist adventure film. He signals this through his use of stylized action shots during moments of dramatic tension we would expect from a war film.

One such scene occurs midway through the movie, when Troy Barlow (Mark Wahlberg), the happy-go-lucky infantryman, is shot through the lung during a brief skirmish somewhere in Kuwait. Earlier in the film, audiences are informed about the

specific and deadly nature of the “sucking chest wound”-- an injury in which a vacuum between the wound and the lung causes the act of breathing to crush the heart and ribcage. Barlow is in serious danger, and his good friend Vig lies dead at his side. Russell opens with a low angle point-of-view shot from Barlow’s perspective, as Chief Elgin (Ice Cube) and Archie Gates (George Clooney) kneel above him. A low dissonant music plays, but the sound of Elgin’s and Gates’ voice is distorted-- further placing the audience in Barlow’s shoes. As Gates leans in to assess the injury, Russell cuts to what looks like a science-fair reenactment of a lung puncture. The disembodied organs play through the deflating of the lung and the subsequent buildup of air pressure in the cavity. After Gates releases the pressure, the film cuts back to a point-of-view shot as Barlow’s hearing returns to normal. This is not the type of scene typical of a war film. Its highly-stylized nature and use of strange, gimmicky props pulls the audience out of the moment. On top of that, point-of-view shots in war films are usually reserved when the character is trying to see something-- not when the director wants the audience to experience a traumatic wound first-hand. This is but one example of the many ways in which *Three Kings* works-- often in the same scene-- between staying true to a traditional war film narrative and taking the sorts of stylistic risks more typical of action and adventure films.

Location and rehabilitation are similarly complicated in *Three Kings*. As in many Vietnam films, the press (represented by grizzled reporter Adriana Cruz (Nora Dunn)) is present in this film, and stands in as a proxy civilian presence throughout. Cruz is looking for a story to tell about the war, but is fed up with the careful handling she receives from the military. Instead, she wants something raw and real to bring home with her. At the same time, she finds herself repeating President George Bush’s claims about the

rehabilitative powers of military victory in Iraq, when she asks a canned question to a soldier: “they say you exercised the ghosts of Vietnam with a clear moral imperative.” Throughout the rest of the film, Cruz will search for that clarity, only to find, as the soldiers do, a murky set of circumstances. Cruz’s role by the end of the film is not so much to report facts as to craft a narrative about moral clarity around the actions of Gaines, Elgin, and Barlow. Although she eventually finds something raw and real to report on, her whitewashing of the events during the broadcast helps further the notion of the war zone as a space for healing and rehabilitating the damaged nationalism and masculinity of the Vietnam war.

Cruz stands in for a civilian perspective of war, and carries with her the fantasies of those in the homeland. That perspective is contrasted with the experiences of the soldiers themselves. The film opens with a title card stating “March 1991. The war just ended.” Barlow confronts a distant Iraqi soldier, but he cannot tell if the man is surrendering or getting ready to open fire. Barlow pre-emptively fires on the soldier, striking a fatal shot to the neck. As the man bleeds out, we learn through dialogue that not only is this Barlow’s first time firing his weapon during the entire war, but he is the only man from his entire unit to fire a weapon. Traumatized, Barlow turns away in disgust as his squadmates gleefully watch the man die. Russell then immediately cuts to a montage of soldiers celebrating the end of the war in various base camps. The audience is treated to shots of men lounging on trampolines, spraying each other with water bottles, and dancing around. A major point of visual emphasis is how bored all the soldiers appear to be. They do not seem relieved that the horrifying war has ended so much as they seem grateful to get back home after a tedious summer camp. Of the entire montage, I find the

sequence of soldiers working out to be most emblematic of the types of stories that are told about the Gulf War. Here we see shirtless men with Rambo-type physiques training hard, their veins bulging against their skin. This sequence creates a visual irony with the cold open of the film where we learn that for most of these men there was never any actual combat during which to put their swollen masculinities to the test. Unlike the healing and rehabilitation metaphors Bush and Cruz use to talk about the war, their sequence illustrates that for the soldiers nothing was healed or rehabilitated because there was never a true opportunity to “get to win this time.” When Gaines, Elgin, and Barlow go on their crazy adventure through the desert, they find those opportunities. But the film is very clear that those opportunities occur only in the fantasy of action and adventure films, not during the war. In this way, *Three Kings* reframes the home front and the war zone as more wholly detached than they were imagined in Vietnam films. This detachment of spaces is itself a fantasy, but the belief informs much of the structure of films about the War on Terror.

Fantasies of Stability: Location

In a November 2015 interview with NPR host Steve Inskeep, Senator John McCain, fielding a question about President Barack Obama’s hesitance to get involved with the conflict in Syria made a bold assertion:

You can fight them there or you can fight them here. That's your choice now. That's your choice. And obviously, the president wants to fight them here, but I would rather fight them there [...] And [defeating ISIS] can be done, and it could easily be done. They are not 10 feet tall. They can be

defeated. The United States of America is the strongest nation in the world, and ISIS is doing just fine, thanks.

It is not McCain's partisan claim that Obama would like to fight terrorists here or his claim that daesh could be defeated easily that most interest me, however. Rather, it is McCain's assertion that the conflict will either happen "here" or "there" that I find fascinating. McCain's statement is nothing new, he is simply resetting George W. Bush's popular claim that "We are fighting these terrorists with our military in Afghanistan and Iraq and beyond so we do not have to face them in the streets of our own cities"³² to the current conflict. These claims simultaneously call back to the "Domino theory" rhetoric used to defend American involvement in the Vietnam War, with the crucial difference being that terrorists had already attacked Americans "at home" in 2001 and several times after. More importantly, McCain's and Bush's statements illustrate a belief in-- or fantasy for-- a conflict with clear boundaries and lines. The veracity of these statements is of less interest to me than the desire they betray: a dream of stability in a war without any.

Bush and McCain express longing for a conflict more similar to the first Gulf War, in which America could flex its "strongest nation in the world" muscles and quickly end battle through sheer firepower against an overmatched enemy. Instead, they find themselves in conflict with an enemy they cannot locate or identify, an enemy whose very structure erases borders, battlefields, and uniforms. In this sense, a desire to reinstate stability, even through a fantasy of clear demarcations between "over there" and "over here," makes sense, but it does not represent the reality of the War on Terror. The War on Terror is not just a war where the conflict happens in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Syria, nor it is

³² Bush makes a variation of this statement many times from 2002 to 2005. This direct quote is from an October 25, 2004 speech.

a war where the conflict happens “over here” in America; rather, the War on Terror is one in which the conflict is always happening both “over there” and “over here” simultaneously and permanently. What I mean to clarify is specifically that the lack of a clear here/there conflict zone dynamic is not an anomaly of the War on Terror, is it the primary feature.

The relationship between this reality of the war and the anxiety it produces does not immediately present itself in the cinema of the early or mid-2000s. Partially, this is because very few War Films release during this period, and partially this is because American filmmakers focused exhaustively on trauma and PTSD in soldiers. Kathryn Bigelow’s *The Hurt Locker* (2008) agonizes over the anxiety of mystery and uncertainty during the war, but ultimately focuses on the soldiers’ motivations for returning to that unsafe space. Her 2012 film, *Zero Dark Thirty*, tells the incredible “true” tale of the mission to kill bin Laden, but emphasizes the “artificial barrier” between enforcement and intelligence Cheney claims the PATRIOT Act eradicated. In this film, trauma becomes a driving force for revenge; however, Maya (Jessica Chastain) spends the entire film gathering intelligence only to sit on the sidelines while Seal Team 6 gets to enact vengeance. For a film about an American moment of resolution for 9/11, the protagonist is noticeably passive. Bigelow’s films are early forays into the dark heart of American involvement in the War on Terror. Beyond being masterful examinations of a still-fresh conflict, they open the door for films about the Iraq and Afghani Wars, several of which come out between 2012 and 2014. This timeline roughly mirrors Obama’s troop withdrawal period, in which the number of soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan decreases from an all-time high of over 100,000 in 2011 down to 16,000 (and the end of

combat missions) by December 2014. Perhaps emboldened by the seeming end of the conflict, American producers began funding more films about the current conflict.

Two films, 2014's *Good Kill* and *American Sniper* emerge from this transitory period of the war in order to tell stories about the ambiguous nature of the battlefield in the War on Terror. These films, through drastically different narratives, complicate and disrupt McCain's and Bush's notions of borders and locations in modern conflicts. *Good Kill* tells the story of a drone pilot living in Las Vegas and flying strike drones over targets in Afghanistan. As his marriage deteriorates, he struggles to resolve his role in potential war crimes and attempts to seek out a morally just ("good") kill in a murky world. *American Sniper* examines the struggles soldiers face as they move through "over there" and "back home" spaces; simultaneously venerating a decorated sniper and complicating notions of certainty in a shadowy war. In this section, I would like to examine how these films deal with the spaces of the battlefield and the home front, and in doing so challenge the Bush/McCain fantasy of clear boundaries.

Good Kill opens with a drone's-eye view of an Afghani city, and then cuts to an extreme close up of pilot Major Thomas Egan's (Ethan Hawke) eye. This sequence presents an inversion of the normal shot-reverse shot structure viewers would expect to experience: first we see the eye looking at something, then we see the thing. In this case, the order of the shots indicates that the drone's view is primary to the text. Egan controls the drone, but is himself operating under the orders of his CO and later the CIA. Central to the tension of the plot is Egan's increasing discomfort with his orders. When the film begins, Egan takes orders from his commanding officer, pilots the drone to a location, marks the target, and fires a bomb. Soon, the CIA begins intervening and requesting

specific targets beyond Egan's normal operating boundaries (locations other than Afghanistan, for example). Egan is forced to transgress both physical and moral boundaries, as the CIA increasingly asks him to drop bombs that inflict collateral damage, culminating when voice over the telecom instructs him to bomb civilian paramedics and rescuers rushing to the scene of an attack. All of this movement and transgression of borders happens while Egan is ironically fixed in his physical location-- as the pilot of a drone, he simply operates a flight stick while watching a video screen. The interaction hardly rises above a video game, although the results are much more real. Egan's world moves and operates at high speeds around him while he sits stationary in a storage container.

The grandest moment of visual rhetoric in *Good Kill* comes on the door to Egan's storage container. The container itself is a bland, tan-colored metal shipping crate in a row of other bland, tan-colored metal shipping crates. On the door of the container is a sign that reads "YOU ARE NOW LEAVING THE USA." The sign itself is a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the dual nature of location for drone pilots: the drone becomes their "body" in the field. The sign also becomes a commentary on the unstable nature of borders in the War on Terror, especially when we consider drone warfare. The door to Egan's crate becomes a transitional space, not for his body but for actions. When he enters the crate and sits in the pilot's chair, his morality shifts to that of the soldier in a war zone; he makes kill-or-be-killed choices despite never being in harm's way himself. These choices force us to consider where Egan works-- is he in the United States or, as the sign suggests, Afghanistan? Legally, he operates under the rules of war, but Egan's ability to easily move between the war and his civilian life are unlike anything soldiers

have experienced before. The boundaries of battle are not so clear to Egan, as the sign on his door illustrates, and these unclear boundaries complicate his understanding of where he fits in this war. Over the course of the film, we learn Egan was a pilot, and wants to go back to film live-action missions. For him, the location of his body matters-- flying a jet over Afghanistan, being in harm's way, provides desperately-needed legitimacy to his kills. Egan's anxiety about his location reveals his desperate need to understand his location as grounded to a boundary.

Egan's desire to place his body in the danger zone of the battlefield is juxtaposed against the dreamy safety of his suburban life in Las Vegas. Director Andrew Niccol shoots the scenes inside the crate with dim lighting and high contrast. The little light we do see in the drone station is provided by the computer screens, and thus hued green and yellow. Conversely, the cinematography of the scenes around Egan's Las Vegas home is bright and open. The sky is blue and seems to continue beyond the horizon, without a cloud in sight. Egan's lawn is perfectly trimmed and a well-watered and healthy green. His wife, Molly (January Jones), looks the part of a suburban housewife with her blonde hair and conservative outfits. Niccol highlights this brightness ironically, however, as we quickly learn that Egan feels more distraught about his life outside the crate than he does about his life inside it. Egan's life inside the crate is in many ways responsible for the turmoil outside of it, but when he is inside the box those concerns evaporate in the face of the mission.

Egan complicates his married life by attempting to maintain a strong barrier between what he does in his crate and his life at home. He refuses to tell his wife what he does, out of a desire to protect her, despite the fact that he brings his negativity and self-

loathing home in the form of an increasingly dangerous alcoholism. At one point, he drunkenly and violently lashes out, driving Molly away with his children. His new co-pilot, Vera (Zoë Kravitz), introduces further complications into his home life as he slowly develops feelings for her, perhaps because of her unique ability to understand what goes on inside the crate. Their shared trauma is comforting to Egan because he no longer has to bottle his life into separate spheres-- he can openly discuss his concerns about the mission with someone who understands what it is like in the room. Ultimately, Egan rejects his attraction to Vera and leaves to seek out Molly. Having just quit his job, Egan now feels able to reconnect with his estranged wife. The conclusion, and his attempt to reconcile his problems, points to Egan's belief that his life inside and outside the crate needs to be kept separate. He does not appear able to resolve his marital issues while still piloting the drone; rather, he acts as though his job with the military was the thing distancing him from his home life. Egan's concern with keeping his two spheres separate is so strong that he believes the only way to repair one is to forsake the other. His actions reinforce the fantasy that the War happens in another location, and attempting to blend those spaces only ends in trauma. The crate's status as an ambiguous space is too much for Egan and his marriage. His disavowal of the liminal nature of the crate is an affirmation of-- or a fantasy for-- the solidity of borders.

American Sniper's Chris Kyle (Bradley Cooper) does not deal with transitory spaces-- instead he physically transitions between the war and the homeland only to find that the clean break between those locations is not as definitive as he imagined. It is not the border that becomes blurred, it is the soldier. Kyle's biggest issue in the homeland is the inability to "turn off" his soldier identity. As a sniper, he has a different interaction

with the battlefield; rather than proximity, Kyle experiences the sensory intensity of war from a distance. His moment of acute emotion are balanced against hours (and at times days) long periods of watching. Kyle interacts with the battlefield through the mediated lens of his sniper rifle. The film opens with his father telling a young Chris that his role in the world is that of a sheepdog, emphasizing that Kyle is responsible for preventing wolves (evil men) from attacking sheep (innocents). Like Kyle, most of a sheepdog's life is spent simply watching, waiting for an attack. That same supernatural hypervigilance director Clint Eastwood mythologizes about Kyle becomes a detriment when he leaves the combat zone. Kyle's civilian identity disappears after he joins the military and deploys, and he is unable to recover it despite the dreamy calm of his life in the suburbs.

Eastwood focuses on a few incidents of distress in Kyle's home life as a way of illustrating his inability to reclaim his civilian identity despite his transition back into the homeland. Like many directors, Eastwood focuses on the genre trope of a singular event as a marker for PTSD. As a sniper, Kyle was less likely to be in immediate danger. Instead, the trauma he would regularly face would be the hours-long surge of adrenaline he would experience while sitting in his perch "overwatch" position, scanning the landscape for potential attacks on the soldiers below. His trauma, like the trauma many soldiers experience in modern war, comes from the accumulation of the extended anxiety of imminent danger. Because the War on Terror is not a conflict against a military force-- or even against a unified enemy-- battles and skirmishes are never planned ahead of time and often emerge from the most unlikely of scenarios. These surprise attacks create a reality where even the most mundane of tasks could be precursor to death or serious injury. This constant state of stress from hyper vigilance contributes a significant portion

of the trauma that many soldiers bring back with them to America. Instead of confronting that reality, Eastwood instead decides to link Kyle's trauma to a specific event where a sniper kills his friend. Kyle's failure to protect his friends becomes a psychic scar that sticks with him even after he leaves the battlefield. Back home in the suburbs, Kyle's inability to "turn off" his soldier identity manifests itself in panic attacks during mundane activities (such as shopping in a mall) or misreadings of harmless situations.

A particular scene that serves to illustrate Kyle's struggles abroad also illuminates his struggles with clear borders and a clean break between his soldier and civilian personas. Eastwood puts Kyle in two scenes during a child's birthday party at his home. In the first shot, Kyle sits alone in his living room, staring intensely at a blank television screen. Slowly, the quiet sounds of children laughing and playing outside are drowned out by the cacophony of war: guns, explosions, shouting. Clearly, the perspective of this shot moves into Kyle's inner thoughts as the outside world is drowned out. Even when he is physically present in the homeland, his mind is unable to leave the battlefield behind. The stickiness of the war zone works against Bush and McCain's notion of the clear here/there boundaries between America and the War on Terror. Kyle is only rescued from his war zone trance when his wife enters the room and pleads with him to join the party outside. For Tara (Sienna Miller), the only hope to help him escape the horrors of the war zone is the crossing of another boundary-- this time outside with other people.

In the next shot, Eastwood presents a more engaged and happier Kyle, as he sips his beer and laughs along with Tara. As the shot opens, it appears that traversing the border between inside/outside and solitude/community has worked, and Kyle is finally starting to leave the war behind. Rather quickly, however, this notion changes. Eastwood

uses sensory triggers to mark the breakdown of Kyle's calm and happy exterior-- a child's laughter becomes a shrill shriek, kids playing with a ball move jaggedly in his peripheral vision. As the internal tension builds, Eastwood does a slow zoom in on Kyle's face-- using the thousand-yard stare in his eyes to betray a chaotic interiority. Finally, Kyle snaps when his family dog jumps playfully on one of the children-- he robotically jumps from his sitting position and stalks calmly over to the animal while simultaneously removing his belt in a fluid motion. As he tackles the unsuspecting dog, he begins to beat it with a belt before Tara's scream of "CHRIS!" snaps him out of his trance. The scene finishes with Kyle, dazed and panicked, looking back at Tara helplessly.

Two things interest me about this scene, with regard to (un)clear here/there dynamics: (1) Kyle's misrecognition of the danger, and (2) his transformation into a zombie-like soldier in response to that perceived danger. Kyle's misrecognition of the danger stems from his initial rejection of reality: he is no longer in a war zone where constant threats await him, even at the most innocent events. This is not a conscious rejection, and it is difficult to trace this back to the trauma he experienced watching his friend die-- even though Eastwood attempts this by linking this scene with the previous scene where Kyle experiences sensory flashbacks in front a blank television screen. Rather, this type of hypervigilance, even in the safety of his own home, is the result of the accumulation of stress and anxiety over hours, days, and months sitting in overwatch in war zones. The trauma, then, is not linked to a specific attack; rather, it is the result of a constant erasure of his civilian identity through his time in the military and in the war zone. He is unable to "turn off" his sniper's eye because his civilian eye has been sublimated to the point of non-existence. For Kyle, there is no clear boundary between

soldier and civilian, and the fantasy he or his wife have about the ability turn it on and off simply by leaving the war zone is proven false. Instead, we see the way in which Kyle's soldier identity bubbles just below the surface, even beneath a calm and happy exterior. Once the sensory overload kicks in, Kyle's movements cease to be conscious. He lifts from his seated position almost as if struck by a cattle prod, and he paces over to the dog as if possessed. In many ways, he is possessed-- by his soldier identity. I used the word "zombie" earlier to describe it, because he functions as if his brain is on autopilot. The soldier identity wipes clean his consciousness and assumes control in the face of any threat. The danger this scene illuminates is that once one enters into the war zone, every single situation is a potential threat. The fantasy of a stable border between here and there fades away, and the two spaces become blended.

Fantasies of Stability: Surveillance

The first theatrical trailer for *American Sniper* was a masterwork of tension and intrigue. It began as the film does, with a scene of sniper Chris Kyle sitting overwatch as a company of soldiers goes door-to-door patrolling the streets of a bombed-out Iraqi city. A woman and a young boy exit a nearby house, and Kyle believes he sees the woman holding a grenade. Through tense dialogue between Kyle and his commander, we are forced to ask ourselves: what did we see? Was it a grenade, or some innocent object? The trailer cuts back and forth between happy images of Kyle's civilian life to his intense stare down the barrel of his sniper rifle as his finger glances the trigger and prepares to make a split-second life-or-death decision to shoot the woman and her child. Both the trailer and opening scene cut before we get to see if he pulls the trigger. His spotter cautions Kyle against making a rash decision: "they'll fry you if you're wrong." Only,

Kyle is not wrong. The woman was carrying a grenade, and he is able to shoot both her and her son before they can attack the soldiers-- saving several dozen lives in the process. Eastwood's film uses this sequence as a refrain-- returning to it later on in order to make more sense of the tension between knowing and not-knowing. Throughout the film, Eastwood forces the audience to see things from Kyle's perspective-- was that a bomb? How could I be sure?-- before his initial assessment is proven right. In every instance of "should he or shouldn't he?" Chris Kyle is proven right. And yet, that same certainty that he exhibits in making these decisions is problematized by the information we get from Eastwood's camera. The film's plot relieves the stress of not-knowing by presenting Kyle as always-right, and yet that fantasy becomes clouded when the audience sees firsthand that his certainty of sight is often nothing more than irrational hyper-confidence.

Throughout this chapter, I have chronicled the fantasy of surveillance put forth by the Bush administration during the War on Terror. The fantasy, I argue, is that surveillance can serve as a shield against future terror attacks; more specifically, that the accumulation of surveillance-- the bulk quantity of it-- can allow us to prevent any future 9/11s. Cheney's claim that "we might have been able to pick up two hijackers" before 9/11 is founded in the belief that voluminous information leads to safety and security. These claims are different than the 9/11 erasure I chronicle in Chapter Three in that surveillance only provides the certainty from which action can spring forth. However, the belief that information gained from surveillance offers anything close to certainty is one of the greatest fantasies of the War on Terror. And yet, as a fantasy, it has legs: both *American Sniper* and *Good Kill* traffic in the notion that there is such a thing as "good"

surveillance, and that justified actions are the result of the accumulation of knowledge and information.

Two other scenes in *American Sniper* work to reinforce the notion that Kyle's surveillance is supernatural and perfect. The first scene happens after his company is forced to take refuge in the home of an Iraqi man who happens to live across the street from a target location. Kyle and his men gladly accept the offer of shelter and a good meal while on their mission, and the opening of the scene features a slow tracking shot around the room as they laugh, joke, and eat heartily. The scene initially functions as a window in the social lives of these men: we see them as just normal people, who enjoy jokes, good food, and friendship. The camera comes to a rest on the Iraqi man and his son. His son struggles with homework, and the man aides his son. In a moment of carelessness, he knocks his son's notepad off the table and bends over to pick it up. Eastwood freezes time, drawing a split second over several seconds, as he cuts from the man leaning over to Kyle's face. Kyle stares intensely, and Eastwood cuts back to the man's elbow, where we see a large scrape or rash. This image is frozen along with Kyle's stare for several seconds, until the man picks up the paper and returns to his dinner. Time speeds back up to normal as Kyle's face expresses a realization: this man is a sniper. He excuses himself to snoop around the man's house, and unsurprisingly finds a weapons cache hidden underneath the floor. He returns to the dining room and beats the man severely, while his men watch in shock.

On the surface, this scene description reads a little ridiculous. It should: Kyle makes a huge leap in logic from "this man has a scrape on his elbow" to "this man is an enemy combatant." Yet, he is correct in his initial assumption. As with the sequence that

opens the film, Kyle is forced to make a split-second decision based on surveillance or knowledge that we would consider less than solid-- and as with the opening sequence, he is completely correct in his assessment. Kyle's father opens the film telling him that he is specially gifted-- as a "sheepdog" he has the talent of protection, but he must always use that talent to protect the sheep from the wolves. Eastwood does not present this scene as a portrait of the ideology that drives Kyle-- he presents it as fact. Throughout the film, Kyle's "sight" is heralded as borderline supernatural. His ability to surveil and gather knowledge (accurate knowledge) is without peer. From Eastwood's perspective, Chris Kyle's overwatch ability is perfect.

Nowhere is that belief more apparent-- and more ridiculous-- than in the film's climax, where Kyle finds himself surrounded and caught in a dust storm with an enemy sniper thousands of meters away. The enemy sniper, Mustafa (Sammy Sheik), passes for the film's primary antagonist, constantly eluding the business end of Kyle's sniper rifle throughout the story. In this scene, Kyle finally has Mustafa where he wants him: beyond any realistic range for an expert sniper. As Kyle stares down the barrel, the audience is asked to see the world through his eyes. Even through his telescope lens, all we can see is a hazy far-away set of shapes. Kyle knows it is Mustafa, though, and takes careful aim. Again, we see through his lens; again, just the faint outline of what might be a head. Kyle pulls the trigger, and the film slows to bullet time as Eastwood cuts back and forth between Kyle's knowing gaze and Mustafa's unaware gaze just before the bullet kills him. As before, what strikes me about this scene is not that Kyle was right, or that he was able to successfully complete the impossible shot; rather, I am struck by the fact that the film revels in his certainty despite presenting clear visual evidence that there is no way he

can be certain. Kyle's spotter tells him "if you've got it, take the shot." Yet, we can clearly see that what he is certain he sees is far from the vague shapes we can see. The contradiction between Kyle's certainty in his surveillance and the blurriness of the images we see on screen is not presented ironically, however. Instead, Eastwood revels in the mythology of Chris Kyle's perfect sight. As a sheepdog, his talents are unique to him. The rest of us sheep lack the skill to properly sniff out the wolves. Eastwood's mythology is just that: myth, fiction. His presentation of Kyle's abilities further the fantasy of the connection between surveillance and safety.

Unlike *American Sniper*, *Good Kill* does not traffic in the mythology of exceptional American sight; however, Andrew Niccol's film does reinforce the notion that there exists a "perfect" surveillance. Niccol juxtaposes the bulk of the film-- in which Egan is forced to conduct drone bombing raids on unknown-to-him targets selected by the CIA-- against the climactic scene of the film, in which Egan goes rogue to drone strike a known rapist. As the film moves forward, Egan becomes more detached from his work and depressed. I have covered the impact on his relationships earlier, but his frustration with his job affects him in his crate as well. Niccol uses a series of repeated close-ups to highlight the subtle shifts in Egan's character. After being briefed on his target by a CIA agent, Egan readies the drone. Niccol uses a three-shot structure from here out: a close shot of Egan's face, staring at the video display of his drone; a reverse-shot of the screen itself, which is grainy and desaturated to mimic poor-quality surveillance footage; and finally, a close-up of Egan's hands, which push buttons and guide the drone into firing position. Niccol uses pace to increase the intensity of the action-- as his edits between the three shots become more rapid as they build toward the

moment Egan fires a rocket-- but the progression we see from kill to kill comes written all over Egan's face. At first, Egan feels confident and justified striking his targets; his face indicates that he generally enjoys eliminating threats to American Democracy. Once the CIA steps in, and Egan's targets become more shadowy and suspicious, Egan's face is more strained. By the end of his time working for the CIA, his face is stoic and frozen. Niccol pairs this transformation with an increased focus on Egan's hands-- a nod to the robotic nature of his work, and a reflection of Egan's increased detachment from the morality of his actions. He still makes "successful" kills, but he no longer makes "good" kills.

The uncertainty over the righteousness of a kill is what drives Egan away from his job as a drone pilot. This same anxiety also drives Egan to quit his job in the most spectacular way possible: by firing an unauthorized drone rocket on an unauthorized target of his own choosing. Throughout the film, Egan is forced to observe (through his position as the "eyes" of the drone) a man in a village repeatedly rape a woman without consequence. Egan expresses frustration that he cannot do anything about it, but is cautioned that a strike against such a low-value target would jeopardize the military's surveillance operation of a compound in the town. At the climax of the film, Egan locks himself in his shipping container all alone. He fires up the drone, pilots it to the town, zeroes in on the man (who conveniently happens to be on his way to rape the woman again), positions the drone, and fires the rocket at the man before he can again rape the woman. Here, Niccol repeats the same triple shot structure-- face, screen, hands-- but this time Egan's enthusiasm and engagement are much higher. Egan is excited about this kill because he knows it is a "good" one. Unlike the missions he pilots for the CIA, the

intelligence that supports this drone strike comes from him, personally. He observes the man raping the woman, he judges that act to be worthy of death, and he positions himself as executioner. The central thesis of the film becomes laid bare: there are “good” kills, but they require a knowledge more intimate than that which comes from an intelligence agency. *Good Kill* draws a line of purity between the observer and the actor-- the only “good” kills are those that the executioner himself has verified personally.

While *Good Kill* is open about its anti-war stance, it still does much to reinforce the fantasies of perfect surveillance I critique in *American Sniper*. In fact, both films conclude with a similar personal-choice kill shot that the audience is supposed to cheer. *Good Kill* presents the idea that Egan’s kill is “good” because his surveillance is “good”-- that is to say, honestly and personally conducted. The film concludes with a reborn Egan, feeling fresh after having cleansed his demons in the drone crate, heading back to his wife and children with the goal of rehabilitation. While *American Sniper* argues that perfect surveillance can save our nation, *Good Kill* presents the notion that “good” surveillance can save our souls. In the end, both films rely on a trope of surveillance-as-savior to drive their moral messages home. The fantasies of perfect surveillance they construct mirror the language of Dick Cheney in 2006: with the proper knowledge, we can ensure a completely safe America. The Bush Administration asked us to forget the cost of this intelligence-gather, and focus only on the result. However, the promise of safety through surveillance is a fantasy that never made it off celluloid.

Coda

In a 2016 interview on the American President Election at Vanity Fair's New Establishment Summit, comedian Fran Lebowitz described Donald Trump as

a poor person's idea of a rich person. [Poor people] see him. They think, 'If I were rich, I'd have a fabulous tie like that. Why are my ties not made of 400 acres of polyester?' All that stuff he shows you in his house— the gold faucets— if you won the lottery, that's what you'd buy.

As someone who grew up poor, I can argue that Lebowitz vastly overestimates how much poor people think about ties; however, her observation about Trump's appeal to the working class has been fertile ground for liberal anxieties following the election. Despite the truth pointing toward a multitude of complex variables, article after article attempted to work through Trump's appeal to "common" voters— was it the case that liberals were too focused on identity politics to the detriment of white working class people, or was it the case that Trump's scapegoating of minority groups resonated with working class white men? Lebowitz's point is well-made: if class were a consideration, why would the embodiment of excess be able to pass as the people's champion? Trump's appeal among working-class whites seems to detach "class" from "money" in a very specific way— he connects to these voters through style in spite of his wealth. In this way, his greatest detriments— borderline inarticulate speech patterns, gaudy and tacky aesthetics— held up a mirror for white working-class voters.

At the same time, many public thinkers took on the issue of gender in the 2016 campaign. How did Hillary Clinton's gender affect her chances? When will Americans be ready for a female president? Lost in these volumes of thought about Clinton's

femininity (or “lack” thereof) are acknowledgements of Trump’s masculinity. Repeatedly throughout the campaign, Republicans accused Clinton of “playing the woman card,” as though references to one’s gender were tawdry in a political campaign. Lost among this is what Susan Bordo calls the “man card”— the constant referrals to masculinity that inundate nearly every American political campaign. In *The Destruction of Hillary Clinton*, Bordo calls out the constantly-played man card that never gets acknowledged: Ronald Reagan looking the Western hero on a horse, George W. Bush as the working man on his ranch, or Marco Rubio’s “small hands” comments that became a political meme in 2016. Masculine posturing has always played a huge role in American politics, and Trump’s aggressive and excessive hyper-masculine ethos shaped the campaign every bit as much as Clinton’s gender. And yet, as always, masculinity slips through our gender radars as invisible.

Trump’s gender is ripe for critique, and in a dissertation about shifts in masculinity as a result of 9/11 seems a perfect place to conclude. One of his largest appeals to voters was as the “anti-Obama” candidate— Republicans called it “anti-establishment,” many have called it “authoritarian,” and Trump dubbed himself the “law and order” president. Tied together in these conceptions of a man is the brand of masculinity he sold: MAGA, a return to a better, simpler time. Just like Rambo asked “do we get to win this time,” Trump promised that no effeminate or weak masculinity would stand in his way as he fixed problems. In the ways Obama was subtle, nuanced, and thoughtful, Trump provided Americans with a brash, simple, and easy-to-understand candidate. He promised promises he could never keep (eliminating ISIS in 30 days, healthcare solved on Day One, building a border wall and making Mexico pay for it,

none of which have come true over a year in) in the name of safety, but more than anything his vulgar and aggressive machismo offered the fantasy of stability through nostalgia. Trump positioned himself as a throwback to a mythic time when masculinity was singular, powerful, and invincible. And people loved it. So much of the anxiety I track in this dissertation is about instability and unknowability. Trump promised to erase that anxiety by returning to a regressive and id-driven masculinity, and each political blunder only served to strengthen his claim to this ancient essence. For Trump, dealing with cellular global terrorism was not hard— you simply bombed them into dirt and killed their families. Getting back up after a traumatic experience was as easy as restocking the military. Obama’s presidency promised Change, but it turned out that after eight years a large portion of the country wanted to go back in time to a fantasy space of “real men” who take charge and bully weaker men into submission. No nuance, no negotiation, no compromise.

In both his personal and political lives, Trump imagines the world as a series of zero-sum contests. His masculinity is a reflection of that— an aggressive style of manhood that I like to call “Zero-Sum Masculinity.” Put briefly, Trump proceeds as if every interaction is a contest, and that no mutually beneficial outcomes exist. This is easy to see in his business or political dealings, especially when he unnecessarily stiffens contracted workers and aggressively attacks already-vanquished opponents— it is not enough for him to win, his opponent(s) must also lose. With regards to his masculinity, I most strongly recall the immediate aftermath of the election, when videos emerged of Trump’s penchant for strange handshakes— he violently rips his handshake partner’s hand towards his own, often throwing his partner off-balance. His odd fascination with

taking a benevolent symbol of mutual respect or partnership and turning into a “contest” that he “wins” by “dominating” the other member speaks to his worldview: masculinity is a contest of will, and only the strongest survive.

Trump even views his body, and his body’s manliness, as a zero-sum competition. While consistently referring to himself as the “most fit president in history” despite all visual evidence to the contrary (he is not even the most fit president of the last few years), Trump made sure to cast his opponents in weak and emasculated lights: “low energy Rick Perry” or “Little” Marco Rubio. During an especially strange appearance on the talk show “Dr. Oz,” Trump had the host read his testosterone levels on live television during an episode about the candidate’s health. There is little-to-no correlation between testosterone and health, outside of extreme high or low levels, yet Trump found it important enough to emphasize with relation to his health. The suggestion here was that Clinton, a woman, had no testosterone while Trump was bubbling over with it— an implication that further suggested that he was “more fit” to be president than his opponent. Again, it was not enough for Clinton to be not “man enough” to be president by virtue of being a woman, Trump must also position himself as overflowing with masculinity.

The implications of Trump’s zero-sum approach to conflict and victory with regards to the War on Terror are obvious: he has explicitly stated his desire to engage in “total war” and target women and children as a means of dominating his opponents. As of April 2017, he had already escalated conflicts in Yemen and Syria through wildly aggressive missions that his predecessor refused to green light. More recently (autumn 2017), his escalation of war threats toward North Korea have caused many to fear an

impending nuclear war. Zero-sum philosophies often rely on brinkmanship, and Trump seems to delight in aggressive ultimatums and actions. How far he is willing to go to continue to build the mythology of the hyper-masculine president is yet to be seen, but the outlook is grim for the rest of the world.

Whether or not Trump is willing to continue his aggressive policies will also determine the ways in which culture reacts to the Trump presidency. Crucially, what types of men will we see on film as a result of the 2016 election? Throughout this dissertation, which began in fall of 2015— long before the idea of a “president Trump” was more than a punchline, I have charted both the ways in which Hollywood portrayals of men and masculinity after 9/11 have been the result of the fraught political climate and the ways in which Hollywood portrayals of men and masculinity were prescriptive ideologies broadcast to the larger American audience. The conservative rebranding of masculinity that happened during the Bush presidency was different than the complicated, damaged masculinities that arose during the Obama years. Trump’s hyper-masculine image more closely resembles Bush’s, yet much of the American embrace of Bush’s “cowboy” values stemmed from the plea for national unity following the 9/11 terror attacks. Ultimately, I believe that what sets Trump apart from his presidential predecessors during the War on Terror is his volatility. Bush had a singular focus; Obama was rational and analytical. Trump seems to delight in chaos, and can be triggered into an outburst at the slightest provocation from a woman or person of color. Beyond his personality, his politics also work to destabilize the planet— his refugee travel ban on Muslim countries is both aggressively racist and terrible anti-terrorism policy. I do not need to explain how his delight in threatening nuclear war adds to this tense atmosphere.

As I gaze into the future, I foresee an ebb and flow of presentations of masculinity as a dangerously/excitingly unstable force. The new media delighted in reporting on the chaos and damage of candidate Trump, and now works to condemn the very real dangers of president Trump. They seem unable to reflect on how their own coverage of the election and platforming of Trump the candidate had an irreversible impact on the election. Hollywood was much quicker to condemn candidate Trump and has almost universally lambasted the president. However, will we see a shift in the portrayals of men and masculinity that reflect said disgust with Trump's hypermasculine and zero-sum worldviews? Or will films about men still rely on the axiomatic dualism of violence and power? How will films deal with the rise of white male "homegrown" terrorists? Beyond all else, will films of the Trump era work to stabilize an image of manhood based in aggression, or work toward something more healthy and multivalent? Could Trump be the catalyst that finally forces Hollywood to rethink the relationship between power and violence? Work in masculinities scholarship has long sought to destabilize hegemonic masculinity, perhaps the force that will push us towards a diverse understanding of manhood would be the man who so strongly clings to regressive notions of a single and unflinching masculinity.

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