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Reading 9/11 in 21st Century Apocalyptic Horror Films

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READING 9/11 IN 21ST CENTURY APOCALYPTIC HORROR FILMS

by

COLBY D. WILLIAMS

Under the Direction of Calvin Thomas

ABSTRACT

The tragedy and aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks are reflected in American apocalyptic horror films that have been produced since 2001. Because the attacks have occurred only within the past ten years, not much research has been conducted on the effects the attacks have had on the narrative and technological aspects of apocalyptic horror. A survey of American apocalyptic horror will include a brief synopsis of the films, commentary on dominant visual allusions to the 9/11 attacks, and discussion of how the attacks have thematically influenced the genre. The resulting study shows that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, have shaped American apocalyptic horror cinema as shown through imagery, characters, and thematic focus of the genre.

INDEX WORDS: 9/11, Apocalypse, American cinema, Apocalyptic horror film

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COLBY D. WILLIAMS

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2011

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INTRODUCTION

A New Yorker, running for his life as his fellow New Yorkers around him scream in terror, retreats from a violent explosion as ash and debris rain down from the sky. A camera pans across an abandoned city street void of any human activity and reveals buildings in ruin, cars left unattended, and rudimentary posters, faded with time and weather, clinging to telephone poles. A young woman screams in horror as a well-known New York landmark is destroyed. At first glance, the aforementioned horrifying scenes may appear to indicate the aftermath of terrorist attacks in New York on that now infamous date – 9/11, and for obvious reasons. As the attacks unfolded, and Americans viewed the attacks and the subsequent aftermath on television, iconic images became ingrained in the American psyche: a firefighter pouring a bottle of water over his ash-caked face, two complete strangers grasping each other as they look on in horror at bodies falling from the towers, and businessmen and women run for their lives as they attempt to evade the debris cloud curling between buildings and alleys. But the former scenes, while they may appear as realistic images of the horrors of 9/11, emanate not from the attacks themselves, but from a source that the terrorist attacks have influenced and shaped for the past ten years – American apocalyptic horror cinema.

The subgenre of apocalyptic horror, disturbingly enough, proves extraordinarily relevant to a post-9/11 society. A category of film that bases its existence upon end-time scenarios and eschatological fears, apocalyptic horror has long dealt with any given culture's anxieties as it confronts its demise. Such cultural demise has become strikingly apparent in the days, months, and years following the terrorist attacks. As Charles Derry asserts in his reissue of *Dark Dreams 2.0*, "we've been punished psychologically [...] one irrevocable horror is that the images from that day are trapped inside us, a permanent part of who we now are. And then later...more images of horror: in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Abu Ghraib, in London, in Madrid" (345).

Additionally, in the years following 9/11, drastic changes have taken place across the American cultural landscape; the loss of privacies resulting from the creation of the Patriot Act, the large political shifts brought forth by both the Bush and Obama administrations, and the frightening confrontation between the largely Christianized West and the distant Islamic world – proof of political scientist Samuel Huntington's theory concerning the clash of civilizations – all have given rise to significant cultural anxieties since 2001. In apocalyptic horror, such anxieties play out in numerous ways – through characters, plot, method of extinction (or near-extinction), and post-apocalyptic social environment. Because of the richness of this particular cinematic genre, a richness that owes itself mainly to a culture's sociopolitical zeitgeist, study of the apocalyptic horror film can provide us with some answers to exactly how and why we

act as we do whenever we face our darkest fears. An investigation of how the tragedy and aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks have been reflected in American apocalyptic horror films produced after 2001 is long overdue. While much attention has been given to other horror subgenres, academia continues to look away from end of time narratives. This is not to say that the cinematic studies have failed to develop the link between 9/11 and American film. Scholars such as Kyle Bishop have devoted much time and energy to studying the link between 9/11 and the relatively recent resurgence of the zombie film. In his essay "Dead Man Still Walking: Explaining the Zombie Renaissance," Bishop investigates the "marked rise in all kinds of zombie narratives over the past ten years," and posits that the 9/11 terror attacks have "caused the largest wave of paranoia for Americans since the McCarthy era" (17). Likewise, Christopher Sharrett's article on what has been pejoratively labeled as "torture porn" provides an excellent perspective on how the War on Terror has helped fuel an American taste for severe physical mutilation within this new realm of horror. Yet despite these critical developments, apocalyptic horror has gone largely untouched. I will contend that 9/11 has greatly affected American apocalyptic cinema in the following ways: the manner in which the world is brought to an end, the enemy (or enemies) that brings about this end, and how the characters deal with one another after the apocalyptic event has taken place.

Before analyzing post-9/11 apocalyptic horror, one must review the cinematic tastes of American audiences immediately following the attacks. American audiences desired a taste of the end in the months and years following the attacks. This assertion, however, has been met with objection. Some argued that subsequent to the tragedy, horror would face a slow but sure decline. Columnist John Dempsey addressed the reluctance of many media outlets when it came to showing any form of excessive violence. According to these proponents, the public, shocked by the recent events, would begin to shy away from cinematic thrillers and horrors; in a September 16, 2001 article, Dempsey noted "USA [network's] move to clear its [schedule] of programming that may be inappropriate in the wake of terrorist attacks on New York and Washington parallels similar decisions by other general-entertainment networks, particularly those that schedule lots of movies" (Variety.com). As a result, Dempsey proceeded to relate that some outlets opted to forego films such as *Lethal Weapon* and *Sniper* and instead show more family-friendly fare such as *Look Who's Talking*. Shortly after Dempsey's article, *Entertainment Weekly's* Jeff Gordinier hinted that the attacks would usher in a new era which would witness the "end of irony" (Gordinier), proposing that even comedies would decline in popularity. Given these assertions, the aforementioned critical responses to the decline of horror after 2001 seem entirely understandable; if mainstream action thrillers and the much-loved comedy genre faced the chopping block, then surely any film or program under the guise of horror would share a similar

fate. Yet despite the prediction of horror's decline, the viewing public seemed to desire just the opposite of what many in the entertainment industry expected after 9/11. Lynn Spigel, in her article "Entertainment Wars: Television Culture after 9/11," contends that "while industry leaders were eager to censor trauma-inducing images of any kind, video outlets reported that, when left to their own discretion, consumers were eagerly purchasing terrorist flicks like *The Siege* and *The Towering Inferno*" (236). Additionally, Charles Derry proposes that "[u]ntil the 9/11, 2001, terrorist attack on America by al-Qaeda reinvigorated the subgenre, apocalyptic horror was being dominated by...a variety of low-budget B-films, not especially notable" (235), implying that the subgenre has experienced a tremendous resurgence following 9/11. The extensive list of apocalyptic horror films following 2001 proves this sentiment readily true. 2002 saw the release of M. Night Shyamalan's *Signs* (which began shooting, eerily enough, on September 12, 2001), Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later*, and Paul Anderson's *Resident Evil*, only to be followed by 2003's *The Core* and 2004's environmental thriller *The Day After Tomorrow*. The subgenre has only grown in the years since. A popular apocalyptic horror website has listed more than 20 films (including the likes of *Cloverfield*, *I Am Legend*, and *Knowing*) that have proven successful in the U.S. box office since 2007 (Apocalypticmovies.com). Of course, the attacks of 9/11 and their proximity to the beginning of the new millennium – a turning point that has fueled the subgenre prior to 2001 – most likely encouraged the subgenre's cultural relevancy, a relevancy proving

that after 9/11, more than ever, W.H. Auden's lament of the "age of anxiety" would find a remarkably fitting social atmosphere and a bevy of twenty-first century proponents.

DEFINING APOCALPYTIC HORROR

Because of the wide variety of cinematic subgenres within the realm of horror, apocalyptic horror must be clearly defined before it undergoes analysis of any type. Many critics often place thrillers (*The Silence of the Lambs*), slasher films (*Friday the 13th*), stalker films (*Halloween*), and suspense thrillers (*The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*) under the umbrella of horror film – a testament to the wide variety of material that contains elements of the sublime and sinister. One must note, however, the great departure from typical horror that the apocalyptic subgenre takes. A brief description of other horror subgenres can serve as a stark contrast to the apocalyptic.

Carol Clover, in her groundbreaking book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, argues that many subgenres of horror have helped define the collective genre. Speaking of the dominant stereotypes of what have become known as slasher films, Clover states that "at the bottom of the horror heap lies the slasher (or splatter or shocker or stalker) film: the immensely generative story of a psychokiller who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims, one by one, until he is subdued or killed, usually by the one girl who has survived" (22). Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, Sean Cunningham's *Friday the 13th*, and Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* fall under this particular

subgenre – if, indeed, one chooses Clover’s classification as their guideline. Each of these films contains what Clover labels as the “final girl,” the female protagonist and hero of the narrative. This lead character is “watchful to the point of paranoia; small signs of danger that her friends ignore, she registers. Above all she is intelligent and resourceful in a pinch” (39); because of her virginal attitude and morally blameless demeanor, the final girl prevails by destroying the villain in the end of the slasher film. The ultimate defeat of the villain by a morally clean female, however, has not earned the slasher film reputable adulation from critics. Since its inception, the slasher film has received numerous epithetic labels. As stated previously, Clover calls the subgenre the “bottom of the horror heap;” likewise, John Kenneth Muir labels slashers as “horror’s red-headed stepchild” (17). He contends that critics and politicians alike have long berated the subgenre for endangering family values, encouraging violence, and even tearing apart the fabric of mainstream American society. The slasher simply seeks to entertain rather than to scare its audience; thus, this particular subgenre has long fallen behind in the box office (17-20). As I will argue, the final girl, along with the dearth of positive criticism towards the slasher film, provides contrasts to post 9/11 apocalyptic horror; however, perhaps the most striking contrast between the two genres comes in the guise of the positive and playful tone prevalent in the slasher subgenre. Muir argues that “slasher movies are fun because so much of their energy involves lulling audiences into a sense of calm and safety and then unleashing a jolt or stinger” (28).

Because of this, the slasher subgenre promotes nail-biting anxiety as audience members sit on the edge of their seat, waiting eagerly for the next onscreen scare. As will be shown, the apocalyptic horror genre largely ignores this tingling suspense and opts for a more pessimistic and sinister atmosphere.

The thriller subgenre, a category including a variety of its own subgenres, contains films such as *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Carrie*, and *Jacob's Ladder*. Unlike slasher films and their excessive gore, the cinematic thriller relies mostly on the understated and unseen. Commonly referred to as suspense cinema, the thriller subgenre relies on a plot "that relentlessly pursues a single-minded goal – to provide thrills and keep the audience cliff-hanging at the 'edge of their seats' as the plot builds towards a climax" (Dirks); furthermore, the filmmaker places the protagonist "in a menacing situation or mystery, or an escape or dangerous mission from which escape seems impossible. Life itself is threatened, usually because the principal character is unsuspecting or unknowingly involved in a dangerous or potentially deadly situation" (Dirks). The lethal "situation" in which the audience finds the protagonist proves strikingly different from the lethal situations in apocalyptic horror. Instead of large-scale, world-threatening events such as global epidemics or nuclear annihilation, the deadly events within the thriller subgenre confine themselves to one individual or even a small group of individuals.

Contrasting with each of these subgenres, apocalyptic horror concerns – on the

surface – social groups at large. The threat that humankind faces (asteroids from space, widespread epidemics, or even worldwide zombie attacks) ominously promises an end to life on earth, and because it threatens not just one character, but millions, the apocalyptic horror film evokes a fear commonly held by even the audience members witnessing the events unfold. Psychologist Eric Dodson states that this particular cinematic subgenre “concerns the theme of humanity’s possible demise – when the modern world lies broken and fragmented, and its remaining vestiges struggle for their very survival...mankind itself hangs in the balance” (Dodson). The apocalyptic film centers on an event that will ultimately drive the entire plot to its climax, and this climax leads the main characters within the film to struggle in an attempt to survive. This calamitous event occurs in every subgenre within the apocalyptic realm – subgenres which range from the natural destruction of the earth (*The Day After Tomorrow*) to a destruction that owes itself to an otherworldly entity (*The War of the Worlds*). Prior to 9/11, apocalyptic horror offered a rather optimistic ending to audience members. In years past, apocalyptic horror films “suggest[ed] that mankind’s possible not-being possess[ed] a great power to call the human race into realizing its most powerful possibilities for being” (Dodson). The characters in *Independence Day* fight fervently until they finally prevail over the alien menace that threatens to take over the planet; *Deep Impact* ends with a sacrifice by astronauts aboard a space shuttle as they detonate an atomic warhead in a successful attempt to destroy the comet that threatens

to obliterate the Earth. Even as recently as 2002's *Signs* – a film that began production prior to the terrorist attacks – the extraterrestrial invaders retreat after humans discover a way to defeat them. Each of these films portrays characters acting in ways that best demonstrate humanity's brightest and most admirable qualities – sacrifice, hope, and perseverance. In contrast, subsequent to the 9/11 terrorist attacks apocalyptic horror narratives take a drastic and dramatically pessimistic turn. *Right at Your Door* concludes with the main character being purposelessly gunned down by the authorities sworn to protect him. *Cloverfield* ends abruptly with the two remaining protagonists killed in a nuclear purging of Manhattan. While some argue that post 9/11 films such as *Knowing* and *War of the Worlds* contain endings that provide hopeful closures as life continues, this hope only arrives after millions have been killed in the interim, and the audience has witnessed at least a partial defeat of humanity. This common thread of the end of humanity links together a wide variety of apocalyptic horror films. The variety of subgenres within apocalyptic horror proves extensive, and each subcategory caters to a particular audience that harbors its own tastes and preferences, yet shares the same deep fears concerning humankind's ultimate fate. In her book *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World*, Catherine Keller states:

“On screen...*The Terminator* and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* presented the theology of a nuclear war. Movies like *The Andromeda Strain* and *Breakout* privileged deadly plagues as the means of apocalypse, as did a widely watched

TV mini-series called *The Stand*, an evangelical allegory about a Christ-figure holding out against a New Age-style Antichrist, [and] *Twelve Monkeys* mixed neo-Wellsian sci-fi with a deterministic endtime scenario” (4).

A brief glance at one of the Internet’s most valuable and reliable websites dedicated to the apocalyptic horror genre, Apocalypticmovies.com, contains an extensive list of the apocalyptic subgenres: the disaster film, the zombie apocalypse, the nuclear war apocalypse, and the alien invasion films, just to name a few. This thesis will cover films which fall under various apocalyptic subgenres; additionally, commonalities between the subgenres – subgenres including zombie apocalypse, nuclear apocalypse, and monster apocalypse -- will be discussed throughout, focusing on the psyche of the character(s) within the films as well as the effect the destruction (in whatever form it may occur) has on society at large.

THE GENRE IN THE DECADE PRIOR TO 9/11

A juxtaposition of the genre as it stood in the 1990s and after 9/11 helps create a stronger awareness of how the terrorist attacks of the new century have truly shaped the state of apocalyptic cinema in the past decade. As the 1990s came to a close, American audiences were treated to spectacular visions of the potential end. Two particular cinematic depictions came in Mimi Leder’s *Deep Impact* and Michael Bay’s *Armageddon*. Both films, released in 1998, portrayed humanity on the brink of extinction

as a rogue comet (*Deep Impact*) and a statewide asteroid (*Armageddon*) hurtle towards the planet. What proves notable, however, comes in the fact that the objects – in their entirety, at least – never collide with earth. In true ex machina fashion, a team of (mostly American) astronauts valiantly save humanity from destruction by completely annihilating the celestial bodies. Of course, this comes after Leder and Bay treat their respective audiences to a visual orgy of destruction as numerous cities along the eastern seaboard of the United States are completely obliterated; yet, the utter apocalyptic destruction of humanity never materializes. Other films from the decade include Don McKellar's *Last Night* (centered on an ensemble cast of characters as they anticipate the end of the world at the turn of the new century), Roland Emmerich's 1996 blockbuster hit *Independence Day*, Kevin Reynolds's 1995 *Waterworld*, the film adaptation of Stephen King's *The Stand*, and Wolfgang Petersen's runaway hit *Outbreak*. The apocalyptic films from the decade that preceded 9/11 served as the barometers of two particular anxieties held by American culture at the time: fear concerning the changing environment and growing globalization. Both *The Stand* and *Outbreak* exhibit fears centered on the rapid and widespread interaction of diverse societies, and both question the ability of efficient governmental response to the epidemics in the said films. Due to the spread of the disease and lack of containment, widespread casualties and illness dominate the films. While one sector of 1990s apocalyptic horror is fixated on the growing fears of widespread pandemics, the other contains environment angst; moreover, 1990s films

such as *Waterworld* portray a future in which global warming has completely devastated the earth. Even films such as *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon* contain hints of apprehension regarding environmental ruin. One particular scene from *Deep Impact* depicts a large tidal wave roaring toward the eastern seaboard, subsequently washing miles inland, flooding valleys, and submerging the mountains of Appalachia. One of the popular taglines shown on many of *Deep Impact*'s promotional materials stated "Oceans Rise. Cities Fall" (Paramount) – an homage to nature's destructive power.

Despite the growing number of disaster films in the mid to late 1990s, many critics question the subgenre's existence during the same time period. Charles Derry asserts that "the subgenre of apocalyptic horror was largely creatively dormant throughout the eighties and nineties" (239). The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War left a void previously filled by apocalyptic films that took nuclear annihilation as their inspiration, leaving a vacuum in which disaster films similar to those of the 1970s – films such as *Dante's Peak* and *Volcano* – could thrive. And many could indeed argue that the films such as *Deep Impact*, *Armageddon*, and *Independence Day* fail to accomplish what the genre of apocalyptic horror is supposed to accomplish; that is, the films never quite present a world completely destroyed and devastated. Instead, they take audiences to the edge of the apocalyptic cliff, allowing them to catch a glimpse of the ubiquitous 'what if.' In contrast, post-9/11 films in the genre portray

worlds after the apocalyptic event has taken place. And herein lies the most significant peculiarity in post-9/11 apocalyptic horror.

THE GENRE AFTER 9/11

Right at Your Door (2006)

Perhaps one of the most telling examples of post-9/11 apocalyptic horror is *Right at Your Door*, a 2006 film directed by Chris Gorak. The film serves as a modern-day retelling of the 1983 nuclear holocaust *The Day After*, only Gorak's modern remake takes place in a larger metropolitan suburb (unlike the small town depicted in the latter), and the dramatic action becomes much more individualized and personal in the former. The plot of *Right at Your Door* centers on a young and upcoming couple – known as Lexie (Mary McCormack) and Brad (Rory Cochran) – who have just moved into a newly-purchased home in suburban Los Angeles. Brad is a stay at home musician awaiting his big break, while his wife works downtown. The film opens on the morning of Monday, May 15th, as Lexie leaves for work. Shortly after she leaves, a series of terrorist-created dirty bombs explode across downtown Los Angeles. A metropolitan-wide quarantine ensues as authorities attempt to prevent the spread of airborne radiological contamination; this seals Brad inside of his new home while his wife wanders the streets of a panic-stricken cityscape. Eventually finding her way back home, Lexie begs Brad to let her in. Brad, however, sticks with the advice of the

authorities and tells her to wait for law enforcement to arrive and give her clearance to enter the house. Eventually law enforcement comes – but only to find that the interior of Brad and Lexie’s house has become tainted with radiation, and because Brad has sealed the windows and doors (albeit poorly and unsuccessfully), he has trapped the radiation inside with him. Ironically, because Lexie has remained outside the entire time, her level of radiation exposure gradually subsides. The film ends with Brad attempting to tear out of the giant quarantine tarp that the authorities have draped over his home, only to be shot by those who at first tried to keep him safe.

Perhaps the most impressive cinematic characteristic of *Right at Your Door* proves to be its lack of extensive dialogue between onscreen characters. The narrative action develops mostly through radio broadcasts and breaking news audio clips. The first sounds heard in the film come in the guise of radio commercial advertisements, as the on-air voice asks “how organic are your organic vegetables” and shares the date, time, and weather. The viewing audience learns that Monday, May 15th is a comfortably warm 65 degrees, and that Los Angeles school children are gearing up for the end of the school year. There are curious similarities to the radio broadcasts echoed across the New York City airwaves on the morning of September 11th; a passing cold front had ushered in a coolness that was a harbinger of a typical New York autumn. As New Yorkers left their homes, they surely listened to news broadcasts that told of the citywide elections being held that Tuesday. The radio broadcasts from September 11,

2001 have been collected in online public archives; in fact, the filmmakers made extensive use of the archives, and writer and director Chris Gorak states:

“The radio played an important part in the script but I only wrote the most essential story points in the original draft. But, I knew, eventually, I wanted to wallpaper the film with constant radio reports to increase the tension. So, upon completion of filming, during post [production], I sat down and wrote an additional 60 page script of only radio broadcasts. I researched the radio broadcasts from 9/11. Reporters' inflections, the difference between announcers in the studio and those reporters on the scene” (Gorak).

Such research becomes readily apparent in *Right at Your Door*. As the series of radiological dirty bombs detonate across the cityscape, the announcers' voices become more and more desperate and fearful. The audience even hears reporters updating viewers as the bombs actually explode – a frightening reminder of the real-time unfolding of tragic events on 9/11. Likewise, Brad despondently looks from his own home as he views the smoke rising from downtown Los Angeles. He becomes inactive, a passive observer who views the attacks with a mixture of frustration and fear (Figure 1).



Figure 1

Perhaps even more unsettling than the radio broadcasts proves to be the fact that the villains responsible for the bomb detonations across Los Angeles never make their faces known. Gorak further explains that he “decided to make the enemy faceless and nameless. The word terrorism or terrorist is never mentioned.” While there are obvious connects to the fear of terrorism and biological and chemical attacks that may be carried out by rogue terrorists lurking in the shadows within the country, the audience viewing *Right at Your Door* neither hears a voice nor views a face that they can connect to the attacks in the film. Of course, this “faceless and nameless” enemy that exists within the film may thank the sociopolitical atmosphere extant in America immediately following 9/11; many will remember that President Bush stated on September 11th, “freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward” (Bush). Gorak’s nuclear apocalyptic film finds a perfect cinematic environment in which to flourish; filmed throughout 2006, during the peak of the growing public discontent towards the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, *Right at Your Door* provides a great fictional – although completely believable – backdrop of America’s foremost fears and anxieties.

Knowing (2009)

Even though Alex Proyas’ 2009 film *Knowing* received varying reviews from various cinema critics, Roger Ebert asserted that the film “is among the best science-

fiction films I've seen -- frightening, suspenseful, intelligent...The plot involves the most fundamental of all philosophical debates: Is the universe deterministic or random? Is everything in some way preordained or does it happen by chance?". In addition to the film's striking visual similarity to the 9/11 attacks, *Knowing* provides a fatalistic vision reflective of post-9/11 apocalyptic horror.

Widowed father and MIT professor John Koestler (Nicholas Cage) and his young son Caleb (Chandler Canterbury) become the inheritors of a manuscript embellished with a series of numbers. After coming to the realization that the numbers are not a randomly composed list but actually a list of dates and latitudinal and longitudinal measurements, Koestler embarks on an attempt to prevent a series of cataclysmic events. The events themselves become strikingly indicative of two particular fears concerning 9/11 and the years that followed: plane crashes and terrorist attacks. Koestler witnesses a plane crash just outside of Boston's Logan Airport; additionally, he attempts to avert a terrorist attack on a New York subway. Perhaps most importantly, he learns that the last series of numbers corresponds to an event that will ultimately prove lethal for everyone – including himself. The plot of Proyas' film consists of a race against time and the inevitable outcome of such a race; as Koestler finally realizes, attempting to control the outcomes of events proves futile. Such a sense of helplessness and futility continues to resonate in postmodern culture, and becomes exacerbated by the events of 9/11 and the subsequent events which followed. Of course, many argue

that since the attacks served as a bookend to a century that had become associated with alienation, futility, and malaise, then the attacks themselves would only promote the continuation of these feelings. This nationwide melancholia, however, became greatly apparent in the days and months following the attacks.

Ebert's assertion provides a compelling glimpse into post 9/11 apocalyptic horror – namely that the genre in the early 21st century has been enveloped by an extraordinary nihilistic worldview. Perhaps the most telling example of this fact becomes reflected in the ending of *Knowing*. After days of attempting to guarantee his survival, Koestler accepts the fact that he will perish along with the rest of civilization. The outcome of the film (and the fates of the characters within) indicates an acceptance of doom; in stark contrast to the apocalyptic horror films that graced American cinema in the decade before the terrorist attacks, films that ended with aliens being defeated by the human race (as in *Independence Day*) or comets being destroyed by bombs (as in *Deep Impact*), Proyas' work concludes with Earth being fatally seared by a destructive solar flare.

The visual imagery contained within *Knowing* shares numerous similarities with the images that filled the airwaves on the morning of September 11th. The climax of the film, a scene in which Boston turns to fire and ash as the solar flare envelops the Earth (Figure 3), uncannily reproduces the sight of the ash cloud as it wrapped around skyscrapers after the towers collapsed (Figure 2).



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Another visual image alluding to the 9/11 attacks comes in the guise of ash-covered citizens confusedly meandering the streets of New York. Shortly after he fails to stop a terrorist attack on a metropolitan subway station, Koestler emerges from the underground station, disheartened by the tragedy that has just unfolded (Figure 5). Most strikingly, however, Koestler and the fellow New Yorkers resemble those emerging from the ash cloud on September 11th (Figure 4).

Cloverfield (2008)

Matt Reeves' superbly marketed film *Cloverfield* presents itself as a modern-day reimagining of the Godzilla films of the mid-twentieth century. Centered on a group of

friends who have gathered to celebrate the job promotion of one of their own, *Cloverfield* uses New York City's Manhattan as its backdrop. The film is similar to Chris Gorak's *Right at Your Door* in that it presents the onscreen action mainly through a secondary medium; while Gorak's film utilizes radio broadcasts to narrate much of the dominant physical action taking place, Reeves' work presents the action through a handheld digital camera held by one of the main characters; thus, the audience sees the attack on the city through the eyes of the character Hudson Platt (T.J. Miller) -- who films with the digital camera -- just as Gorak's protagonist hears of the attack on Los Angeles via the radio broadcasts in *Right at Your Door*. The film opens with a screen that displays a Department of Defense label. Reeves wishes his audience to interpret the film which follows "as a chronicle of actual events – testimony from an eyewitness...they are invited to 'experience' the attack through a single camera's lens [and] assume the position of investigators watching a piece of documentary evidence" (North 77). Immediately, footage of a young couple filming themselves on a dreary New York morning is displayed on the screen. What follows is a hodge-podge of randomly filmed events that ultimately lead up to the party celebrating the job promotion of Rob Hawkins (Michael Stahl-David), a young man soon to be transferred to Japan because of said promotion. The audience views firsthand the farewell messages filmed specially for Rob – messages from partygoers who wish him well on his new move.

About twenty minutes into the party, the handheld camera focuses on a group of friends surrounding a television screen. The audience glimpses the view of the screen, suddenly learning that some type of catastrophic event has taken place immediately off the coast of Manhattan. Only blocks away from the action unfolding on the screen in front of them, the friends decide to make their way to the rooftop of their apartment building. Hudson Platt, with the digital handheld still rolling, joins them as he runs up the roof access staircase. Looking towards the Manhattan coastline, the partygoers see a massive explosion and detritus and debris fall from the sky – some of it threatening to land on the very building on which they stand. This event provides the spark that ignites the rest of the *Cloverfield*. Panic-stricken, the friends run down to the first floor and exit the building, and as they step out into the street, they are horrified to find the Statue of Liberty's head rolling towards them.

Most of Reeves' film consists of the friends trying to make their way off of Manhattan Island as they join a massive exodus from the city; however, protagonist Rob Hawkins wishes to find his sweetheart and diverts the group from ever doing so. Throughout their night long, horrifying adventure, Rob and his friends learn that an unidentifiable monster is responsible for the ongoing attacks across the city. The friends gradually splinter apart – due, in essence, to an attack on Brooklyn Bridge and military soldiers who take one of the friends to “treat” her for a bite she has suffered from one of the hundreds of spider-like creatures that have emanated from the

mysterious being attacking the island. The only two characters left towards film's end are Rob (who now holds the digital camera and films the events) and his girlfriend Beth (Odette Annable); the two find a hideaway under one of Central Park's many pedestrian paths, only to find that the U.S. military plans to bomb Central Park to ultimately kill the monster who has utterly ravaged the city. The film concludes with a farewell message taped by the two lovers. The film ends as it began – with a Department of Defense logo verifying that the preceding has been recovered from what remains left of the city.

The allusions to the terror attacks of 9/11 prove numerous; *Cloverfield* continually references the attacks as the narrative progresses; almost every component of the film could be seen as a retelling of the terror attacks (albeit in terms of science fiction). Two of the most compelling allusions prove to be the setting of the attack and the visual imagery prevalently presented in the film. *Cloverfield's* New Yorkers see the destruction of a popular city landmark – the Statue of Liberty – and the denizens of the city make use of all routes leading out of the city. In the film, news footage shows hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers filling main arteries such as the Brooklyn Bridge (Figure 6); such a visual obviously struck many audience members as identical to the mass exodus of New Yorkers on the morning of 9/11 -- New Yorkers who, finding all means of public transportation eliminated, took to the streets to escape to the Bronx, Brooklyn, and beyond (Figure 7).



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

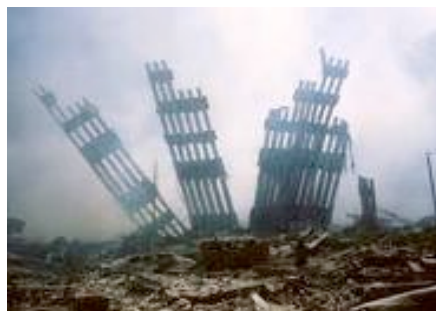


Figure 9

Citizens, in droves, run panicked away from the attacking creature – a creature whom the audience members rarely see throughout their viewing of Reeves' film; thus, as Daniel North states, *Cloverfield* "reinscribes disaster with the markers of chaos" (86).

The identity of the creature in *Cloverfield* gives rise to many points of critical inquiry. As Daniel North asserts in his article "Evidence of Things Not Quite Seen: *Cloverfield*'s Obstructed Spectacle," the failure of revelation in the film "plays with vision and concealment, staging a game of 'hide and seek' between the audiences and the monster it promises to deliver" (75). For the majority – indeed, some would say the entirety – of the film, the monstrous villain tormenting the city remains largely unidentified. The rapid camera movement, along with skyscrapers and other buildings

that line the streets, obscures the monster from the audiences' view; likewise, the characters within the film play a veritable cat-and-mouse game with the monster as they run away from the destruction while at the same time attempting to fulfill their visual desire to actually see the behemoth. This attempt, however, helps shape the technical aspects of *Cloverfield* due to the fact that "the shaky camera [movement] seems to know where the next point of interest will be located, [but] catching it too late or misframing it" (North 87). Furthermore, instead of explicitly viewing the monster in all its glory, Reeves leaves it to the audience to "imaginatively buil[d] up from a series of vestigial traces, such as the claw marks on the head of the Statue of Liberty" (North 81). Instead of directly viewing the source of the destruction, the audience must glimpse the results of it. The failure to fully reveal the monster in *Cloverfield*, at least until the latter half of the film, pays homage to the same idea present in Gorak's *Right at Your Door* – that is, the idea that the villain in post 9/11 apocalyptic horror proves enigmatic and unseen, a testament to the controlling fear of terrorism and terrorist attack in the years following 2001. In almost every terrorist attack following the ones on New York and Washington, media outlets have littered the airwaves with a variety of questions – one of which concerns the identification of those responsible for the attacks. Of course, such a question must also subconsciously acknowledge the Bush proclamation that terrorist attacks prove to be carried out by the "faceless" menace plaguing international relations and safety. More importantly, filmmaker and producer J.J. Abrams (who largely

shaped the production and marketing of *Cloverfield*), has stated that he “desired to construct a national monster” with the film – a monster that could prove allegorical in the context of the post 9/11 zeitgeist (North 81). North concludes that “in an age of dispersed, media-savvy and barely visible enemies, [*Cloverfield*] puts out a monster that cannot be caught on camera, fully understood or reasoned with...Its weak spot cannot be found amidst the confusion of communication breakdown. Panic prevents action” (90).

Matt Reeves’ *Cloverfield* also alludes to American culture’s obsession with breaking-news media broadcasts (a type of broadcast fervently practiced in the years following the 9/11 terrorist attacks). As the mysterious goliath begins attacking Manhattan, the partygoers in the apartment immediately turn the television to CNN; later in the film, as the group of friends struggle to find a way out off of the island, they watch updates of the attack through a store window front; coincidentally, this shot reveals for the first time the monster’s frightening body as it easily overcomes military efforts to stymie its advance onto the island. Thus, news broadcasts help develop the plot of *Cloverfield* as the situation grows drastically more negative. It should be remembered that for weeks after September 11th, American televisions allowed viewers to see breaking news concerning the attacks as it actually occurred; media outlets even developed a relatively new category: the developing story. The two terms have often been used interchangeably in the past decade, and the footage used by major news

outlets such as CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC rely on footage shot by the actual viewers of their stations; for example, CNN's iReporter concept helped pave the way for other news outlets in using found footage from the average citizen who simply is in the right place at the right time. The footage from viewers often comes in the form of an amateurish quality – a quality marked by what Daniel North calls a “documentary authenticity” (88). This found footage quality plays an extraordinarily large role in post 9/11 apocalyptic horror as contemporary filmmakers attempt to recapture the sickening aura of the 9/11 attacks. Most of the footage that captured the nascent stages of the attack originated from the common New York City denizen as they grabbed their cellphones and cameras to record the unfortunate victims who perished in the towers; furthermore, these same cameras kept recording as the towers fell to dust and rubble and as their owners ran for cover. *Cloverfield*, along with many of the others in the realm of apocalyptic horror genre, call upon the media outlets to play a subtle role – a role that portrays “news media as documenters...of global catastrophe” (North 88).

War of the Worlds (2005)

The Steven Spielberg remake of *War of the Worlds* epitomizes the drastic reimagining of the apocalyptic horror film following 9/11. Charles Derry, in *Dark Dreams 2.0: A Psychological History of the Modern Horror Film*, contends that the remake “must be seen in the context of the ‘War on Terror’ and its conflation with the War in

Iraq" (270). The film itself begins with a microscopic view of individual cells, and as the cinematic shot widens and zooms out, the audience glimpses a drop of water, which subsequently transmutes into the planet Earth. A voice over narrator informs the audience that for years, someone has been planning an attack on the planet. As the narrator describes this preplanned attack, numerous images display on the screen; the images come from urban environments, and contain an aged, amateurish quality. Thousands of inhabitants of an unnamed city shuffle down sidewalks, making their way to work or another destination as they carry on with their routine existence. After the introduction to what will soon unfold (an attack by alien invaders), the audience begins to piece together the routine of protagonist Ray (Tom Cruise) as he finishes work at a shipyard in New York City. Ray, a divorced father of two children, heads home to his Brooklyn townhome to spend time with his children as his ex-wife and her new boyfriend head to Boston for the weekend. Soon after assuming this duty, a dark and ominous looking lighting storm appears over the city. Almost immediately, the attack on the city begins with a towering mechanical tripod erupting from the ground. As Ray runs to a gathering crowd blocks from his own home, he learns that some of the lightning strikes have repeatedly struck one particular area in front of a large church. The bystanders stand and take in the resulting black hole in the road with mouths gaping. Suddenly, however, the crowd's curiosity turns to horror as they gasp and begin to back away when the asphalt of the street begins to crack. The tripod rises from

beneath the earth, rock and debris falling from its metal shell, and as it stands to survey the helpless crowd, it begins to shoot beaming particles of light, a light that effectively disintegrates them. Derry describes the unsettling result of the attack: “the attack of the Martian tripods – spider-like adversaries hundreds of feet tall, with eerie, eel-like appendages – is devastating. [They] uproot streets, buildings, and bridges, which all collapse. Terrifyingly, the tripods ‘disintegrate’ people, tearing limbs into odd pieces that explode and dissolve into the air” (271). This initial attack begins an intense journey taken by Ray and his two children out of the city, through the largely rural countryside, and to Boston where Ray will reunite his son and daughter with their mother. Throughout their journey – a journey which proves to be the soul of the plot – Ray and his two children encounter an angry crowd attempting to board a ferry that will take them away from the city; similar to *Cloverfield*, when New Yorkers make their exodus across the Brooklyn Bridge only to see the monstrous creature destroy the very bridge on which they stand, those awaiting the ferry in *War of the Worlds* fail to board it due to a sudden, unexpected attack by one of the alien tripods, prompting panic among the waiting masses.

The aforementioned scene within Steven Spielberg’s *War of the Worlds* paints a hauntingly familiar picture: one of New Yorkers sweating and panicked as they strive to make their way off of Manhattan Island (Figure 11).



Figure 10



Figure 11

Such an image evokes memories of the 9/11 attacks within the American psyche – memories shaped by real time news reports that littered the television airwaves. Derry again argues that “it is hard for a contemporary audience [of *War of the Worlds*] not to think immediately of the 9/11 attacks...when the attack by Martians comes quickly in the film (Figure 10); a church, tellingly, is one of the first things they destroy” (271). The ideological clash of cultures fueling the terrorist conflict becomes implicated in this image, alluding to the strenuous, and oftentimes caustic, relationship between Islam and the Christianized West. Another dominant image related to the 9/11 terrorist attacks presents itself within the film; at one point, Ray and his children emerge from an abandoned home – a home in which they sought refuge the previous night – only to find a destroyed commercial airliner that has crashed into the adjacent street. The side of the fuselage has been ripped open, and eerily, many of the bodies of the unfortunate passengers are nowhere to be seen. The engine lay in the street, completely dissected from the wing. Of course, images of plane crashes crop up time and time again in post 9/11 apocalyptic horror film. Despite the numerous visual allusions to the 9/11 terrorist

attacks, the most explicit reference in Spielberg's remake comes in the form a single quote uttered by Ray's daughter, Rachel, who frighteningly asks if "the terrorists" are responsible for gruesomely killing everyone in their path as they continue to chase them away from New York City. The *War of the Worlds* remake received much laud from both audiences and critics following its 2005 release. Many critics agreed that the film proved to be "emotionally effective, particular in how it connect[ed] to the emotional trauma suffered on 9/11" (271).

I Am Legend (2007)

Francis Lawrence's cinematic remake of Richard Matheson's 1954 novel by the same name proves both frightening and insightful to the post 9/11 citizen. The film serves as a depiction of what life on Earth (specifically in New York City) would resemble if only one denizen walked the streets. The narrative centers on Robert Neville (Will Smith), a former government worker who finds himself to be the only New Yorker who has survived a viral outbreak that has destroyed the population. The film begins with a short news clip on how scientists have developed a vaccine for cancer, a vaccine that will essentially erase the threat of the disease. The footage suddenly cuts to a wide-shot of Manhattan months later; an eerie silence pervades the streets, and nature has begun to reclaim the asphalt and abandoned buildings. Amid the utter devastation and desolation exists one man, a man who has inhabited the city

in the past months struggling to forage buildings for food and discover another survivor with whom he may share companionship.



Figure 12



Figure 13

Throughout much of the first third of *I Am Legend*, the audience learns through a series of flashbacks about how New York City became deserted. The flashbacks contain important information about Neville's deceased wife and child, a family that he lost in the evacuation of New York. The audience also learns that government officials planned to quarantine the island by bombing the bridges and subway tunnels leading out of Manhattan. As jets flew in to accomplish this mission, Neville witnessed the death of his wife and child as they became the victims of a mid-air collision. As debris from the aircraft rained down on the asphalt and the adjacent Hudson River, Neville stood in horror, completely ignored by the thousands of others who were likewise attempting to flee the island of Manhattan.

The latter portion of the film concerns Neville and his attempt to evade the zombie like creatures who thrive in the darkness of night; these fiendish denizens serve as the only other characters in the film (with the exception of Neville's dog and a few other characters towards the close of the movie). Neville must aggressively track down and trap these zombies – for they hold the key to reversing the virus that has decimated much of the world's population. While he searches for the ultimate cure in a makeshift lab of an abandoned apartment building, Neville also attempts to locate via radio broadcasts other pockets of human survivors. Not until the end of the film does the audience meet Anna, another survivor who has managed to stave off the virus.

The 2007 remake of Matheson's novel contains numerous allusions to the attacks of 9/11, and the film has become a reflection of a post 9/11 New York. Perhaps the most peculiar aspect of the film adaptation is the change of setting. Matheson's original work placed Robert Neville in the city of Los Angeles; yet with the fervor of post 9/11 anxieties, filmmaker Francis Lawrence moved the storyline to the eastern seaboard of the United States to a city that has become the symbol for 9/11 in many ways. In the film, New York City serves as ground zero for the outbreak of the virus, just as it served as ground zero for the September 11th terrorist attacks. In one particular flashback, Neville's wife asks if the virus has gone airborne, leaving the island and infecting citizens in the surrounding areas; the implication that Manhattan serves as the geographic origin for the ensuing devastation that takes place throughout the course of

the narrative proves allegorical. On 9/11, New York City became the point from which dominating fears and anxieties would grow, essentially infecting the rest of the United States.

Additionally, *I Am Legend* provides a glimpse of a post 9/11 world: a world in which the remnants of a capitalist system give rise to questions about its function and permanence in a country devastated by calamity. The camera lens captures tattered signs whose original intent was to advertise, but now simply serve as ragged and unheeded decorations hanging from the sides of buildings. At one point in the film, Neville looks around listlessly at the absurdity of the billboards and advertisements that dot the landscape; the juxtaposition of capitalist objects with the natural elements that have reclaimed the city streets of Manhattan proves notable, and the futility of advertisements that ultimately have no audience becomes readily apparent. Neville's adherence to a capitalist ideology also reveals itself within the film. At one point, he walks into a record store, browses the merchandise, and proceeds to flirt with an imaginary customer (in the guise of a mannequin) that he has created. Neville's actions exhibit his tendency to retreat into a semblance of a comfortable existence that he once knew prior to the viral outbreak. *I Am Legend*, along with *The Road* and various other disaster films (usually of the zombie invasion subgenre, which contains films such as the 2005 remake of *Dawn of the Dead*), concern what Kirk Boyle labels as the "naturalization of economic crises" (Boyle); furthermore, Boyle argues that "literary,

[cinematic], and cultural imaginations of catastrophes shape their real formation within the capitalist world-economy” (Boyle). The relationship between capitalism and a post 9/11 society proves to be a frail one. In the aftermath of 9/11, capitalism struggles to remain relevant and useful to a people disillusioned about where to go from here.

The Road (2009)

Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 novel *The Road* received more critical reception among book readers than filmmaker John Hillcoat’s 2009 cinematic adaptation received among moviegoers. Released periodically across the United States in the latter half of 2009, the film did not garner as much mainstream support as the typical end of the world flick. Some critics asserted that “unlike the effects-filled apocalypse porn of the recent *2012* or *Terminator Salvation* (or indeed the older *Armageddon*, *Deep Impact* and so on), *The Road* is positively allergic to the audience-pleasing depiction of mayhem and spectacle — it is, in fact, almost completely effects-free” (Maher). Yet because of *The Road*’s cinematography and production concepts – blacks, grays, and dull oranges dominate much of the film – some noted the film’s critical promise and asserted that:

“The most arresting aspect of *The Road* is just how fully the filmmakers have realized this bleak, blighted landscape of a modern society reduced to savagery. A grimy, damp fog hangs over everything, and instead of birdsong there is the eerie creak and crash of falling trees. Vehicles sit abandoned on highways,

houses stand looted and vacant, and what used to be towns are afterimages of violence and wreckage" (Scott).

Peculiarly, the dramatic event that results in such a world is never known by the audience. Nuclear war, environment disaster, terrorist attacks – any catastrophe could have caused the world within *The Road*. Much like Matt Reeves' apocalyptic horror film *Cloverfield*, much of *The Road's* narrative power lies in the withholding of information from the audience.

The film centers on two characters – a father (Viggo Mortensen) and a son (Kodi Smit-McPhee) – and their attempt to make their way across a barren wasteland. They head for the coast, hoping to find way to reach the seas in an attempt to discover a continuance of life. Throughout their journey, the man and the boy encounter groups of cannibals hell-bent on their own survival and starving. The grisly band of wanderers looks almost inhuman as they prowl the desolate landscape in search of human flesh. The father and son, however, successfully evade and harm some members of the cannibalistic crew, for the world of *The Road* proves to be one in which a fight to the death is quite the common contest. The two travelers constantly search for sustenance, and the father wholeheartedly attempts to keep his young companion optimistic and safe.

Periodically, a series of flashbacks interrupts the narrative of the two travelers as they make their way to water. These flashbacks provide glimpses into the former lives

of the father and the son, and for a brief moment the audience learns of the female figure once present, but now deceased (much like Lawrence's 2007 adaptation of *I Am Legend*). The flashbacks also provide glimpses into a world that once existed, but has now ceased to be. Sadly enough, the father dies towards the end of the film, leaving the young child alone and frightened; he does not wander alone for too long, however. Again, much like *I Am Legend*, in the end of the film the audience meets a female character, a character who informs the young boy that he has nothing more to fear; such an ending creates potential for the young boy to continue on with this prototype of a family.

RETHINKING APOCALYPTIC HORROR AFTER 9/11

A sampling of post 9/11 apocalyptic horror films proves that the terrorist attacks in 2001 strongly influenced the visual imagery and plots within the genre; prior to 9/11, natural disasters defined the genre – despite of the numerous subgenres contained within. Subsequent to 9/11, however, the genre became radically shaped by the dominant fears in the forefront of the American psyche: terrorist attack and the eerily unknown methods by which they might be carried out. The visual images used in the genre serve as allusions to the dominant images that filled newspapers and television broadcasts on the day of 9/11 and the weeks, months, and years that have followed.

Likewise, the settings and plots of post 9/11 apocalyptic horror become reminiscent of the attacks and the methods by which they were executed.

There exists, however, a more broad, categorical redefining of the genre that has occurred in the previous decade. This reimagining of a world after global calamity reveals more about human anxieties regarding not only 9/11, but a post-modern existence – an existence in which all human institutions become questioned, and change proves the only constant. Such fears have been long incubated in the collective psyche of Americans, and 9/11 only provided the spark which ignited these explosive fears.

Right at Your Door, Knowing, Cloverfield, War of the Worlds, I Am Legend, The Road, and many other films within the genre, contain male characters without a dominant female figure present to accompany them. *Right at Your Door's* Brad finds himself barricaded inside of his own home. In a role reversal which has controlled most narrative storytelling, Lexie, the only female character in the film, serves as the breadwinner; Brad stays at home to clean up their newly-purchased house. Because of her status as the only active worker in the household, she becomes the character trapped in the horrid and gruesome scenes unfolding in downtown Los Angeles. Male character Brad sits passively at home, made impotent and helpless by the unfolding scenes outside of his home. The *War of the Worlds* remake portrays a divorced father struggling to make his way to Boston so that he may reunite his children and their mother. Coincidentally, Ray's ex-wife and her new husband have become pregnant, all

the while leaving Ray to ponder how he will exist alone in a world brought to the brink of destruction by the Martian (and now retreating) invaders. *The Road*, with its barren and ash-caked landscape, provides an utterly dire view of a world lacking life and its various forms. The father and the son wander throughout the remnants of civilization – remnants that prove void of female life. Similarly, the film *Knowing* centers on a widowed father who strives in vain to save himself and his son from catastrophe. When he finally meets a suitable female companion, a car wreck ends her life, leaving him without a mate. The few times the audience glimpses a female figure comes in the form the flashbacks, to a time prior to the unknown catastrophic event. *Cloverfield*, while it does contain female characters, centers on the attempts of one character in particular – Rob – to reconnect with his former female companion. Prior to their reunification towards the end of the film, Rob runs panic-stricken, and sometimes aimlessly, through the streets of New York City. Finally, *I Am Legend* consists of one male character and his dog as they fight to survive in a New York City devoid of any other human being. Other films in the genre within the past decade have contained similar motifs of the lone male figure. This narrative tendency cannot simply be explained by the patriarchally controlled narratives that have dominated in years past; instead, this tendency owes itself to deep-seated fear that life on this earth walks a fine line. Procreation itself becomes threatened in post 9/11 apocalyptic horror.

The pervasiveness of this lone-male figure in post 9/11 apocalyptic horror cinema sheds light on a deep-seated fear regarding the ultimate end of human civilization and how it may come about. In his highly acclaimed book on horror cinema, Andrew Tudor suggests that sexuality in the horror genre – at least after the 1950s – indicates a dominating fear regarding the traditional American family unit and its role in society. Tudor states that “post-sixties erosion of the foundations of [society]” proves extant in American horror cinema, and more importantly, this erosion “relate[s] to civil legitimation and to the functioning of the privatized family” (222). This decaying of the nuclear family unit, Tudor asserts, leads audiences to feel fearful towards “unpredictable social relations in a world now open to the possibility of escalating chaos” (223), for if the family unit (which has been a largely stable component in pre-1950s America) falls apart, then anxieties are bound to prevail – especially in a post-apocalyptic environment. Time and time again in post-9/11 apocalyptic horror cinema, the figure of the lone-male brings into sharp focus the prospect of a world that lacks the ability to reproduce. Such a world becomes eerily reminiscent of the landscape in McCarthy’s *The Road* – barren and lifeless.

Yet another commonality shared by post-9/11 apocalyptic horror films serves as an utterly pessimistic reminder of the American spirit – or lack thereof – in a 21st century culture. The apocalyptic horror genre following 9/11 bases itself not on reason; as a result, the characters in this type of cinema indicate what Mark Fisher describes as

“some kind of Gnostic religious impulse, a faith in a distant and unknowable God that has, to all appearances, abandoned the Earth” (14). Left to their own devices, humans act and react irrationally – as if left to fend for themselves in an environment that only incubates “an ineradicable drive to persist in conditions where death would be preferable” (17); thus, in *Knowing*, John Koestler struggles to find a way to divert the oncoming (and ultimately unavoidable) catastrophe. As has been noted, his futile attempt makes up the plot of the film. *Right at Your Door* contains a scene where various panicked citizens wander from aisle to aisle in a hardware store, struggling to take anything they find – without regarding their use or purpose. Even in a film such as *I Am Legend*, Robert Neville finds a friend – and a potential lover – in a female mannequin. Such irrational behavior only becomes more apparent when placed next to the causes of the catastrophes in post-9/11 apocalyptic horror: causes that remain largely unknown and perpetrators who remain anonymous or enigmatic at best. From the monstrous sea-creature in *Cloverfield* and the menacing undead in *I Am Legend*, to the unknown catastrophe that has resulted in a world such as the one that exists in *The Road*, ignorance results in irrationality in the worlds constituting the genre.

While male-dominated narratives and irrational behavior acutely present themselves in the genre following 2001, there remains another similarity which films in post-9/11 apocalyptic horror share. This similarity, a similarity that presents itself in the dichotomy of seeing and unseeing (or mental reality versus physical reality), becomes

indicative of a fear to which only a culture bred on mass media can relate. This fear, one of seeing something that simply should not be seen, proves extraordinarily relevant in post-9/11 film. This idea becomes readily apparent in *The Road*, when the father states to his son “remember that the things you put into your head are there forever.” His advice indicates that traumatic images play an important role in the deterioration of the psyche – a psyche that should remain strong and vital in a post apocalyptic environment. This intake of traumatic visual images plays an important role in films such as *Knowing*, when John Koestler warns his sister (with whom he leaves his young son) not to allow the child to see the evening news, as it will contain images of the disaster (a disaster that only he knows will happen) in which numerous innocent bystanders will be killed by a terrorist sabotage. Likewise, in Spielberg’s remake of *War of the Worlds*, Ray urges his daughter not to look through the back window of their vehicle as they escape the attacking Martian tripods decimate the landscape behind them. The childish girl creates a make-believe bubble around herself with her arms so that she may feel protected from the world around her. This avoidance of the look can be contrasted with the embracing of it, an embracing that also dominates the post-9/11 apocalyptic horror genre. The gaze has always proven to be an essential component of any horror subgenre, but after 2001 (and with the rise of multimedia tools), the look becomes even more important, for looking becomes the culprit responsible (at least in part) for the emotional trauma experienced by the characters onscreen. Even the

audience becomes implicated in the visual schemata, desiring to see with their own eyes the atrocities taking place onscreen – atrocities that they cannot fully see or comprehend due to visual withholding on the part of the filmmakers. The growing importance of explicitly looking (or not looking) in post-9/11 apocalyptic horror film suggests that perhaps American mass media has become too pervasive; mass media powerhouses such as YouTube, which rose to popularity in 2005, have become free ports of information for those wishing to find any visual and pop culture sensation they desire. Websites such as YouTube and Liveleak tempt viewers to see for themselves what the news and other cable broadcasts might not show because of the graphic nature of the content. Yet this free flow of visual stimuli has its consequences. As the father in *The Road* states, we too must remember that whatever we put into our minds “is there forever.” September 11th brought with it horrendous images of planes flying into buildings, innocent officer workers jumping to their deaths, bloodied and ashen faces walking confusedly throughout downtown Manhattan; in the days and months following the attacks, even more graphic images became readily available for those who possessed such morbid curiosity. Images of bodies littering the grounds at the base of the Twin Towers, burned corpses being pulled from the Pentagon, while not as commonplace as the images that filled the mainstream television airwaves, the more gruesome fair indeed became the much sought-after treasure desired by many websurfers. The availability of such 9/11 affiliated images has given American viewers

freedom – perhaps even too much freedom – in seeing any image they choose to see.

Nonetheless, this freedom carries great consequences.

In her article “The Trauma of Representation: Visual Culture, Photojournalism, and the September 11 Terrorist Attack,” Kari Anden-Paradopoulos states:

“Faced with the September 11 attacks, people seem fundamentally to have responded in the same way regardless of whether they were direct eye-witnesses to the events or second-hand viewers of it on the television screen: this was unreal, beyond words, an out-body experience, pure fiction – like a Hollywood disaster movie” (90).

September 11th has become, in a sense, a depiction of reality reflecting art. A culture driven by the visual, what Anden-Paradopoulos refers to as a “pictorial turn” (101), must ask important questions about the availability of the images of 9/11. The availability of such images, she warns, runs the risk of cheapening the emotional and political significance of the event as more audiences view them over and over again; a sense of numbness and apathy could slowly grow over those who view such images. Anden-Paradopoulos asserts that “reading the 9-11 [images] as cultural artifacts with rhetorical qualities endows us with a richer understanding of how they make us perceive this historical event in different ways” (103). Such a notion plays greatly into the world of *The Road*.

THE FUTURE OF THE GENRE AND THE RESEARCH

Much has been said about how culture has shaped the apocalyptic horror genre in America; however, most of this criticism has focused on the alien invasion films of the 1950s and how these films were indicative of a prevalent fear of communism. Furthermore, the early zombie apocalyptic films – most notably George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* – have been viewed through a distinctly racial lens, obviously due in part to the civil rights movement in mid-1900s America. The blockbuster natural disaster films of the 1970s, *Earthquake* (1974), *The Towering Inferno* (1974), and *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) to name just a few, prove more indicative of the adventure genre than they do apocalypse horror. Many contend that the aforementioned films should not be classified under the realm of apocalypse horror due to the fact that the entirety of civilization is not threatened with extinction, but rather a small group of citizens. Thus, in the previous century, horror and its various subgenres have been the subjects of academic discussion and analysis; however, because of the relatively recent events of 9/11, not much has been written about the strong tie to the apocalypse horror genre that has followed. This thesis has only begun to assess the effects of 9/11 on the apocalyptic horror genre in the ten years following the attacks and has briefly commented on the value of such films in American culture. As the years take the nation further away from the tragic events, and as time diminishes at the psychological grip that the day has held on the collective American psyche, more may be ascertained about

how the attacks and their aftermath have greatly influenced horror and other cinematic genres.

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