READING CULTURES FROM THE MONSTERS THEY ENGENDER: CLOVERFIELD AND POST-9/11 PARANOIA*

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Whether through the spoken or written word, film or the visual arts, the question of how to sincerely and accurately depict realities of suffering and shock has always been there. As our technologies become more sophisticated and world communities become better connected, however, the proliferation and scope of these images takes on a new, more global significance. Reactions to 9/11 constitute a significant example of this current debate about representations of trauma.

This paper examines the role of popular culture, science fiction in particular, in negotiating this highly mediated traumatic event. Through a definition of trauma and an analysis of the same in the film *Cloverfield*, the lack of resolution and resultant paranoia since the attacks are demonstrated, and the relevancy of popular culture in socio-political debates and representational discourse is also interrogated.

Keywords: *trauma, 9/11, popular culture, science fiction, Cloverfield.*

Bien a través del lenguaje oral o escrito, cine o los artes visuales, el problema de cómo representar y difundir fielmente realidades relacionadas con el sufrimiento y el trauma siempre ha existido. Sin embargo, conforme las tecnologías se hacen más sofisticadas y las comunidades mundiales están mejor conectadas, la proliferación y el alcance de estas imágenes de sufrimiento adquieren un significado nuevo y más global. Las reacciones frente al 11 de septiembre de 2001 constituyen un ejemplo significativo de esta cuestión sobre la representación del trauma.

Este artículo investiga el rol jugado por la cultura popular, principalmente el de la ciencia-ficción, en el tratamiento de este suceso traumático y altamente mediatizado. A través de una definición del término trauma y un análisis del mismo en la película *Cloverfield*, se demuestra la falta de resolución y la consiguiente paranoia ocurrida tras los atentados, al igual que se defiende la relevancia de la cultura popular en los análisis socio-políticos.

Palabras clave: *trauma, 11-S, cultura popular, ciencia ficción, Cloverfield*.

1. INTRODUCTION

The events of the 11th September, 2001 represent a pivotal moment in the history, not only of the United States of America, but also in the history of the representation of trauma, terror, destruction and death. This is not to say that prior to 9/11 this issue of representation did not exist or have major significance, of course. Whether through the spoken or written word, film or the visual arts, the question of how to sincerely and accurately depict realities of suffering and shock has always been there. As our technologies become more sophisticated and world communities become better connected, however, the proliferation and scope of these images takes on a new, more global significance. In this paper, I wish to examine how the trauma caused by the September 11th attacks on the United States remains very much unresolved and how this is reflected in the film *Cloverfield* (Reeves 2008). As popular culture and science fiction in particular, are often considered of lesser hermeneutical importance, I will start with an apologia for the significance and value of science fiction in analyses of socio-cultural events. A brief outline of reactions to 9/11 in the visual media will follow in order to examine the socio-historical context of the events. Given the centrality of trauma theory in any approach to 9/11, I will then present a definition of trauma based on theories propounded by Cathy Caruth, Cyndy Hendershot and Ann E. Kaplan. Finally, after briefly addressing cinematic

tendencies since 9/11, I will analyse the film *Cloverfield* to show how the unresolved trauma of the September 11th attacks has turned into a paranoiac response despite apparent attempts to provide some element of catharsis.

2. SCIENCE FICTION AND AMERICAN CULTURE

Science fiction is a problematic genre insofar as it evades easy definition and has a complex epistemological relationship with reality, "a relationship that is often articulated in the genre's simultaneous rebuke and commemoration of realism as a filmic style" (Cornea 2007: 264). It almost always includes fantastic elements, creating new worlds and universes, or, at the very least, new technological possibilities in the 'present'. Because of this seemingly naïve or escapist approach and style, science fiction has often been dismissed as uncritical and irrelevant. It is this very remove from 'reality', however, that gives science fiction the critical distance it needs to engage more deeply with certain sensitive issues, such as the representation of trauma. Like other film genres, it can represent and interrogate the interests, obsessions and anxieties of humans in a revelatory way "creating alternative worlds primarily in order to refract our own back to us. By invoking the paradigm shift of estrangement, the suspension of reality, or the creation of incongruous speculations, science fiction as 'fabulation' is designed to break the hold of the *status quo*" (Graham 2002: 59). In fact, science fiction appears to be of the most apt genres when dealing with issues of trauma, anxiety and questions of identity. In this respect, it is particularly appropriate when looking at the history of the United States of America. As a large country populated by varying and sometimes divergent cultures, creating a sense of unity has often proved difficult. Time and again, one way that Americans have come together is in the face of adversity. The existence of a common enemy has proved the most effective way of bringing people together under one ideological superstructure. It has often been noted how American identity is in some way characterised in opposition to an enemy, be it external or internal (see Engelhardt 1995). America's involvement in wars (almost always outside their national borders) is evidence of this. When it was not the Nazis or the Japanese in WWII, it was the Soviets during the Cold War, or the Vietnamese, and more

recently, various nations in the Middle East, not to mention internal enemies, such as Communists and other political conspirators. With enemies and war come fear and paranoia. The dread of invasion or attack is an almost constant feature of modern American history and this is duly reflected and depicted in its cultural documents. The 1950's, for example, provide compelling examples of the social paranoia and trauma born out of a feeling of "being surrounded by powerful and sometimes mysterious enemies" (Bookes 2006: 5). This was further compounded by the angst created by the potentially apocalyptic threat of the atomic and nuclear age. Interestingly, amongst other genres, science fiction dealt most engagingly with these fears. There is a host of films from the fifties and later which confront these communal fears, mainly through the use of certain thematic distancing techniques such as the alien invasion, monster attack or post apocalyptic dystopia as a sublimation of these anxieties. Famous examples include: *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *Invasion U.S.A* (1952), *War of the Worlds* (1953), *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). As previously mentioned, the outlandishness and consequent distance science fiction can imaginatively exploit is precisely what makes it so effective in engaging with such issues. The success of these films demonstrates how science fiction "can serve as a venue for trenchant social and political commentary that might have been judged too controversial in a more 'mainstream' form" (Bookes 2006: 6).

3. 9/11 AND THE VISUAL MEDIA

Looking at contemporary American society, it can be argued that there are many similarities with the paranoid Weltanshauung of U.S. society in the 1950's, namely, predominant feelings of anxiety and mistrust. If anything, today there is an even more acute sense of fear than ever before. The principal catalyst of this was 9/11. In a horrific twist of fate, America's long-lived fears of invasion and attack were finally realized. The 'impending' became the 'real' and fear and anxiety transformed into trauma. What happened was an inversion, a cruel reversal of art imitating life. The planes that flew into the World Trade Center constituted an all too familiar spectacle from the science fiction genre. It was, as many commented at the time, like something straight out of *Independence Day* (1996). As one critic notes: "Indeed,

our response to 9/11 made disturbingly clear how much our perceptual experience as well as our psychic life is filtered and managed through films we have seen, even experienced *as* films we have seen" (Kahane 2003: 107). There was even some feeling of guilt and responsibility in Hollywood. Robert Altman went so far as to say "Nobody would have thought to commit an atrocity like that unless they'd seen it in a movie [...] I just believe we created this atmosphere and taught them how to do it" (Altman 2001). The repercussions of this influence are frightening. The extent of the far-reaching effects of the visual media, particularly when considering issues of violent trauma are well-known:

> What we see in the movies and on television provides a context and prior set of meanings within and with which we interpret events like the 9/11 attacks. It is not simply that we find images of destruction familiar; they come to us as part of a system of fixed meanings. When we see buildings destroyed, we think of movies in which foreigners are responsible, and we know that retribution will follow. In this way our cultural image bank provides a template for subsequent patterns of memory; as a society we are far more likely to remember a moment of violence that comes, as it were, precategorized than we are to attend to the ongoing brutality of, for example, domestic violence or sexual exploitation. (Sherman and Nardin 2006: 3)

Many films that were in production and post-production in Hollywood following 9/11 were stalled and/or edited to eliminate any elements that would recall the shocking events to a sensitive public. Images of the World Trade Center towers in the posters and teaser trailer for *Spider-Man* (2002) were pulled after the attacks, for example. What Susan Sontag famously called the 'imagination of disaster' (1966), which had been a feature of science fiction movies as far back as the 1950's, took on a new significance in light of these events and strengthened the conviction that science fiction was not a genre removed from 'reality', but rather, inherently bound up with it (see Cornea 2007). Films like *Independence Day* became imbued with a somewhat prophetic quality which fed into the feeling of hyperreality surrounding 9/11. The distinction between 'image' and 'reality',

'representation' and 'real' became blurred on that day. There was an uncanniness about what was seen, what Claire Kahane refers to as a kind of '*déjà vu*', whereby the historical became confused with the fictional (2003: 107). Cultural theorists, such as Jean Baudrillard, put forward controversial views concerning the interplay of image and real soon after the event which upset many with their complex deconstructions of the notion of reality and the implications for such a 'real' event as the terrorist attacks in New York:

> So did reality actually overtake fiction? If it appears to have done so, it is only because reality absorbed the energy of fiction and itself became fiction. One could almost say that reality is jealous of fiction and real events are jealous of images [...There is] a sort of duel between them, to see who will be the most inconceivable. (2002)

This feeling of the postmodern collapse of the boundaries between reality and fiction was mirrored in the media's treatment of the attacks. As Kaplan and Wang observe: "The visual media have become a cultural institution in which the traumatic experience of modernity can be recognized, negotiated, and reconfigured" (2003: 17). The live coverage that people watched all over the world in a seemingly unending loop has become iconic and it revealed the true power and control of the media in a new way. The televised footage gave the viewer a new sense of immediacy rare to such a spectacular catastrophe and opened up questions about reality and the representation of trauma on a previously unknown level. Richard Kearney notes how:

> Television viewers were afforded a double experience of: (a) suffering 'as if' they were *present* to the terror (in modern America's first traumatic experience of alien Terror on its own soil); and (b) detachment by virtue of their real *absence* from the scene itself [...] Indeed the endless replication of the scene, together with the verbal repetition of media-speak ('This is *impossible* to describe', 'This is *unreal*' etc.) suggested that what was at issue was not just the

transmission of information but an experience of something *too real* to be consumed in anything but an imaginary idiom. In sum, the media experience of 9/11 seems to have been less *cognitive* than *aesthetic*. Its reality was expressed by unreality. (2003: 133)

Many have even accused the media of producing secondary or vicarious trauma while some suggest that the visual media are actually "a breeding ground of trauma" (Kaplan and Wang 2003: 17).

4. TRAUMA THEORY AND POPULAR CULTURE

The question of what exactly constitutes 'trauma' is a complex one. Cathy Caruth famously defined it as:

A response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or set of events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviours stemming from an event. [... The event] is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. (1995: 91)

Cyndy Hendershot similarly describes it as a painful or intense experience which cannot be translated, like "a past which is inarticulable as a present reality" (1999: 73). However, as E. Ann Kaplan points out, one's reaction to a traumatic event also "depends on one's own psychic history, on memories inevitably mixed in with fantasies of prior catastrophes, and on the particular cultural and political context within which a catastrophe takes place, especially how it is 'managed' by institutional forces" (2005: 1). This is particularly relevant when tracing the cultural response of a nation. Most definitions of trauma refer to individuals, but it is also important to note the widespread recognition of 'massive' or 'collective' trauma whereby "traumatic events may affect the discourse of an entire nation's public narratives" (Kaplan 2005: 66). As with the collective traumas stemming from events such as the Holocaust or the

destruction created by the atom bomb in Japan, 9/11 had a distressing effect on a large community and this shockwave extended itself outwards via the media to the global community at large. Of course, the attack on the United States didn't constitute a simple 'international' conflict, but rather an international one as the subsequent attacks on Madrid and London emphasized unequivocally. The media, by repeating over and again the images of 9/11 in those first hours and days, rendered the traumatic event open for a more communal and even global trauma. The repetition of the footage the media created 'vicarious' trauma for those not actually present. They produced this by bringing about a "heightened present in which the storing of the past as past does not and cannot take place" (Breithaupt 2003: 67). Repetitive phenomena, such as flashbacks, hallucinations and nightmares are signature features of trauma and the media's treatment of 9/11 can be seen to produce this. What is more, the spectacular images transmitted on television became the object of a guilty fascination to hundreds of thousands of people glued to their television screens, voyeuristically watching the scenes of devastation over and over, perhaps not enjoying the images but certainly hypnotically drawn to them. As Kahane remarks:

> It is this experience of titillation and terror, numbing depression and the fullness of the moment, disgust and the recognition of a certain beauty in the formal image of devastation, feelings that seemed to be not uncommon during the first few days following the disaster, that made it such a complex psychic as well as social and political phenomenon. (2003: 114-5)

Later, there was strict censorship and control of the images but by this point they had already become both widespread and iconic. The media proceeded to take on the role of therapist to those traumatised, focusing on images representing the innocence of the victims, bereft and in shock, the heroes salvaging what they could, the incredulity of eye-witness accounts, the demonization of the enemy (Osama bin Laden) and the emphasis on the memorialisation of the dead. The American flag became the overriding symbol of unity in defiance of the common enemy. This is not satisfactory therapy, however, and ultimately only served to make a scapegoat of bin Laden

and those of an Islamic faith, fuelling an unquestioning nationalistic fervour which never adequately engaged in any meaningful debate as to the reasons behind the attack (Breithaupt 2003). The tendency in the media to critically fall short in such situations is clear: "trauma discourse (especially in the popular media) may degenerate into a signature for victimhood, or an unresolved melancholia mired in injured narcissism or national pride, a melodramatic scenario for self-aggrandizement, a paralysis of the mind and the body, and a failure in language, image and narrative" (Kaplan and Wang 2003: 15).

It is important to recognize that despite any therapy that the U.S. government or media attempted to provide, there has as yet been no true resolution of the trauma. The so-called 'War on Terror' is still going on nine years later with the unfortunate consequence of further exacerbating the volatile relations between various nations and political groups. This lack of resolution to the trauma has only led to additional feelings of insecurity. That unresolved trauma results in increased paranoia has been commonly noted: "The world of the paranoiac is a delusory one in which historical issues are played out as mythic battles between good and evil" (Hendershot 1999: 73). This compulsion can be clearly seen in the U.S. government's response to the attacks, particularly in the rhetoric of the 'War on Terror' (e.g. 'axis of evil') and its protagonists, and it is also evident in popular culture reactions to 9/11.

5. FILM AFTER 9/11

The role of the media in the representation of 9/11 had a direct effect on how films were made after the attacks. As director of *Independence Day*, Roland Emmerich points out:

> It was very interesting to see how the media always criticised us for doing certain things and then they used the same method. They went for the montage of victims at the fence [...] and they used really, really emotional music – like in the movies [...] That has changed something for movies. Now people say, can we do this, can we do that; is it right, is it wrong [...] (In Cornea 2007: 277)

For a time, films were unwilling or unable to approach the subject of 9/11. The media was given almost complete sway to represent the subject and Hollywood was reticent to critically engage. Hollywood instead offered "a complete and distinct escape from the confusing and changed reality that followed 9/11; these alternative digital worlds were at a far remove from the televised images that accompanied 9/11 or from the simulated scenes of destruction in science fiction" (Cornea 2007: 266). It was effectively from 2006 that films which directly referenced the event were released, such as *United 93/Flight 93* (2006) and *World Trade Center* (2006). It is important to note the almost invariable focus on heroics in the more realistic films that deal with 9/11. In the above films, for example, the passengers of the hijacked plane in *Flight 93* are given almost martyr status while the emergency services (police, fire fighters etc.) figure as unequivocal heroes in the latter. This inclusion of successful heroes and the consequent conflict resolution achieved constitutes an attempt to alleviate the trauma and create catharsis for the viewer; they reflect a therapeutic desire: "Melodrama, at least in its Hollywood variety, is a symptom of a culture's need to 'forget' traumatic events while representing them in an oblique form" (Kaplan and Wang 2003: 9). In non-realistic films, however, this does not seem to be the case, or at the very least, it exists to a lesser extent. Shyamalan's *Signs* (2002) and Spielberg's *The War of the Worlds* (2005), for example, fail to provide credible heroes or a cathartic resolution with the consequence of prolonging the trauma, leaving the viewer somewhat unsettled at the end of both films. Within the science fiction genre, the film that most overtly addresses the events of September 11th, 2001 is *Cloverfield* (2008). *Cloverfield* eschews simplistic representations of heroism, favouring instead a more complex view of 9/11 where the conflict remains very much present.

6. *CLOVERFIELD* AND POST-9/11 TRAUMA

Cloverfield harks back to the traditional science fiction monster attack movies of the 50's, drawing intertextually and unashamedly from iconic films such as *Godzilla* (1954) and *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*. The choice of a monster of unknown origin is particularly apt in many ways for the subject of post-9/11 trauma. The metaphor is

tried and tested as Cyndy Hendershot noted concerning the use of mythological forms to represent real threats in 50's atomic-fear science fiction: "such ahistoricism constitutes a paranoiac response to the cultural trauma caused by the reality and threat of nuclear destruction" (1999: 73). In the case of *Cloverfield,* the paranoia is not the threat of nuclear destruction, but rather the threat of destruction of a more complex and devastating kind, i.e. cultural, religious, political, economic, ideological and physical. *Cloverfield* combines the monster attack genre with a very contemporary and highly postmodern documentary-style cinematography using handheld cameras (reminiscent of 9/11 media coverage) as a vehicle to simultaneously provide entertainment and escape for viewers. Some critics suggest that we actually need fictional films like this to help us unconsciously work through certain difficult or traumatic experiences:

> As if the narrative framing of horror, that Hollywood horror stories allowed, could afford relief from the unbearable immediacy of the event by putting it into relief [...] The more horrific the real world becomes the more people feel the need to re-experience the horrible in unreal worlds. Why? Because the imaginary can furnish access to the heart of darkness which remains intolerable in the flesh. (Kearney 2003: 120)

Cloverfield producer J.J. Abrams and director Matt Reeves, both adhere to this idea of experiencing catharsis through watching films, science fiction films in particular. In the *Cloverfield* DVD 'Commentary', for example, Abrams equates the film with its Japanese predecessor, *Godzilla*, which also uses an enormous monster as a metaphor for the trauma of the period, explaining how they were aware that the film "was a way of dealing with the anxieties of our time" and how he feels that "genre films enable you to sort of basically, in a safe environment, approach those sort [sic] of feelings and to experience them but in the safety of knowing that ultimately it's a giant monster movie" (51:35). Despite these claims of catharsis, however, it is questionable as to whether it can be attained in a film so lacking in resolution. *Cloverfield* has received much negative criticism for the depiction of scenes clearly evoking 9/11, for example: "Nothing like a

little shameless emotional manipulation to spark a movie that's already treading risky ground by exploiting a global tragedy for thrills (Travers 2008); "Do we really need the horror of 9/11 to be repackaged and presented to us as an amusement-park ride?" (Zacharek 2008); "The shots are uncomfortably close to everything we know from 9/11, far less oblique in their referencing than, for example, Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* remake" (Phillips 2008); "The screams and the images of smoke billowing through the canyons of Lower Manhattan may make you think of the attack, and you may curse the filmmakers for their vulgarity, insensitivity or lack of imagination" (Dargis 2008); "We've only just finished the rebuilding and the psychic healing! Why in God's name must we endure this sort of thing here over and over again?" (Bradshaw 2008). Given the force of the shock felt by so many, it is understandable that images reminiscent of the event cause stress or anxiety. Dissociation, denial and amnesia are, after all, common symptoms of PTSD sufferers. It is also true that "some conventions of narrative and imagery, with their sensationalized, clichéd emotional patterns often tend to dilute and 'forget' the unutterable pain and horror of traumatic experience" (Kaplan and Wang 2003: 8-9). On the other hand, there seems to be a simultaneous impulse or necessity driving towards the representation of and confrontation with trauma in order to 'work through' or heal it (Kaplan 2005). This conflict between the wish to forget and the necessity to represent, despite the seeming impossibility of the task, is central to trauma studies. The reactions to *Cloverfield* highlight this complex relationship, in this case between popular culture and 9/11. As previously mentioned, a common reaction to the World Trade Center attacks was the feeling of *déjà vu* evidenced by frequent references to Hollywood films. This role was reversed, however, when Hollywood itself began to draw upon images reminiscent of the event and many have taken offence to this. Indeed, from the very beginning of *Cloverfield*, the September 11th attacks are an absent presence. The film opens with the message that what we are about to see constitutes a document recovered from the 'area formerly known as Central Park'. The abandonment or alteration of the name of such an iconic place hints at the terrifying level of destruction necessary to warrant such a drastic measure. It also almost subliminally reminds us of another well-known New York location whose name was changed for similar reasons, i.e. when 'The World Trade Center' became 'Ground Zero'. Later, in the scenes of the

going-away party the video camera is used to get 'testimonials' from Rob's friends, at first in the subdued party atmosphere and then, after the initial shocks, in a more panicked way. This action, more obliquely perhaps, recalls footage of 9/11 where ordinary people were filmed reacting to the events as they happened on the streets of Manhattan. Moments later, as the characters in the film hurry up the stairs to get a better look from the roof, we hear an unidentified voice significantly asking "you think it's another terrorist attack?" (18:37) situating the action distinctly in a post-9/11 setting. In quick succession, as the party-goers rush to the streets for safety, the head of the Statue of Liberty hurtles through Manhattan, coming to rest just outside the apartment building, thus providing a defining metaphor for the film. Just as post-9/11 political rhetoric recognised the destruction of the Twin Towers as an attack on American freedom, *Cloverfield* offers its own analogous symbol of the defiling of American values. The following scene showing the obliteration and collapse of a nearby tall building and the resulting wave of dust and debris that engulf the street constitutes the most blatant borrowing from 9/11 imagery. The sight of dazed and dusty figures traumatised by the gravity of what has just taken place could be no more explicit in its association with the collapse of the 'Twin Towers'. Soon after, the procession of New Yorkers crossing Brooklyn Bridge out of Manhattan compounds these already established parallels. Just over 50 minutes into the film, the protagonists finally arrive at Beth's apartment building where she is trapped. There they are faced with a daunting challenge to save her as her apartment block is resting precariously, at a seemingly impossible angle, upon an adjacent 'twin' tower block which the heroes of the film have to negotiate to rescue her. This scene provides a final overt reminder of September 11th.

The temporal structure of the film is also relevant when considering trauma. *Cloverfield* is made up of three separate diegeses. The opening sequence frames the rest of the film as a kind of 'found footage', now seemingly property of the U.S. Department of Defence. In this diegesis we see nothing more than a screen playing the contents of the digital camera SD card which constitutes the rest of the film. The second diegesis shows the events of April 27th where Rob and Beth wake up in New York and go to Coney Island for the day. Significantly, the first images we see here are views of the New York

skyline and Central Park before they are subsequently destroyed by
the monster. The third diegesis is abruptly introduced soon after and
is concerned with the events of May 22nd. The film regularly cuts
between footage of these two days creating a 'before and after' effect.
As mentioned above, trauma is defined by its visuality and the clash it
creates between the past and present, evidenced by flashbacks etc. It
is therefore not uncommon in trauma films such as *Cloverfield* to find
similar temporal abnormalities and a heightened consciousness of
images:

> Cinema has become one of the key means for the
> narrative temporalization of experience in the twentieth
> century, and its specific stylistic devices (*mise en scène*,
> montage, conventions for marking point of view and
> temporal shifts in particular) have made it a cultural
> form closely attuned to representing the discordances of
> trauma. (Lockhurst 2008: 177)

Often in trauma films, the main diegesis constitutes the
present and this is invaded by images and events from the past. In
Cloverfield, however, the film ends in the past with Beth's
retrospectively ironic lines in Coney Island: "I had a good day" (70:22).
The fact that we are left in the past after experiencing the traumatic
events of the monster attack reinforces the extent to which the film
foregrounds the trauma as still being very much present and
unresolved. The splicing of scenes of the formerly happy lives of Rob
and Beth with their disturbing experiences during the attacks serves
to convey the fracture and intense grief of shattered life stories.

The cinematography of the film too, serves as perceptive social
criticism. The use of handheld cameras in *Cloverfield* recalls the
amateur footage which constituted a substantial part of the first
images we saw of the World Trade Center attacks. The documentary
style and the consistent emphasis on capturing both celebration and
disaster for posterity also elucidate the current global obsession with
technology and documenting. Everything we see in the film is filtered
and mediated through the camera-within-a-camera. The currency of
the image is clear. The film highlights the modern day addiction to
the image and too frequent preference for simulation over the real.

When the head of the Statue of Liberty comes crashing down the street in the film, for example, we see characters using their mobile phones to capture the event. It is no accident either, that it is an electronics store that is looted, again an act symbolic of this fervent obsession. Also, in the store (as earlier in the apartment) there are scenes of people transfixed in front of televisions watching media footage of the disaster as it happens on screen. These too, are extremely telling and pertinent, foregrounding the unrivalled primacy of simulacra in the postmodern age, not to mention the power of the media. The film's supposed cameraman, Hud, defends his relentless 'documenting' saying: "People are gonna want to know how it all went down [...] People need to see this, you know? This is gonna be important" (25:45), an attitude which seems to accurately reflect the views of those, both the media and the general public, who filmed the 9/11 attacks and later distributed the images. It is also noteworthy that the actors of the film used those very media images as a guide. Michael Stahl-David reveals in the *Cloverfield* DVD 'Making of' that "a lot of the research for this movie came from YouTube, looking at footage from 9/11, looking at amateur footage, and the chaos and messiness of those shots and the alarming realness of that" (8:46). Abrams sums it up succinctly stating: "There's a new kind of familiarity with that kind of panic video" (8:59), acknowledging the unprecedented effect of 9/11 in the representation of disaster and trauma.

Perhaps, however, it is not the direct representation of scenes that remind us of the World Trade Center attacks that are at the heart of the disapproval the film has met. It is rather the open-ended character of this science fiction monster attack that disturbs audiences. The film presents us with a highly-loaded metaphorical monster of unknown origin and with the apparent intention to destroy New York but who is not visibly destroyed or defeated during the course of the film. There is a notable absence of any convincing hero figure to defeat the monster; there is no character like that of Will Smith in *Independence Day* to save the day by overcoming seemingly impossible odds, thereby leaving the viewer revelling in a sense of triumph and security. The yuppie protagonists in *Cloverfield* cut far less heroic figures than those defined in any classical sense of the word. Unlike *Godzilla* or most other monster and alien invasion movies, this monster is not brought down by the appropriate authorities or hero,

thus leaving the sensitive viewer anxiously guessing and questioning
the meaning of it all. Whether intentional or otherwise, this is one of
the strengths of the film's socio-political criticism. It is precisely the
double nature of the monster, or, more accurately the 'other', that
lends the film a sharper critical edge. The monster is clearly identified
with the 9/11 attackers but is not reduced simply to this:

> The horror of monsters rests in this capacity to
> destabilize axiomatic certainties. In this respect, while
> they may excite horror, they are not, strictly speaking,
> representations of 'abjection', for the abject is repressed,
> hidden and submerged, whereas one of the functions of
> monsters is to be a spectacle of abnormality. Monsters
> are excluded and demonized, but nonetheless
> functionally necessary to the systems that engender and
> classify them [...] The discourse of monstrosity is
> therefore something which both bolsters and
> denaturalizes talk about what it means to be human.
> (Graham 2002: 39)

As an 'other', the monster represents internal anxieties and
raises the troubling questions: Where is it from? Why is it here? How
can it be stopped? We are never entirely certain where the monster
has come from or why it is wreaking havoc on New York City. We follow
characters that know and learn very little about the situation. Only in
the final scene of the film are we given an oblique clue as to the origin
of the monster. In this scene, an object falling from the sky and
splashing into the ocean, which could be the arrival of the monster,
can be seen in the top right-hand corner of the frame. The fact that it
seems to come from the sky is surely no accident; it reminds us of
America's long-lived fear of invasion epitomised by the catchphrase
from the 1950's: 'Watch the Skies'. Prophetically, in 2001 the attacks
did come from the skies. The lack of any definitive answers to these
fundamental questions about the monster in the film reflects the
similar vagueness surrounding the true origin of and reasons behind
the attacks in American political discourse after 9/11. Until *Cloverfield*
neither the media nor other films engaged so directly with the
questions surrounding and underlying the 9/11 attacks. Although these
questions are provocatively left unanswered in the film, the very

presence of a monster of unknown origin terrorising New York is sufficient to stimulate discussion. Explaining away the metaphor and subsequently politicising or biasing the film would have been less effective. The very open-endedness of the monster represents the necessity of opening up debate regarding the causes of 9/11.

Cloverfield's monster in its representation of modern America, then, can be seen as a highly effective symbol of a repressed American guilt complex, i.e. the sublimation of the trauma of its worst fears being realized, coupled with the unexpressed feelings of responsibility for past wrongdoing. The public and political rhetoric of America as the innocent victim after 9/11 was an obvious attempt at hiding or sidestepping deeper issues concerning a shadowy heritage of double-dealing and dubious foreign policy, and in this sense, the monster in *Cloverfield* could be said to represent the arguably self-destructive activity of America, politically and culturally, at the time. With reference to the duplicity of monster figures, Richard Kearney relevantly notes: "Without them we know not what we are. With them we are not what we know" (Kearney 2003: 117). The fact that the monster is not eliminated is central insofar as it implies a lack of resolution of the trauma in question. The film therefore, does not offer a definitive cure but rather leaves the wounds exposed and unhealed. This perhaps, is a more constructive approach than the provision of unconvincing and unrepresentative closure seen in so many 'trauma' films. As E. Ann Kaplan suggests: "Trauma can never be 'healed' in the sense of a return to how things were before a catastrophe took place, or before one witnessed a catastrophe; but if the wound of trauma remains open, its pain may be worked through in the process of its being 'translated' via art" (2005: 18-19).

7. CONCLUSIONS

The cinema constitutes a central component of communal cultural responses to socio-political discourse. Science fiction, long-ignored, has finally found a place in debates concerning representation and has proved fruitful in approaches to cultural and sociological study. In retrospect, with the 1950's in mind in particular, science fiction has often exhibited a special affinity with issues of paranoia, trauma and

identity, especially with regard to American culture. As experience and
trauma can be individual and personal and/or collective and cultural,
to authentically engage with the anxieties and traumas of modernity,
therefore, popular culture serves as a fundamental hermeneutical
instrument. With respect to cultural representations 9/11, a study of
science fiction films such as *Cloverfield* can yield provocative and
significant results. While film can often help viewers work through
traumatic events by providing distance and closure, any catharsis
Cloverfield attempts to provide finally falls short, mainly due to the
integrity of its highly critical political allegory. *Cloverfield*'s monster of
uncertain origin ultimately represents acute paranoia arising from the
unresolved trauma of the current political situation in the United
States. While the film may not succeed in offering relief from the
continuing distress suffered in America, it does constitute an
important step in the healing process by confronting the trauma head
on and recognising the lack of resolution which is essentially
prolonging the suffering and anguish.

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