Capitalist Superheroes:

Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age

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(Newman 2004: 50). His hybrid ethnicity and cultural identity gives him and other characters the ability to stand in symbolically for a variety of real-world social and ethnic groups that suffer similar forms of marginalization: from the discarded working class and the disabled to homosexuals and any number of ethnic minorities. Most other superhero characters leave no such room, instead endlessly re-establishing the absolute hegemony of the white heterosexual male.

Moreover, these films employ the visual motifs and technologies associated with panoptic control in a form that challenges the questionable ways in which most popular narratives incorporate and legitimize neoliberal discourses of surveillance. Like *Watchmen*, these films challenge the legitimacy of panoptic forms of social and political power, while opening up a space for otherness and diversity as essential categories with a right to public visibility and acceptance. But Del Toro's films move beyond Moore's critique of neoliberal panopticism in their attempt to carve out a domain for characters that are presented in terms of their status as marginalized minorities.

In this regard, the Hellboy films are not entirely unique within the superhero film genre. Bryan Singer's two X-Men films for instance are often cited as narrative allegories for queer theory and civil rights issues, both films' mutant characters "explicitly analogized to Jewish bodies, gay bodies, adolescent bodies, Japanese or Native or African American bodies—they are first and foremost, subjected and subjugated and colonized figures" (Bukatman 73). And the TV series *Heroes* has similarly foregrounded categories of ethnic and sexual diversity in its various groupings of super-powered characters. But within the larger landscape of mass culture and contemporary popular entertainment, these potential sites of ideological resistance remain themselves a small but essential minority.

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Neoliberal Capitalism and the End of the World

> Watching *Children of Men*, we are inevitably reminded of the phrase attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. That slogan captures precisely what I mean by "capitalist realism": the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it. (Fisher 2009: 2)

The popular entertainments of the postmodern era have seen an ongoing proliferation of apocalyptic narratives and imagery. From the science fiction B-movies of the 1950s to the millennial disaster revival of the late 1990s, end-of-the-world scenarios have maintained a constant grip on the popular imagination in the post-World War II era. The spectacular visual effects that make up the main attraction for films about global catastrophe have continued to ensure the marketability of the apocalypse: in Cold War genre films like *Earth vs. The Flying Saucers* (dir. Fred F. Sears, 1956), in digital cinema blockbusters like *2012* (dir. Roland Emmerich, 2009), and even in arthouse favorites like *Melancholia* (dir. Lars von Trier, 2011).

This succession of apocalyptic film cycles in American popular culture has flourished alongside the historical development of a particular form of capitalism. From the development of consumer society in the 1950s onward, American capitalism has undergone a series of intensifications that have culminated in the past three decades in the establishment of neoliberalism as a global paradigm. Each series of disaster movies has reflected historically determined anxieties that were specific to its own phase in the development of capitalism: the cycle of Cold War

science fiction films in the 1950s can be read as an expression of anxieties triggered by ubiquitous consumerism, while the successful series of disaster films in the 1970s reflected the concerns about a decade of inflation and economic crisis. In the contemporary age of neoliberal capitalism and its "There Is No Alternative" mantra, the apocalyptic motif in popular culture has extended beyond its traditional genre boundaries, now appearing in many kinds of narrative entertainment. Besides the zombie film, the disaster film, and the post-apocalyptic action movie, the superhero film has become another expression of this post-historical worldview.

In this chapter, I examine the relationship between the post-WWII disaster film and its complex relationship with capitalism as it developed from late-Fordism to post-industrial neoliberalism. I develop my analysis of this relationship between popular genre fiction and ideology by first discussing the dialectical structure of the classic monster movie, concluding my initial argument with a close look at the contemporary disaster film *Cloverfield* (dir. Matt Reeves, 2008). These monster movies have a great deal in common with the contemporary superhero movie genre, and will help articulate more clearly the contradictory nature of many such popular narratives. The second part of the chapter then extends this argument by examining the first season of the television series *Heroes*, which offers one of the most compelling examples of the relationship between post-9/11 neoliberalism and the superhero genre, and which also brings together many of the conceptual strands from earlier chapters. By examining the apocalyptic elements that can be identified in these popular narratives, this chapter will argue that these end-of-the-world scenarios reveal how one of the pervasive elements of neoliberalism is the false notion that we have indeed reached the end of history.

The Antinomies of Apocalyptism

The audiovisual depiction of large-scale destruction in Hollywood entertainment has often been placed in the context of Tom Gunning's "cinema of attractions" paradigm, which elevates the attraction of spectacular imagery above the traditional emphasis on narrative. This perspective certainly has relevance for the formulaic and narratively shallow disaster film, which emphasizes kinetic thrills and spectacular visual effects over elements such as character development, complex plotting, and verisimilitude. But although these films do give precedence to visual effects over characterization and plot, there is also a narrative motif in these end-of-the-world scenarios that connects strongly with postmodern anxieties.

As Frank Kermode pointed out in his discussion of apocalyptic narratives in literary history, apocalyptic fantasies offer an illusion of order and progression by providing history with a sense of closure. Just as origin stories supply a comforting sense of narrative beginnings and mythological predestination, the apocalypse promises a revelation that all too often serves to reboot a system that has gone into crisis. Furthermore, it is an extremely flexible motif that is adaptable to a seemingly infinite range of historical periods, genres, and narrative forms:

> Apocalypse can be disconfirmed without being discredited. This is part of its extraordinary resilience. It can also absorb changing interests, rival apocalypses, such as the Sybilline writings. It is patient of change and of historiographical sophistications. It allows itself to be diffused, blended with other varieties of fiction—tragedy, for example, myths of Empire and of Decadence—and yet it can survive in very naïve forms. (Kermode 8-9)

Among such naïve forms of apocalyptic narrative are clearly the pop-cultural texts that range across numerous genres in multiple media, including post-World War II Hollywood cinema. But

perhaps most remarkable about the systemic occurrence of these apocalyptic narratives is that such popular films—with very few exceptions—ultimately show the world being saved from disaster on the eve of its destruction, frequently due to the direct intervention of a martyr figure. Such martyr figures have become increasingly commonplace in apocalyptic blockbuster films of the late 20th century, where "the Hollywood appropriation of martyrdom situates it in the larger context of the redemption of mankind" (Copier 174).

While most Hollywood films of this kind avoid explicit religious references that would limit the films' popular appeal in a predominantly secularized Western culture, Biblical notions of martyrdom and sacrifice do continue to dominate these pictures. In *The Poseidon Adventure* (dir. Ronald Neame, 1972) as much as in *Armageddon* (dir. Michael Bay, 1998), Hollywood disaster films have indulged in the fantasy of a heroic martyr sacrificing his own life to redeem a corrupt, stagnant world from the brink of destruction. The contemporary superhero movie is certainly no exception to this pattern: *Superman Returns* for instance represents only one of the many ways in which the genre has appropriated messianic imagery and themes in connection with apocalyptic scenarios. As I have developed in more detail in chapter 1, Kal-El's acceptance of the messianic role determined by his father connects his origin story to a larger mythical discourse of predestination and patriarchal power.

While apocalyptism makes up a continuous cross-genre motif in classical and postclassical Hollywood cinema, its individual movie cycles have reflected the specific anxieties of their own historical circumstances. The 1950s wave of apocalyptic monster and science fiction films can, for instance, be read as symptomatic of wider socio-cultural fears and anxieties relating directly to the paranoia of its era's cultural and political discourses:

> While the science fiction of the long 1950s responds in a particularly direct and obvious way to the threat of nuclear holocaust, it is also the case that this fiction is influenced by a number of other concerns and anxieties that were crucial to the texture of American life in the decade. Indeed, these other concerns and anxieties are ultimately inseparable from the nuclear fears of the decade, the synergies among these various fears accounting for the otherwise seemingly inexplicable level of Cold War hysteria that informed American attitudes during this period. (Booker 4)

Similarly, the 21st-century cycle of superhero movies has incorporated apocalyptic imagery and motifs in ways that reflect contemporary anxieties related to post-9/11 neoliberalism and the War on Terror.

These films stand as a telling example of how the absence of historicity in late capitalism triggers a desire for Kermode's "rectilinear views of the world," the resulting re-establishment of order, and perhaps even a promise of redemption. The disaster film acts out the wider fantasy that the postmodern world has reached the point of collapse, while promising a nostalgic form of rebirth and renewal. This is why the disaster film connects so strongly to discourses of 9/11 and the neoliberal agenda: the spectacular imagery of the attacks automatically led the public to interpret the events as part of a postmodern culture of spectacle. This contributed to the ease with which the events and their media representation were effectively severed from any socio-historical context, and came to circulate as lurid spectacles in their own right. These images subsequently came to serve a cultural and political agenda that embraced neoliberalism's "There Is No Alternative" logic in the articulation of the Bush Doctrine and the War on Terror.

Most films in the disaster movie genre embody a strong sense of nostalgia for a pre-modern world, using the films' cataclysmic events as a kind of societal and historical reboot, returning the

world to an earlier form of capitalism. The apocalyptic mode of superhero movies however reflects a more ambivalent attitude towards postmodernity. For while the superhero films typically do include spectacular scenes of mass destruction that define much of these films' drawing power, the narrative tradition of the superhero also requires that the world be saved from this calamity. The preservation of a status quo that will inevitably lead to a similar crisis in the next installment is thereby ensured. The superhero film thus serves as an excellent example of the specific kind of postmodern culture that has developed in the neoliberal era. For instead of the repeated fantasy/anxiety of a devastating attack on New York City, these 21st-century films circulate in a culture where this has already happened, and where the conflicting desires to revisit those events while also fantasizing that they never took place creates an uncanny narrative/historical short circuit. The endlessly repeated superhero cycles fulfill this antinomy: the world is both saved and destroyed, the hero both sacrifices himself and survives, the events in the films both did and did not happen.

Disaster Movies and America's Addiction to Catastrophe

> Only a catastrophe gets our attention. We want them, we need them, we depend on them, as long as they happen somewhere else. (DeLillo 1985: 66)

The above passage from Don DeLillo's postmodernist novel *White Noise* (1985) is frequently quoted in reference to the central role occupied by catastrophic imagery in the American public imagination. In response to the question why the postmodern subject finds himself so enthralled by images of large-scale devastation, the character Alfonse Stompanato memorably replies: "Because we're suffering from brain fade. We need an occasional catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information" (65).

This perspective on the postmodern desire for moments of spectacular disaster that briefly interrupt the deadening monotony of late capitalist consumerism indicates the contradictory nature of postmodern popular culture. According to this logic, the disaster film is symptomatic of both the desire to upset the status quo, and the opposite wish to see that same balance endlessly and immediately restored. This negative dialectic is typical of the schizophrenic nature of the capitalist system, as well as its tendency to move towards crisis: "with its ceaseless boom-and-bust cycles, capitalism is fundamentally and irreducibly bipolar" (Fisher 2009: 35). A similar idea was suggested by Susan Sontag as early as 1965, in her influential essay "The Imagination of Disaster":

> Ours is indeed an age of extremity. For we live under continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror. (42)

As Sontag pointed out so accurately, the spectacular and repetitive nature of cataclysmic imagery in Hollywood films from the 1950s onward became a crucial element in the historical development of postmodernism. As science fiction and horror movies from the Cold War era offered more depictions of large-scale destruction, the public perception of catastrophe was increasingly defined by fantasy representations, with movies setting the standards by which real-life disasters came to be judged.

Unlike the more speculative, science-oriented narratives of early-20th century science fiction novels, the Cold War disaster films offered the audience a more haptic form of involvement. These spectacular films with their emphasis on visual effects allowed the viewer to engage in a fantasy of seeing recognizable landmarks of the modern Western world destroyed and capitalist civilization brought to a sudden, violent end. The ubiquitous nature of disaster footage in the Hollywood movies

of the 1950s therefore "owed a good deal of their fascination to the therapeutic opportunity they presented for working through anxieties about the frightening prospect of global annihilation, particularly because they so consistently supplied happy endings and comforting resolutions" (Rozario 168).

It has become commonplace to interpret these films' alien invasions, atomic mutation, and identity theft as metaphorical representations of anxieties related to the threats of nuclear warfare, communism and McCarthyism. More recent studies of these film genres however have focused on the way in which they articulated and acted out wider resentments against modernity itself, and the complex relationship with capitalism they seem to represent. If the period of late or globalized capitalism has indeed ushered in an era in which the Baudrillardian simulacrum has usurped our perceptions of reality, then "the postmodern culture of calamity may well be defined by a collision or collusion between the apocalyptic and the hyperreal" (Rozario 188).

In the history of the disaster film, this simultaneous collision and collusion started with the cycle of science fiction films of the 1950s, beginning with *When Worlds Collide* (dir. Rudolph Maté, 1951), including the "paranoia subgenre" of *The Thing from Another World* (dir. Christian Nyby, 1951), *Invaders from Mars* (dir. William Cameron Menzies, 1953), and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (dir. Don Siegel, 1956), and culminating in the cycle of monster movies featuring visual effects produced by Ray Harryhausen: *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (dir. Eugène Lorié, 1953), *It Came from Beneath the Sea* (dir. Robert Gordon, 1955), *Earth vs. The Flying Saucers* (dir. Fred F. Sears, 1956), and *20 Million Miles to Earth* (dir. Nathan Juran, 1957).

The Dialectics of the 1950s Monster Movie

Harryhausen's monsters offered audiences a productive way of engaging with the dialectical view of (post)modernity that is embodied by the disaster film as the product of a mass culture in

which "everything becomes a *spectacle*, that is, essentially *non-participatory*" (Lefebvre 1995: 337). One of the primary postmodern anxieties concerned the breakdown of the distinction between the natural and the cultural, the modernist opposition that was being challenged by the swift development of technology and commodification in the 1950s. Resentments against this cultural shift were articulated in these films by monsters wreaking havoc on the major American cities that represented modern discourses of progress. Whether the monster in the film took the form of a giant lizard, a gargantuan octopus, or the monstrous yet endearing alien "Ymir" from *20 Million Miles to Earth*, the creatures represented a primitive, peculiarly innocent force of nature that responded violently and spectacularly to the arrogance of modern humanity. These films thereby came to perform "valuable, if problematic, therapeutic work for a modern people living in a world of constant turmoil and turbulence, in a world haunted by violence" (Rozario 188).

The therapeutic work these popular texts perform is itself deeply contradictory, as we desire to see resentments against modernity acted out from within the context of these formulaic narratives in which the upset balance is also systematically restored. This desire is indicative of some of the doubleness that typifies the historical period of the 1950s. The schizophrenia that Deleuze and Guattari have described as an essential characteristic of postmodernism may be witnessed here: "the overt doubleness of American culture in the 1950s can ... be taken as a reflection of the increasing hegemony of capitalism in the decade, as the last remnants of agrarian alternatives to capitalism were swept from the American scene once and for all" (Booker 4). Just as Marx adopted a dialectical form of analysis in order to chart the complexities and contradictions of capitalism, an analysis of American Cold War popular culture should be similarly dialectical in order to recognize the embedded contradictions that fueled this cultural period.

The Hollywood disaster films of this era present us with such overwhelming contradictions that their narrative logic becomes a form of shorthand for dialectical thought. Firstly, the films' entire existence is predicated on the depiction of apocalyptic imagery, yet they consistently present narratives of historical redemption. Secondly, the films' articulation of the communist threat is allegorically represented in the form of mind-controlling aliens that transform American citizens into a homogeneous mass, while American commodity culture of the period represents exactly this kind of cultural homogeneity. Thirdly, the destructive monsters provide a form of therapy for postmodern audiences that lack a sense of agency, even as this "therapeutic activity" takes the form of a passive consumer spectacle. Both Lefebvre and Debord have criticized such visual spectacles for being essentially non-participatory, emerging precisely at "the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life" (Debord 29). If the popular culture of the 1950s can thus be interpreted as a symptom of this historical moment in which we see the beginnings of late capitalism and an emergent postmodernism, it could be rewarding to compare the features of this period's allegorical disaster films with more recent texts that share this apocalyptic motif.

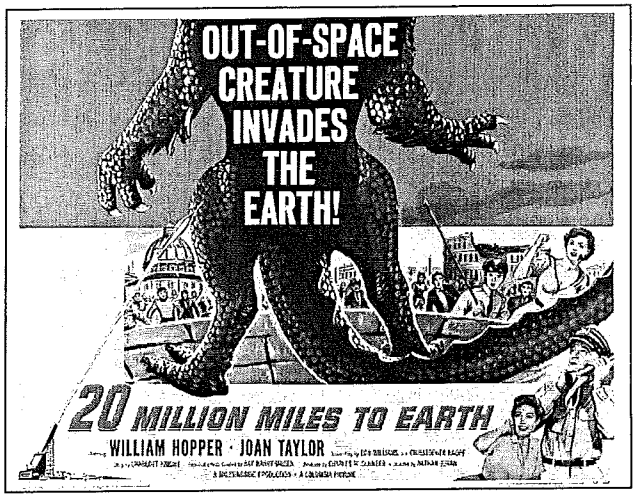
Such a comparison between similar texts from different eras can clarify shifts and possible ruptures in ideological values over time, as popular culture adapts to changing cultural concerns. This allows us to focus on the ways in which they represent the dialectical values of continuity, in the form of stable intertextual genre conventions, and change, in the form of modifications to the formula that connect to historically specific reading positions. One of the traditional ingredients of the disaster movie genre is the hero's vocation as a scientist. The disaster movie typically "opens with the scientist-hero in his laboratory, which is located in the basement or on the grounds of his tasteful, prosperous house" (Sontag 43). The protagonist thereby repre-

sents not only the Enlightenment ideals of scientific knowledge and rational thought, but also the conservative ideological values associated with white heterosexual patriarchy, his female assistant an important but subservient accessory in his ongoing investigation.[10]

Not only is the scientist-hero in these disaster films instrumental in saving the world from the aggressors; his cooperation with the American military also represents the efficacy of the military-industrial complex that provided the economical engine for post-WWII America. In this sense, the narratives of 1950s disaster movies dramatize the successful cooperation between the government and the enlightened individual, often overcoming initial conflicts and misunderstandings to rise together and overcome seemingly insurmountable odds. At the most superficial symbolic level, these narratives therefore seem to offer thinly veiled metaphorical representations of American superiority, always in the form of explicitly masculine and patriarchal fantasies of social and technological control.

Although this kind of "common-sense" interpretation does indeed hold true at the most basic narrative level, the monster movies of the 1950s simultaneously provide an altogether different level of engagement that runs counter to what one may call the "preferred reading" of this surface meaning. For although the scientist-hero is nominally the protagonist and therefore theoretically the primary locus of audience empathy and identification, he simultaneously offers a more ambiguous representation of the "one who releases forces which, if not controlled for good, could destroy man himself" (Sontag 46). The protagonist thereby stands not only for the positive aspects of scientific progress and Enlightenment values, but also for the destructive powers associated with nuclear power, ultimately making him responsible for the disasters that take place in the film. In other words: the protagonist occupies a position that could with equal legitimacy be described as that of dramatic antagonist.

By the same token, the monster that functions as the picture's nominal villain may also be said to be the film's actual protagonist-hero, and the primary focus of audience engagement. Like the eponymous main character in archetypal monster movie *King Kong* (dir. Merian C. Cooper, 1933), the stop-motion animated creatures in the 1950s cycle of monster movies constitute "a narratively centralised special effect ... whose singular nature not only forms the basis for the diegetic story, but also supports a meta-narrative *about* spectacular display" (North 66-67). In marked contrast to the bland, interchangeable leading men who portray these films' scientist-heroes, the spectacular monsters in the 1950s disaster movies are colorful, larger-than-life characters, given forceful and distinctive personalities. Indeed, these films' longevity within fan culture and genre film history derives from the creature effects more than anything else. Even the film posters' design usually emphasized the dominance of the creature over the human characters in the film, who dwell in the margins as the monster overshadows every other aspect of the image.



The original poster for *20 Million Miles to Earth* (1957) – and the centrality of its monster protagonist.

With hero and villain thus occupying opposite yet interchangeable roles in the genre, the monster movie provides an opportunity for viewers to navigate between these two positions. Rather than limiting the viewer's options to a binary choice between good and evil, these films provide a deceptively complex interface through which the dialectical nature of capitalism is clearly reflected: the scientist-hero/villain embodies Jameson's notion that "capitalism is at one and the same time the best thing that has ever happened to the human race, and the worst" (1991: 47). This helps us understand why the disaster film became such a ubiquitous genre within global cultures of postmodernism, as it reflects most accurately how we must view "the cultural evolution of late capitalism dialectically, as catastrophe and progress all together" (ibid.). Even if the films themselves are commonly perceived as hollow, superficial forms of postmodern spectacle, the contradictions that exist at every level of their structure make them quintessentially symptomatic of postmodern culture.

Cloverfield and the Post-9/11 Disaster Film

> From a psychological point of view, the imagination of disaster does not greatly differ from one period in history to another. But from a political and moral point of view, it does. (Sontag 48)

As Susan Sontag implies in the above quotation, the imagination of disaster within this popular genre reflects wider social concerns that allow contemporary audiences to engage with these texts at a level beyond that of mere plot. In their ambivalent treatment of apocalyptic imagery and narratives, distinct cycles in the disaster movie genre's history can be related to political and ideological values of their periods. For instance, just as the 1950s cycle of monster movies reflects concerns about the Atomic Age, the post-WWII rise of Western consumerism, and the loss of

individual identity this cultural shift entails, the late 1990s "millennial" cycle, spearheaded by the success of *Independence Day* (dir. Roland Emmerich, 1996), represents the contradictions of the fully globalized capitalism of Clinton's post-Cold War "Pax Americana." Throughout this cycle, which also includes films like *Deep Impact* (dir. Mimi Leder, 1998) and *Armageddon*, the focus is placed squarely on America's leading role in world politics, willing to sacrifice a martyr figure to redeem the world while a benevolent, patriarchal American president succeeds in uniting the world and leading a global response to the cataclysmic event at hand.

When the 9/11 attacks occurred, the popular genre of the disaster movie took up a pivotal role within the forms of public discourse that would come to define the event. Many commentators, including *New Yorker* film critic Anthony Lane, immediately emphasized the film-like qualities of the attacks: "People saw—literally saw, and are continuing to see, as it airs in unforgiving repeats—that day as a movie" (qtd. in Rozario 177). And while the spectacular images of the destruction of the World Trade Center buildings were endlessly repeated, the public response to the uncanny way in which these images seemed so familiar from countless disaster movies created a strangely contradictory response. On the one hand, there was a public outcry against Hollywood images that sensationalized mass destruction, as "numerous critics summarily declared that the attacks ... had brought about the 'end of irony'" (Spigel 120). But this was simultaneously contradicted not only by the public's addiction to the ceaseless repetition of these images, but also by a widely shared private interest in the disaster movies that were publicly deemed unacceptable: "even while industry leaders were eager to censor out trauma-inducing images of any kind, video outlets reported that when left to their own discretion consumers were eagerly purchasing terrifying [disaster films] like *The Siege* and *The Towering Inferno*" (ibid.).

This contradictory relationship with 9/11 and its connection with the spectacles of the disaster movie genre confirms Slavoj Žižek's explanation of the unreal qualities of the attacks and their imagery:

> What happens at the end of this process of virtualization ... is that we begin to experience "real reality" itself as a virtual entity. For the great majority of the public, the WTC explosions were events on the TV screen, and when we watched the oft-repeated shot of frightened people running towards the camera ahead of the giant cloud of dust from the collapsing tower, was not the framing of the shot itself reminiscent of the spectacular shots in catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others, since—as Jeremy Bentham knew—reality is the best appearance of itself? (2002: 11)

This Baudrillardian reversal of real and representation, of authenticity superseded by simulation, clarifies this apparent desire to revisit the disaster films that had defined the spectacle of catastrophe for us, as this allows us to measure the "reality" of the 9/11 footage by the yardstick of the "fantasy" of the disaster film. Using Lacanian theory to illuminate the importance of fiction in our understanding of reality, Žižek employs the notion of "traversing the fantasy" as a way of negotiating our fears and desires without having to confront them directly: "we should be able to discern, in what we experience as fiction, the hard kernel of the Real which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it" (ibid. 19). In other words: the fantastical representations of spectacular apocalypse do not truly represent an escapist flight from reality into the realm of fantasy and entertainment. Rather, at a more fundamental level, they act out a perverse desire to see this drive fulfilled, while the troubling implications of this desire are inoculated by the emphatically non-realist trappings of the genre film.

This is again a point where we should clearly differentiate between the two conflicting notions of popular fantasy and what

it represents. Fantasy is not merely a cultural expression of how one wishes things were: "it is a 'story' that both naturalizes a state of affairs – *that's just the way that things are* – and makes it a personal configuration – *that's just the way that I am*" (Williams 212). Apocalyptism in popular narratives therefore articulates both a desire for historical linearity to re-impose itself forcefully, and the post-historical anxiety of neoliberal capitalism. Such forms of fantasy thus allow one to engage with the tension between structured desire and unmediated *jouissance*, allowing us to "approach what [we] desire without ever getting any closer to it" (ibid.).

Therefore, whether they deal with the anxieties caused by the Cold War and its threat of nuclear annihilation or by 9/11 and the threat of global terrorism, monster movies function as sites where audiences can negotiate these issues therapeutically within the safety of a genre that confronts these fears indirectly. Matt Reeves, the director of the post-9/11 monster movie *Cloverfield* (2008), acknowledges this perspective on the genre in his audio commentary from the film's DVD release:

> From the beginning a lot of people were saying: "... Does it have this 9/11 angle to it?" And in a certain sense I was always aware that it did, in that it felt like it was a way of dealing with the anxieties of our time ... Genre movies ... deal with very real anxieties that people have. That's why they're effective. *Godzilla* came out of that whole A-bomb nightmare for Japan, and the idea of this terrible, unfathomable destructive force ... and all the anxiety that came out of the atomic and nuclear age ... So that was always the entry point for our movie. But then we felt that once you call up those feelings, I think genre films enable you to approach those feelings in a safe environment, and to experience them, but in the safety of ultimately knowing it's a giant monster movie.

In many ways, the "9/11 angle" to which Reeves refers in *Cloverfield* is all too obvious. For while the film establishes itself

in the generic tradition of the disaster movie by forging intertextual connections with the classic Ray Harryhausen monsters, it repurposes the genre's familiar narrative and visual tropes as an extension of post-9/11 culture.

The teaser trailer for the film immediately established not only the subjectivity and immediacy of the digital-video aesthetic associated with 9/11 and its various media representations, but also the tradition of the monster movie, alongside the resulting nature of the film as defined primarily by its entertainment value. Besides the associative connections between the handheld digicam conceit and the endlessly recycled 9/11 footage, the film re-stages iconic images from within the safety of its own monster movie context. These obvious symmetries largely shaped the critical response to the film, with reviewers and audiences alike voicing the film's uncanny appropriations of 9/11 imagery. Dubbing the film's nameless monster "Al-Qaedzilla," *Village Voice* film critic Nathan Lee was one of many writers to observe that "street-level 9/11 footage would fit seamlessly into *Cloverfield*'s hand-held, ersatz-amateur POV; the initial onslaught of mayhem, panic, plummeting concrete, and toxic avalanches could have been storyboarded directly from the CNN archive" (n. pag.).

Given the fact that *Cloverfield*'s multiple and deliberate articulations of 9/11 discourse were equal to (if not larger than) its disaster movie genre trappings, the film's enormous critical and commercial success may indeed testify to the audience's readiness to engage with these issues from within the relative "safety" of its explicit monster movie context. Hollywood films that have presented aspects of the 9/11 attacks in a more literal way (such as *United 93* and *World Trade Center*) were surrounded by controversy and public debate, and attracted only a fraction of *Cloverfield*'s blockbuster-sized audience. An often-heard complaint was that audiences were still too traumatized by the attacks to confront a cinematic recreation of the events directly,

thereby once again foregrounding the traumatic aspects of 9/11, as discussed previously in chapter 2. These films' narratives however provided little more than generic tales of heroic American martyrdom aimed at transforming a passive and victimized America into an image of heroic masculinity.

This general lack of a coherent geopolitical narrative to contextualize the attacks has been frequently discussed and criticized in studies of 9/11: "the events of September 11 were converted into a human-interest story, into a commodity that could generate substantial profits for commercial news organizations" (Rozario 194). With the bombardment of spectacular images and sentimental human-interest narratives about individual victims, the attacks were presented within a historical and political vacuum that reduced complex issues to familiar patterns of heroes and villains:

> The entertainment media and apocalyptic theology both tend to present politics and morality in black-and-white terms, treating the world as a place where "innocence" is always imperiled and where retribution is demanded against violators of virtue. Both discourses privilege the sentimental and favor personal morality over political knowledge to such an extent that complexity can begin to feel like the last refuge of fools and the corrupt. (ibid. 200)

This simplistic reduction of historical events into ready-made generic binary patterns conforms once again to Lynn Spigel's description of "infantile citizenship," as I have developed previously in chapter 2. With the mass media coverage presented in ways that are both sensational and sentimental, while entirely lacking in historical or geopolitical context, both the news footage of 9/11 and its various depictions in Hollywood movies patronize their viewers as if they were children. This position helped the American public adopt a role of victimized exceptionalism "that allows adult viewers comfortably to confront the horrors and

guilt of war by donning the cloak of childhood innocence" (Spigel 128).

Cloverfield incorporates several elements of this a-historical media response to 9/11 as well, firstly by re-staging familiar representations of those catastrophic moments as an unforeseeable attack by a nameless, unidentifiable monster. In an inspired break with genre traditions, *Cloverfield* offers no explanation for the monster's actions, or even any indication of its origins. And unlike the traditional scientist-hero of the disaster movie, the protagonists of *Cloverfield* are young "neo-yuppies" with no idea of the nature of the events they encounter. But the fact that there is no central voice of authority represented within the narrative maintains the protagonists' ambiguous position in the film. For just as the unforeseen consequences of technological progress made the scientist-hero at least partially responsible for the impending apocalypse, it is here implied that the ignorance and incompetence of these new global capitalists is to blame for our current predicament. As Nathan Lee suggests, a subversive reading of *Cloverfield* may indeed be the most compelling one:

> With its emphasis on corporate infrastructure and the unimaginative consumer class that enables it, *Cloverfield* makes for a most satisfying death-to-New-York saga. Which is to say, the fatal flaw of Drew Goddard's script—shallow, unlikable heroes—can be flipped to an asset: death to the shallow, unlikable heroes! (n. pag.)

Furthermore, while this oppositional reading of the heroes' traditional dual role of protagonist/antagonist certainly applies within this post-9/11 cultural context, the monster's similarly dialectical nature is equally convincing. As in the Ray Harryhausen films of the 1950s, the monster acts out wider resentments against (post)modernity in ways that allow viewers to indulge in such fantasies indirectly.

"Some Thing Has Found Us": smoke-covered Manhattan on the *Cloverfield* film poster.

As the film's poster illustrates, the monstrous attacks on New York constitute *Cloverfield*'s quintessential attraction: the notion of a post-9/11 New York under attack by a mysterious creature is the sole focus of the poster's design. While the image on the poster recreates familiar images of the attack that showed downtown Manhattan from the water, enormous smoke clouds rising from the Financial District, it adds the tag line "Some Thing Has Found Us" as its sole indication of the force behind this destruction.

With the film's monster literally described by the term "Some Thing," one is tempted to perceive it as a metaphorical embodiment of the Lacanian concept "Das Ding": the lost object of desire and *jouissance* that must be continually re-found, representing the unknowable "abyss/void of the Other beyond every empathy and identification" (Žižek 2010: 312). *Cloverfield*'s monster posits the threat to the city precisely in the form of this "unknowable void" that acts out our own repressed fantasies:

> Not only were the media bombarding us all the time with talk about the terrorist threat; this threat was also obviously libidinally invested — just remember the series of movies from *Escape from New York* to *Independence Day*. That is the rationale of the often-mentioned association of the attacks with Hollywood disaster movies: the unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise. (Žižek 2002: 15-16)

The monster thus comes to represent a far more accurate embodiment of how 9/11 was given shape by the media, and therefore of the way it was experienced by much of the public. Unlike the more literal recreations of the attacks, post-9/11 disaster movies like *Cloverfield*, *War of the Worlds* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2005), and *Children of Men* (dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 2006) offer more productive ways of "traversing the fantasy" of 9/11. The fundamental ambiguity of genre cinema perfectly accommodates the "Janus-like structure" that is required of such a fantasy: "simultaneously pacifying, disarming (providing an imaginary scenario which enables us to endure the abyss of the Other's desire) *and* shattering, disturbing, inassimilable into our reality" (Žižek 2008: 329).

In direct contrast with the human-interest media depictions of 9/11 and the sentimental Hollywood features that frame the attacks in terms of heroism and victimization, the post-9/11 disaster film fully embraces the antinomies of contemporary culture. Unlike the monster movies of the 1950s, there is no happy ending that restores the former status quo, nor is there a return to pre-modern fantasies of an Edenic agrarian society. Moreover, the traditional representatives of political authority and scientific progress, which were still such a strong presence in the late-1990s disaster movie cycle, are strikingly absent, leaving the individual subjects to fend for themselves in a catastrophic situation they fail to understand, and in which both the traditional authority figures and themselves may very well be implicated.