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Empty Sky: 9/11 and Performing Regenerative Violence

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Drama and Theatre

by

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The Dissertation of Raimondo Genna is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

University of California, San Diego

University of California, Irvine

2010
DEDICATION

To my mother, Maria, Danny, Peter, Juan, and Jewel.

You have been my light in the dark.
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VITA

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"Empty Sky: 9/11 and Performing Regenerative Violence” explores theatrical depictions of violence and trauma following the events of 11 September 2001 and their relationships to American myth and identity. In the aftermath of the terrorist attack of 9/11, many in the media, from politicians and pundits to journalists and fictional characters in popular television, discussed the epistemological rupture of the event, stating that the world had changed forever and that everything was now different. However, the ontology of U.S. national identity and its ties to myth as a mode of
expression and perception underwent a re-fortification, answering the change by reiterating a distinctly American narrative. Following the work put forth by Richard Slotkin and his seminal *Regeneration Through Violence*, and drawing from performance studies, psychoanalysis, and cultural materialism, “Empty Sky” explores how regenerative violence is deployed through theatrical and performative means as a way of making sense of 9/11, narrativizing the Iraq War, and the reification of the American imago. My dissertation analyzes such theatrical works, such as Anne Nelson’s *The Guys*, Lavonne Mueller’s *Voices from September 11th*, Paul Greengrass’s *United 93*, and Oliver Stone’s *World Trade Center*, along with Iraqi Freedom as a socio-military performance, as emblematic representations of regeneration through violence. My work also investigates critical renderings of the regenerative violence trope as a way of interrogating American mythos, such as Sam Shepard’s *God of Hell* and Clint Eastwood’s *Flags of Our Fathers*. 
Introduction

9:03 am

It looks like a movie! I couldn’t believe my eyes, watching it right above me.

—Jennifer Overstein in a phone interview with NBC’s The Today Show immediately after the second plane crash

11 September 2001

“With great power…”

The summer of 2002 saw the biggest box-office opening weekend with Spider-man, based on the Marvel’s comic book superhero first created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko in 1962. Bitten by a genetically engineered spider, meek high school honors student Peter Parker (played by Toby Maguire) is transformed into a super human being with incredible strength, agility, the ability to cling to walls and spin webs from spinnerets located on his wrists (as opposed to the back end of his abdomen, like a real spider), and a strange, sixth “spider” sense that warns him of impending danger. Young Peter secretly loves Mary Jane Watson, his schoolmate and next-door neighbor who is involved with another, far wealthier student. Believing he could win Mary Jane if he had a nice car, Peter enters into a quasi-professional wrestling cage match for its cash prize. Wanting to protect his secret powers and to keep his guardians, Uncle Ben and Aunt May, from worrying about him, Peter creates a costume that hides his identity, a poor man’s version of his later iconic attire. After being dropped off by Uncle Ben—who believes that his nephew is going to the library to study—Peter wins his match, but the
promoter reneges on the full prize and pays out a much smaller winning. When the promoter is robbed, Peter allows the criminal to escape since he is still angry about his winnings, saying that the robbery was not “his problem.” After changing back into his Peter Parker identity, he discovers that his uncle, who had been waiting for Peter to emerge from the library, had been carjacked and fatally wounded. Bent on vengeance against his uncle’s assailant, Peter dons his costume and chases the carjacker into a warehouse. When Peter finally apprehends the criminal, he discovers that the man who killed his uncle is the same man who robbed the fight promoter, the one he chose not to stop when he had the opportunity. Peter finally learns the lesson that his uncle had been trying to convey earlier in the film: “with great power comes great responsibility” (*Spider-man* 2002). From that moment the materialistic and libidinal driven Peter Parker “dies” and is reborn as Spider-man, the hero of New York City—and all it took was the violent death of his uncle.

I begin this dissertation with *Spider-man* because of its standing as a cultural product of a significant historical moment in the United States. *Spider-man* was the first of the 2002 summer “blockbuster movies” after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, in which members of the Islamic terrorist group, al Qaeda, hijacked four commercial planes and crashed them into both Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City; the Pentagon in Arlington County, Virginia, just outside of Washington, D.C.; and a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania on the morning of 11 September 2001. After the first plane, American Airlines Flight 11, had crashed into Tower One of the World Trade Center at 8:46 am NAEST dozens of television crews from local, national, and international media outlets, including CNN, had cameras on the ground and in the air recording and
streaming the images of the burning North Tower. Unaware of the nature of the crash, news reporters wondered what could have caused what was widely assumed to be an accident despite the pristine weather of the day. With cameras fixed on the burning building as the newscasters contemplated the tragedy of what might have been mechanical failure, news stations televised United Airlines Flight 175 flying into Tower Two of the World Trade Center at 9:03 am. As if seen through the corner of one’s eye, cameras caught United 175 pass along the screen as it disappeared into the building only to emerge out of the opposite side as a spectacularly horrific ball of fire, glass, ash, and smoke that cognitively overwhelmed screen. Speculation concerning an aviation accident immediately turned to conjectures of who was responsible for these coordinated terrorist attacks.

For nearly an hour, images of the second plane crashing into the south Tower would be played over and over again by the news media, intercut with images of bodies falling from the Towers, pedestrians streaming away from the World Trade Center while various first responders (firefighters, police officers, and medical personnel) raced towards the burning buildings. In the flurry of fragmented information circulating through the airwaves, reports began to emerge from the Pentagon of an explosion. Unknown in the moment, what felt like an explosion was actually the impact of American Airlines Flight 77 on the western side of the world’s largest office complex at 9:37am NAEST. Although camera teams were dispatched to the Pentagon and news anchors discussed the events in Virginia with their correspondents, the majority of the news media continued to fix their gaze on the burning Twin Towers in New York and unyieldingly played the second crash video loop, until 9:59 am NAEST when Tower Two
imploded, crashing down upon itself before the entire world, a result of the damage it sustained. The various media outlets, with camera crews strewn throughout lower Manhattan, caught the Tower’s collapse from multiple angles as frightened people attempted to outrun the thunderhead-like plumes of ash and debris. And, as if on a similar repeated video loop as that of the second plane crashing, at 10:28 am NAEST Tower One of the World Trade Center fell, nearly mirroring its twin even in its destruction.

In the aftermath of the Towers’ twin collapses, the sky now empty, the media’s collective gaze moved downward to the streets. Ghostlike in appearance because they were covered in ash and sometimes blood, the walking wounded moved about trance-like while sirens, choked with dust, squealed their high-pitch wails. In the hours that followed, the televisual imagery of the plane crash, falling people, imploding towers, and walking wounded would be continuously transmitted even as reports emerged that the final hijacked plane, United Airlines Flight 93, crashed in an empty field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania at 10:03 am NAEST (*The 9/11 Commission Report* 1–14). When it was all said and done, through television, still photographs, and the Internet, the terrorist attacks, which became known through its temporality as 9/11, would be the most watched event in human history (Friend 36).

But as quickly as the televisual images of the planes flying into the South Tower and their inevitable fall permeated the nation’s scopic field and cultural imagination, all images of the iconic Twin Towers vanished from the United States airwaves. The news coverage no longer focused on the buildings’ collapse but focused its unblinking eye, for a time and at a distance, on the gash that was the World Trade Center’s remains. Now
called Ground Zero, the term that was originally used to designate the impact point of a nuclear explosion, the wreckage of twisted metal and concrete filled the televisual frame as the focus shifted first to search and rescue and then finally to recovery. Not only were the video loops of the crash and subsequent implosions gone from commercial broadcasts, but also gone were images of the intact pre-9/11 Twin Towers. In an attempt to alleviate the trauma of the nation, popular shows such as *Friends*, *Sex and the City*, and *The Sopranos* had removed the establishing shots that featured the emblematic Towers so as to not remind the audiences of their absence. And it was not limited to the small screen as major motion pictures quickly followed suit: movies, such as the science-fiction tongue-in-cheek action film *Men in Black II*, the romantic comedy *Serendipity*, and the satirical *Zoolander*, just to name a few, all removed images of the World Trade Center prior to their releases. To protect a wounded nation still reeling from the devastation of 9/11, the television and film industries erased the Twin Towers again from the fictionalized cinematic realities. The Towers would only exist in the cinematic reality by its totalized absence.

*Spider-man*, which was already in postproduction when the terrorist attacks happened, also underwent a series of re-edits in response to the attacks. Spider-man’s cosmology takes place in the “real” world of New York City (as opposed to mythic cities, such as Superman’s Metropolis or Batman’s Gotham City) and several scenes initially took place at the World Trade Center. Indeed, given the iconic nature of the Twin Towers even before 9/11, it was a dominant signifier in the film’s early trailer. During a bank robbery, the criminals use a helicopter as their getaway vehicle. As the robbers escape, they suddenly lose control of their aircraft and find themselves caught in a web
suspended between the Twin Towers. At the beginning of the trailer, the urban landscape was non-descript and could have signified any city, but the dominance of the Towers at the trailer’s end made it perfectly clear that we were in New York City. Indeed, the Towers garnered more screen time in the trailer than Spider-man himself (he never makes an appearance during the trailer’s mini-narrative, his webbing metonymically indicating his presence). Immediately after 9/11 the trailer was pulled from circulation; the robbery scene, along with any shots that featured the Twin Towers, were cut from the film, and any mention of them was erased from the film’s narrative. Given the trauma surrounding the 9/11 attacks, the director and studio felt that its inclusion would be more harmful to the audience, detracting from the escapist nature of the melodramatic film.

The film did include two subtle tributes to 9/11, although not to the attacks themselves but to the survivors (Wloszczyna 1D). The first is a shot of Spider-man’s momentary respite on the flagpole with the American flag behind him at the end of the film. The red and blue of the flag reflects Spider-man’s own red and blue costume, connecting him to the ideal hero of the American Narrative: the self-sacrificing figure who is forever vigilant in his—to borrow a line from fellow comic book hero, Superman—never ending battle for truth and justice; the heroism of Spider-man is the heroism of America. The second 9/11 tribute does not have the same semiotic transparency, but is equally significant. During one of the battle scenes in the film, the Green Goblin, the film’s villain, presents Spider-man with a presumably “no win” situation: Spider-man is forced to either choose to rescue a trolley full of innocent children or Mary Jane from certain death. Miraculously Spider-man is able to do both, but the Green Goblin tries to thwart his success. As the Green Goblin is about to destroy
Spider-man, along with Mary Jane and the trolley full of children, the citizens of New York City save him in the melodramatic nick-of-time scenario: spectators on the bridge where the battle takes place begin to pummel the Green Goblin with found objects, yelling their support for Spider-man. From the crowd a spectator yells, “You mess with Spidey, you mess with New York,” followed by voice asserting, “You mess with one of us, you mess with all of us!” (Spider-man 2002). The voices that emerged from the crowd do not belong to any featured characters and so could have belonged to anyone, including the movie’s audience. As an opening day audience member, I distinctly remember cheers rising from the audience during that particular moment. Had I seen the film in New York City, I would not have been at all surprised by the audience reaction—but I saw the film in San Diego.

I believe that the audience’s reaction was a performative gesture of identification with the victims of 9/11 in particular and with the national identity at large. In the weeks and months that followed the attacks, there were constant references made linking the metonymic signifier of New York to the nation as a whole: “Today we are all New Yorkers” and Rudy Giuliani as “America’s Mayor.” The metonymic identification was not lost on Spider-man producer Laura Zisken, who acknowledged the connection between New York and the nation at large: “There is a gestalt about New York now, Ich bin ein New Yorker”¹ (Wloszczyna 1D). The 9/11 attacks’ traumatic rupture on the collective national identity constitutes what Lacan called the encounter with the Real (Four Fundamentals 53). According to Lacan, the Real is that which resists language and

¹ Zisken’s “Ich bin ein New Yorker” is an intertextual reference to John F. Kennedy’s famous quote in Germany, a performative gesture of solidarity with the citizens of Berlin and against the Cold War enemy, the Soviet Union.
symbolization absolutely. For many of the viewing nation, what has become known as 9/11 marks our collective encounter with the Real, which disrupted our national sense of self, our collective identity. The encounter with the Real registers as a missed encounter due to the incomprehensibility of the event, what Cathy Caruth calls the “unclaimed experience” of trauma. For the overwhelming majority of us, the encounter did not begin at 8:46 am, when the first plane crashed, but when the second plane flew into the South Tower at 9:03 am, which was caught on camera for the world to witness. The encounter with the Real lasted at least until, if not for sometime after, the second Tower fell at 10:28 am. It was at 9:03 am, or its time-stamped video record, that the symbols of American ingenuity, strength, modernity, and commerce came under attack by the symbolic instrument of American freedom of movement, commerce, and modernity: a commercial airliner. The falling symbols of American strength and exceptionalism also marked its Imaginary collapse for the American subject in that encounter, revealing what Lacan refers to as the béance, or gap. According to Lacan “the human being has a special relation with his own image—a relation of gap [béance ] of alienating tension. That is where the possibility of the order of presence and absence, that is of the symbolic order, comes in. The tension between the symbolic and the real is subjacent here. It is substantial…” (*The Ego in Freud’s Theory* 323). For Lacan, the Imaginary’s role is to fill the gap between the Symbolic and the Real and provide a sense of wholeness and completion. The buildings’ collapse ruptured the American ontology, as the béance became the open wound of alienating tension.
*Spider-man* offered a substitution for the anxiety and anger that was felt across the nation, allowing for the Lacanian *méconnaissance,*\(^2\) or misrecognition, through the projection of the traumatized ego onto the specular image of the film. There was already a sense of identification with the audience members and the characters on the screen through nationalistic affiliations felt towards New York in the aftermath of 9/11. But there was a more direct connection and misrecognition towards the heroic protagonist. Peter Parker/Spider-man became the effigy onto which the public could project its communal desire for agency and a desired identity as a way of navigating through the cultural trauma. As Joseph Roach argues in his seminal *Cities of the Dead,* the “effigy is a contrivance that enables the processes regulating performance [...] to produce memory through surrogation” (36). For Roach, surrogation is “how culture reproduces and re-creates itself” as a continuous act that “does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitute the social fabric” through the “three-sided relationship of memory, performance, and substitution” (2). By projecting their desires of self onto the character of Spider-man, the audience reproduces and re-creates its cultural identity. He becomes the surrogate for a cultural identity whose regeneration rests on the violence that Spider-man endures and triumphs over. In short, *Spider-man* became the performative reclaiming of the American identity.

It was not just *Spider-man’s* timing and tributary scenes that contributed to the performative reclamation of a desired identity, but also the hero’s familiarity. I am not

\(^2\) Tied to self-knowledge, *méconnaissance* “represents a certain organization of affirmations and negations, to which the subject is attached.” But Lacan does not equate *méconnaissance* with ignorance, as there must be “a kind of knowledge of what there is to misrecognize” (*Freud’s Papers on Technique* 167).
simply addressing the popularity and longevity of the character within the cultural consciousness as a vehicle for escaping the post-9/11 climate of changing terror-threat colors and duct tape to protect oneself from biological and chemical attacks, though I believe these to be important factors in the film’s financial success. More importantly I refer to the film’s use of a common and recognizable trope in American mythology and narrative: regeneration through violence. Cultural critic and historian Richard Slotkin identifies the trope as an essential part of the narratology that shapes the American experience in his seminal three-volume work, *Regeneration Through Violence*. Exploring the development of the Romantic American hero, Slotkin analyzes literature, news media, politics, and popular entertainment spanning nearly four hundred years of United States history and culture. As Slotkin observes, the early colonists saw America as

> an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience. (*Regeneration 5*)

For Slotkin, the regeneration through violence trope consists of the hero’s ascension to a higher plane of existence because of the violence experienced. Whether experiencing the violence of nature such as the frontier, war, or more immediate interpersonal conflicts, the hero ascends—morally, psychologically, spiritually, materially—to an elevated state of being. And because the hero’s state is predicated upon and contingent on the violence experienced, the violent event is not only necessary and validated, but is valorized as the necessary incident for the *telos* of the mythical American Character.
While the genetically engineered spider biting him may have been the key moment of Peter Parker’s life, the pivotal moment of Spider-man’s birth was the death of Uncle Ben. The transubstantiation of Peter Parker into Spider-man is epitomized in the film’s ending, in which Peter finally wins Mary Jane but literally walks away from his personal desires in favor of his greater responsibility to the larger community of New York City: next he is seen swinging from building to building, ending with his clinging to a flagpole on top of a skyscraper with the American flag billowing behind him. The persona of Peter Parker is sublimated into the mask, both literal and figurative, of Spider-man. And not only does the regeneration through violence trope underpin Spider-man’s existence, linking his origin tale to American mythology, given the popularity of the Spider-man character since his creation more than 40 years ago (comic books, Saturday morning cartoons, and made-for-television movies), the 2002 film was another reiteration and perpetuation of the structuring metaphor.

The act of surrogation, the audience’s reclamation of a desired identity through the focal effigy of Spider-man, itself was a performative gesture attempting to make sense of 9/11 by projecting the misrecognized violence and trauma of the terrorist attacks onto the silver screen. If Benedict Anderson is right that national identities are derived through “imagined communities” (Imagined Communities 6–7) whose construction is, in part, derived from shared cultural practices and representations, then the destruction of these representations inflicts damage on the subject’s sense-of-self. As signifiers of America, the Twin Towers’ utter destruction marked an existential crisis for the imagined identity, just as the real deaths of nearly three thousand people came to represent the symbolic death of an epoch. So it should follow that the subject would navigate the
existential crisis through the image. Peter Parker, with his naïveté and childlike and selfish desires, dies alongside the violent murder of his Uncle Ben and is reborn as Spider-man. This American meta-myth of regeneration through violence allows Spider-man to become the *Imago*, what Lacan terms the “ideal-I” that participates in the subject’s formation. As Lacan argues in “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Formation,” the subject identifies with, and “assumes,” the role determined by an exemplary model. For Lacan this identification and assumption is embodied, as well as cognitive:

> For the total form of his body, by which the subject anticipates the maturation of his power in a mirage, is given to him only as a gestalt, that is, in an exteriority in which, to be sure, this form is more constitutive than constituted, but in which, above all, it appears to him as the contour of his stature that frees it and in a symmetry that reverses it, in opposition to the turbulent movements with which the subject feels he animates it. (*Écrits* 76)

The mirage dictates what the subject’s body is to be, it determines the shape just as the subject is obligated and desires to embody the idealized conception in shape and gesture. And as such, the actions of Spider-man-as-*Imago* participate in the audience’s reclamation of an imagined identity through idealized actions of heroism and sacrifice. The audience’s reclamation of an imagined, collective American identity occurs through the restoration of behavior.

As theorized by Richard Schechner, restored behavior is an activity or action that can be consciously separated from the person doing it. The behavior performed is citational, as it seems to be quoting from elsewhere though the originary point is lost in time or perhaps never existed (*Between Theatre and Anthropology* 35). As Schechner notes:
Restored behavior is symbolic and reflexive: not empty but loaded behavior multivocally broadcasting significances. These difficult terms express a single principle: The self can act in/as another; the social or transindivudual self is a role or set of roles. Symbolic and reflexive behavior is the hardening into theater of social, religious, aesthetic, medical, and educational process. Performance means: never for the first time. It means: for the second to the nth time. Performance is “twice-behaved behavior.” (36)

The action performed itself is symbolic and, as such, is part of the fabric of an imagined identity. As the action is symbolic and codified, it both describes the identity but also prescribes how the subject is to behave as that performed identity. Restored behavior forms a “feedback loop” between the cultural performances and social actions as one influences and determines the other (37). The action is performed and recognized within an associated identity matrix, the identity itself is restored in the performance. And in the case of the *Imago* of the American identity, the performance of regeneration through violence is central to its existence.

Intertwining Roach’s “surrogation” and Schechner’s “restored behavior,” audiences reclaimed an imagined identity damaged on 9/11 through *Spider-man*. Through the comic-book action movie, audiences recovered their collective sense of agency, an agency seemingly absent that September morning. The intertwining also allows for an adjacent misrecognition to occur concerning the American subject and the trauma of 9/11. Through the character and actions of Spider-man, the audience performs what Dominick LaCapra refers to as “acting out” in which the subject relives an event by projecting it onto another, where “one is fully possessed by the other or the other’s ghost.” LaCapra discusses how acting out a trauma is a “compulsively repetitive” process “whereby the past, or the experience of the other, is repeated as if it were fully
enacted, fully literalized” (*Writing History, Writing Trauma* 148). The compulsively repetitive process runs the risk of the traumatized subject failing to come to terms with the traumatic event. For lack of a better term, the subject may become stuck in the past and acts out the traumatic event even if the event takes on different appearances, locations, and players. The acting out creates the illusion of resolution but, as a compulsively repetitive process, is performed again and again. “Acting out” is opposed to what LaCapra terms “working through” the traumatic event, where one “tries to acquire some critical distance” allowing an engagement “in life in the present, to assume responsibility” even as it means one does not “utterly transcend the past.” For LaCapra, working through means that you come to terms with it in a different way related to what you judge to be desirable possibilities that may now be created, including possibilities that lost out in the past but may still be recaptured and reactivated, with significant differences, in the present and future […] Working through involves repetition with significant difference—difference that may be desirable when compared with compulsive repetition. In any event, working though is not a linear, teleological, or straightforward development (or stereotypically dialectical) process either for the individual or collectivity. (148)

The critical distance LaCapra discusses is difficult for a generation of Americans that had not endured previous traumas, such as Pearl Harbor or Vietnam, which themselves, moreover, should not be viewed as equivalent to the events of 9/11. The terrorist attacks have been likened to Pearl Harbor, the Japanese sneak attack on the Hawaiian naval base that ushered the United States’ entrance into World War II. While there are similarities between the two, such as the unexpected nature of the attack and the shattering of an idyllic morning by terror, there are some marked differences. The attack on Pearl Harbor involved military causalities while 9/11’s impact was on a civilian
populace. This should not be read that military lives are somehow less than civilian lives and somehow minimizes the tragic loss of life, but the two do draw from different registers. Also mediatization of the two events differed in their respective phenomenological effect. Verbal accounts on the attack on Pearl Harbor were transmitted across the Pacific and flooded the radio airwaves in a matter of hours. The writers and announcers filtered these radio reports, providing a verbal mediation of events and statistics, such as the numbers of lives lost and planes and ships destroyed. The impact of the news reports was from the voice describing, along with the description, to the listener’s ear. The next day, President Roosevelt would deliver his famous “Day of Infamy” speech to a joint session of Congress before their formal passing the declaration of war on the Empire of Japan. The visual representations would not reach the newspapers for several days, as they needed to be flown in and then wired across the nation.\(^3\) It took even longer for the newsreel footage of the aftermath to reach the movie theaters. By the time imagery of Pearl Harbor had reached the public, though potent and visceral, the idea of Pearl Harbor had already taken hold of the cultural consciousness.

Unlike Pearl Harbor, the more recent and still lingering trauma of Vietnam that sent the nation into turmoil has no singular event to point to as an originary incident. While the Gulf of Tonkin incident that allegedly involved attacks on U.S. war ships by North Vietnamese ships led to Congress’s passing the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which granted the President the power to wage war without a formal declaration, the event itself was not responsible for the lasting scar on the national psyche. Rather, the trauma of

\(^3\) See David Friend’s *Watching the World Change* and his discussions concerning the technological and temporal differences of transmitting both still and moving images and their reception between World War II and our contemporary digital world (324–326).
Vietnam developed over time and metastasized through the social body as the war continued to escalate and more and more young men were drafted to fight in a foreign land. The threat of the draft led a wide swath of young people to become critically engaged in the war and question its existence as the numbers of U.S. servicemen swelled. As live bodies streamed to Southeast Asia and dead and wounded bodies streamed home, the moral and political strife were further fueled by the flow of the televisual images into American living rooms. The tensions surrounding Vietnam reached new levels in 1968 as the year saw the horrific Tet Offensive and Mei Lai massacre in the Southeast Asian region and the riots outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. While not directly linked to Vietnam but very much part of the cultural consciousness, 1968 also marked the assassinations of both Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King; the latter killing sparked riots throughout the nation. The social and political pressures continued past 1968, as protests, both pro- and anti-Vietnam War, and their sometimes-violent outcomes, joined the war images on the televisual landscape. Although the Vietnam War would come to an end in 1975 with the pull out of U.S. forces and South Vietnam falling to Northern forces, the trauma continues to affect the generations that lived through the decade-plus long wounding.

Nonetheless, the traumatic experiences of both Pearl Harbor and Vietnam could not prepare the public for the impact of 9/11. Although Pearl Harbor and 9/11 do share the common trait of being a singular event, they differ substantially in their reception. The initial impact of Pearl Harbor was aural rather than visual as the radio functioned as the dominant form of mass communications. As impactful and visceral as the verbal descriptions of Pearl Harbor were, they did not compare to the visual representations of
photographs and newsreels that followed. However, the verbal descriptions did prepare the public for their visual counterparts. And as the still and moving images took days and sometimes weeks to reach the mainland, the time delay allowed a certain level of acclimation with the event within the public’s consciousness. As horrific as the Pearl Harbor visuals were, they were images of the result of the attack, not the attack itself. Apart from the first plane crashing into the North Tower, the attacks of 9/11 were televised live across the nation and the world. Although 9/11 was mediated through the televisual for an overwhelming majority of Americans, the liveness of the event, along with its spectacularity, provided an immediacy that overwhelmed the nation. For Vietnam the temporal difference between the reality and its visual airing were not as great as in the 1940s, but the longevity of the event and its lack of initial shock allowed for a degree of contextualization, particularly within a political lens.

Another substantial difference between 9/11 and its traumatic counterparts is geography. Both Pearl Harbor and Vietnam were in foreign lands. In 1941 Hawai`i was a territory and not yet a state and, as a Pacific island, it fell under the category of foreign and exotic Other space, even though the targets were U.S. Navy ships, aircraft, and troops. While violence did erupt within the United States over the Vietnam War, no single event stood alone and apart from the larger Vietnam War context. For many Americans, 9/11 stood—and still stands—as a singular and spectacular event and functions as a foundational moment, free of any prior material history. While the general public has lived through natural disasters, man-made trauma on a national scale within the country’s borders has been a rarity. The only frame of reference to the traumatic event is Hollywood blockbuster film. It should come as no surprise that, in our
society of the spectacle, people, such as bystander Jennifer Overstein quoted in our
epigraph, would discuss the immediate experience of the attack through a simile of
mediation. Overtein’s quote indicates hers was an indirect or twice-removed rather than
direct witnessing, even though she saw it first hand. Her reference to make sense of the
event is film. As such our citational reaction, our “restored behavior” in response to the
event, would follow the logic of a referential point, the movie, along with its own
adherence to acting out regenerative violence.

The audience members who cheered after the “You mess with one of us, you
mess with all of us” line cast themselves into the “roles” of the defiant New Yorkers
portrayed in the film. And because of the signifying chain of “sameness” and projected
identifications, we are Spider-man (Spider-man is New York and we are New York,
therefore we are Spider-man). The acts of surrogation and restored behavior allowed the
audience to perform their identities through the film, symbolically “acting out” the
trauma of 9/11 by projecting it onto the screen. The New Yorkers represented on the
bridge, along with Spider-man himself, are not self-contained, individual characters, but
signifiers within the cinematic field of the Imago that, through the identifications,
contribute to the continual subject formation of the audience members. In this signifying
chain, the subjected audience itself becomes a signifier within the imagined community’s
cultural economy through the melodramatic trope of nomination as performed in the New
York self-identification on the bridge. The act of enunciating one’s name is not only an
act of discerning oneself or identifying with a collective, but is also a claim of
virtuousness. According to Peter Brooks “the act of self-nomination which echoes
throughout melodrama, breaking through disguises and enigmas to establish true
identities” indicating the subject’s “moral identity” (*The Melodramatic Imagination* 38–9).

In true melodramatic form, this naming is not simply a subjective act of fidelity between the characters and Spider-man, but is also a somatic act as well: the characters physically involve themselves in the scene, throwing found objects at the Green Goblin to prevent him from carrying out his treacherous scheme of preventing Spider-man from saving the day. The killing of the innocent children and Mary Jane are simply the means to break Spider-man’s spirit, the spirit of the hero. But that spirit is saved through the action of spectators, becoming literal spect-actors (following Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*), in the identification and ensuing action. The crowd is “called” into action and lays claim to its—and Spider-man’s—collective identity, finding their own lives as heroes through the potential deaths of women and children. The audience members who cheered in the identification moment find solidarity and are later rejuvenated through mimetic terror and violence. And in this act of violence and terror, the American subject acts out the rescue of all those deemed innocent, an impossible act in 9/11. But the terror at the bridge is not the terror of 9/11, for that originary act of violence is located in Uncle Ben’s death. The terror at the bridge is the terror that has not happened yet, the violence that the American subject will be able to overcome in this already-regenerated state of being.

The mimetic terror and violence at the bridge demonstrates a key factor to the reclamation of an imagined identity through the intertwining of the surrogation and restored behavior: what Diana Taylor calls the scenario. As Diana Taylor notes, the scenario functions as a performative frame that “makes visible what is already there” and
“lays out the range of possibilities” as they activate social dramas and embodied performances. The scenario structure over-determines sense-making as it reproduces the familiar by drawing from both what Taylor has identified as the textual archive and the performed repertoire (*Archive and the Repertoire* 28–9). The scene at the bridge constitutes the rescue narrative, a familiar trope in American myth,\(^4\) that incorporates several semiotically loaded melodramatic signifiers, including the defenseless female body and innocent children posed against the villainous Enemy. The familiar action of the male hero rescuing the virginal love interest and the innocent children restores gendered performances of masculinity, action and protection. Even the voices of the New Yorkers on the bridges who announce their nomination are all male. Moreover, it is not just the behavior that is citational, but also the scenario itself. The scene’s given circumstances, to borrow a phrase from Stanislavski, are also familiar to the audience through its numerous reiterations.

The performative power of the scenario lies in part to its recognition and accessibility by the audience. In his *Tropics of Discourse*, Hayden White argues that narratives are “emplotted” and are based on the “encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle of components of specific kinds of plot structures” (83), facts that are encoded with meaning through and by the plot structure that shapes the narrative. This emplotment is used as a method of making sense of the events through a recognizable narrative. Mediated through language, which is embedded with tropes and structures, the chronological events are written into a sense-making discourse that allows the subject to

\(^4\) Though not the first, Mary Rowlandson’s 1682 *The Soveraignty & Goodness of God … a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration*, was an early popular narrative that saw numerous retellings for over 200 years (Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence* 96).
“understand” the reality that surrounds her/him. There is a level of historical collapsing occurring as the subject negotiates the intertextual exchange between the unknowable Real of 9/11 and the knowable emplotment constructing a recognizable scenario that not only allows for but prescribes encoded restored behavior. The subject’s acting out within the known, and knowable, scenario allows for the sense-making by formulating the event in an already determined frame.

But sense-making and the identification within Spider-man are not simply restricted to the hero as Imago but also to his alter ego, Peter Parker. If Spider-man represents the “ideal-I,” then Peter represents the “I” as he has an “everyman” quality to him: he is consumed with self-doubt, wracked with guilt over the death of his uncle, concerned about the well-being of his aunt, his possibly unrequited love for Mary Jane, and subject to the realities of his material world. But conforming to prescribed notions of the American identity, he has a very Jacksonian attitude about him. The wealthy industrialist Norman Osborn (and alter-ego for the villainous Green Goblin) offers Peter a job after he is fired from his lab assistant position. Although appreciative of the offer, Peter refuses the job saying that he wishes to make his own way through the world and does not wish to take the “hand out” (Spider-man 2002). Peter Parker exhibits the ego ideal to which he is subjugated through the Imago; or to put it another way, he is what we, the American audience, are meant to be. Despite his material problems he rises above them for a greater moral good. This “everyman-as-hero” allows Peter Parker to be the symbolic “gateway” for the audience to imagine themselves as “hero,” formulating a collapse between the comic book hero and his “everyman” alter ego. In its critical reception, this “everyman-as-hero” was extended to the heroics of 9/11:
Imagine him a few years older—and without his superpowers—and Peter might be a New York firefighter charging into a burning skyscraper. That's what firefighters, like modest superheroes, do.

In the film’s most visually ravishing scene, Maguire does launch himself into a burning building, and then goes back again. He retrieves a baby the first time and encounters the steel-plated Green Goblin the next. Salvation and doom are all in a day’s work, as they were at ground zero. (Winn D1)

Arts and Cultural Critic Steven Winn draws a connection between the character of Peter Parker—sans superhuman power—and the firefighters who rushed into the burning towers: it does not take special powers to make a hero, it takes character. Of course, as Winn himself notes, his “reading” of the film is a subjectively historical one: “movies—like novels, music, theater and art—are seen and viscerally absorbed by audiences in the moment they arrive.” The historical moment determines how the subject views the object, just as the art object shapes the understanding of the historical moment. The exchange between material reality and cinematic representations not only include understanding heroes, but also villains. Winn draws parallels between the Green Goblin and Osama bin Laden, conflating both as a “techno-savvy loose cannon, a wealthy loner and a shameless military-industrial opportunist” with the added traits of schizophrenia and poor parenting skills. It is as if the demonic mask of the Green Goblin becomes a transcendental signifier for Villain (or Enemy, the “immoral” Other) that “captures” both the filmic narrative and historical narrative that is being shaped in their collision.

The transference of Osama bin Laden onto the Green Goblin presents a complex instance of what René Girard calls “double substitution”:

The first, which passes unperceived, is the substitution of one member of the community for all, brought about through the operation of the surrogate victim. The second, the only truly “ritualistic” substitution, is superimposed on the first. It is the substitution of a victim belonging to a
predetermined sacrificial category for the original victim. The surrogate victim comes from inside the community, and the ritual victim must come from outside; otherwise the community might find it difficult to unite against it. (*Violence and the Sacred* 102)

According to Girard’s thesis, the “outsider” becomes the ritual victim for the surrogate insider; to all appearances, Osama bin Laden occupies the position of outsider, while the Green Goblin’s alter-ego, the white industrialist occupies the position of surrogate. However, following the yeoman origins of American melodrama, the industrialist also occupies the position of outsider within the community since his (and it is almost always a male) lust for power and wealth sets him apart from the ontological standing of community; this outsider status is compounded by the fact that the character of Norman Osborn, the industrialist, is absorbed into the visage of the Green Goblin. In the film, Osborn becomes a split subject, following the dictates of the Green Goblin. The demonic Green Goblin overrides whatever humanity Osborn may have. By the end of the film, Osborn occupies the outsider status, since he is part of the Green Goblin, not the other way around. Note for instance in the above quotation that Winn associates Peter Parker—not Spider-man—with the firemen and refers to the villain as Green Goblin, not Norman Osborn.

Mediated through the cinematic screen, the Green Goblin becomes the surrogate victim that the Other (Osama bin Laden) is projected onto. The surrogated sacrificial Scapegoat does not have a direct material correlation to the referential Other, but a symbolic one. The efficacy of the surrogate as a sacrificial entity is contingent on the community being able to identify with it. The Green Goblin’s dual “insider/outsider” status allows for a level of identification: the Scapegoat must be recognizable within
“oneself” (from the singular to the communal), otherwise the purgation-purpose of the ritual murder is lost. The sacrificial Scapegoat, i.e. Green Goblin, becomes the _pharmakos_, both the poison and the cure (Girard 95). The film, within the frame of the historical moment, becomes the ritualized murder of Osama bin Laden _via_ the demonic Green Goblin allowing audiences to project a fantastic closure to the traumatic events of 9/11.

The film does not directly discuss the events of 9/11 but is wrapped by it as an example of what Louis Althusser calls the ideological state apparatus that sublimates the subject into the larger narrative that emerged following the attack. The commercial success of the film and the audience responses express a theatricalized acting out of the 9/11 trauma but they also expose another Althusserian process taking place: interpellation. The audience reaction to the line “You mess with one of us, you mess with all of us” is an example of what Althusser identifies as interpellation, or the hail, and the subject’s subjection within and to the state. In Althusser’s example, he discusses the subject’s turning when s/he is called with the ambiguous “hey, you there”: the subject’s turning to the voice of the authority (as embodied by a police officer) reveals how the subject exists within the ideology of the state, physically responding to the hail. Althusser goes beyond the subject-in-ideology and argues that “ideology has always already interpellated individuals as subjects, which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, which necessarily leads to one last proposition: _individuals are always-already subjects_” (Lenin and Philosophy 119). For Althusser, the subject is a thing not that exists inside ideology, but rather that is created by ideology, a process that begins before the individual is born,
through the ritualistic practices of her/his parents. The hail is just one indicator of the subject’s internalization of the ideological network in which the subject is formed and to which the subject responds. The subject of the state internalizes the indoctrinations of the state’s ideology, to the point where the ideology becomes naturalized and normative for the subject.

Slotkin’s regeneration through violence trope is a cornerstone in the proto-narrative that functions as both the langue and parole of American ideology to which the individual is always subject. The trope participates in the syntax of history, governing the arrangement of events that determines meaning. But it is also the embodied utterance of history that is both the performance and the performative of the American subject. The audience’s response to “you mess with one of us, you mess with all of us”—indeed a hail—is an enacted interpellative gesture. The audience’s cheers are the self-identification with the ambiguous “us,” the “turn” so to speak, in response to the voice of authority, as embodied by the voice in the crowd, the symbolic signifier of “democracy.” The film does not merely capture the mood of the time, but reiterates and reinscribes the subject’s subjection through the call-and-response of the theatrical moment. Not only is the audience placing itself within the melodramatic narrative of the film, but the film also, to a certain extent, knowingly places the audience within the narrative since the line was inserted after the 9/11 attacks in the “Ich bin ein New Yorker” context. The film, as part of the cultural industry, fulfills the function of the ideological state apparatus: it reproduces the means of production through the re-inscription of the subject’s place within the American Narrative.

*Spider-man*’s importance lies in the cognitive mapping of the American subject and
reveals, through the signifiers of the “hero” and “villain,” the desire of a reconstituted subject-as-hero against the Enemy/Other. The film acts as a node within the cultural economy, intersecting the encounter with the Real of 9/11 and the desire to symbolically act out the trauma through a narrative that both familiarizes and exemplifies American Imago. Projecting the trauma of 9/11 onto the familiar narrative re-asserts the ideologically Imagined America, what is referred to as the Lacanian insistence of the signifying chain (Écrits 419). This repetition can be found not only in post-9/11 fictive cinematic narratives but, more importantly, prior to September 2001, in creating an ego-ideal onto which the subject projects its identity, desiring to be the American hero.

Of course this should not be seen as an anomaly, even with the given historical events that surround Spider-man. Hollywood has had a long history in the reiteration of the American subject. In its own way, it reproduces the means of its own production, working in a reciprocal relationship with the American Narrative: in trying to earn the largest profit margin, the film/culture industry tells stories that the desired audience wants to hear, stories that audiences can relate to. But more than just telling stories that audiences can see themselves in—stories that mirror their actual lives—the film/culture industry create stories that audiences can imagine themselves to be in, cinematic fantasies that exceed the lives of the viewers. In doing so, the film/culture industry, as part of the ideological state apparatus, does more than present the audiences’ desire, but forms the desire of the subject itself. It presents the object of desire as well as how to desire (Zizek, Sublime 118). This process is necessary in reproducing the means of production as the subject, in order to be a subject, is in a continuous state of subjection, in which, as Judith Butler puts it, the subject has a “passionate attachment to subjection” (67). This process
can be seen in the “summer blockbuster”: big budget, spectacular melodramatic films that gross millions of dollars at the box office. Hollywood studios create these films because of their commercial success. In addition the studio, wishing to continue to bring in large revenues, gives the audiences what they want, tapping into the ideological narrative that the studios are reiterating, creating a circuit within the symbolic exchange.

**Empty Sky**

My foray into *Spider-man* demonstrates the overall thesis for this dissertation: how the regeneration through violence trope, what Richard Slotkin has identified as the structuring metaphor of American myth, functions within various performances as a way of acting out the trauma of 9/11. But our argument extends beyond the trope’s deployment as a narrative tool and explores its usage as a performative, prescribing our cultural understanding and framing 9/11 by enveloping the trauma within our national mythopoeia, or myth-making. The chapters that follow explore various performances—theatrical, cinematic, and social—as sense-making attempts with our collective encounter of the Real by acting out the trauma of 9/11 through the structuring metaphor of regenerative violence. I examine these performances and analyze how they participate in the ongoing process of subjectivation, as the encounter with the Real of 9/11 is re-imagined through the essential structuring trope.

The discourse on 9/11 is wide and rich and theatre and performance studies have made valuable contributions, especially through the discipline’s participation in the ongoing sense-making process that followed the terrorist attack. Scholars have examined 9/11 as a theatrical and performative event on the geopolitical stage. However,
investigations into the sense-making performances of 9/11, particularly their structuring of the traumatic violence as the crucible of regeneration, both narratologically and performatively, has been woefully under-theorized and unexamined. Given the importance of regeneration through violence in the framing of American myth and narrative and its constitutional use in the subject-forming process, it demands critical inquiries and, when necessary, interventions.

My analysis of Spider-man serves as the introduction to this dissertation and continues into chapter two, which examines Anne Nelson’s The Guys. Written as a way for Nelson to navigate her personal 9/11 trauma and staged in December 2001 at TriBeCa’s The Flea in an attempt to revitalize the theatre that was financially struggling due to its proximity to Ground Zero, Nelson’s play served as an early theatrical contribution to 9/11 representations. The Guys centers on Nick, a fire captain struggling to write the eulogies for his men who died on 9/11, and Joan, a reporter determined to help him find his voice. The play explores trauma and memory as the fire captain commemorates his fallen comrades. But in re-membering his men, the play perpetuates the violence of erasure as it reinscribes what I will call spectral palimpsests, elevating the guys into idealized personas as Nick attempts to rescue their memories.

Chapter three looks at two films, Paul Greengrass’s United 93 and Oliver Stone’s World Trade Center, both dedicated to telling authentic cinematic stories concerning 9/11. Greengrass promotes his film as a rigorously researched piece steeped in empirical evidence and interviews with victims’ families in order to construct a plausible and believable truth of what happened onboard United Airlines Flight 93, the only flight not to reach its designated target on 9/11, crashing instead in a field in Shanksville,
Pennsylvania. But Greengrass takes artistic liberties to fill the lacunae of the flight and chooses to undermine his own adherence to the official report in order to collapse the distance between the action depicted on film and the audience’s subjective position. While Greengrass nonetheless argues for his film’s fidelity to the facts, Stone admits to condensation and chronological manipulation in order to tell a compelling story cinematically. Focusing on two Port Authority police officers who both missed the attacks and are trapped by the Towers’ collapse, Stone claims authenticity for World Trade Center by remaining true to the essence of the survivors’ stories and their ensuing rescue. But in the manipulation and promotion of themes, Stone converts the gash of Ground Zero, the physical marker of 9/11, and transforms the hole into a symbolic womb as he celebrates the heroic rebirth.

Chapter four critically investigates the Iraq War as a social performance. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration declared its “War on Terror” and invaded Afghanistan where Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda had run its terror network and found sanctuary under the protection of the Taliban, but even before troops were deployed to Afghanistan, there was talk concerning Saddam Hussein and Iraq. Folding Iraq into a melodramatic narrative infused with historical and mythical citations to World War II and film, the Bush administration responded to the spectacularity of 9/11 with an equally mediatized display. In a classic three-act melodramatic structure, the Bush administration, along with the embedded news media, performed the Iraq War culminating with a cinematic dénouement as the commander-in-chief piloted his fighter aircraft onto the landing deck of a navy aircraft carrier and delivered his “Mission Accomplished” speech.
Along with examining a sampling of the regeneration through violence performatives, I also explore several critical interventions. Demystifying the patriotic iconography of one of the most celebrated images coming out of World War II, Clint Eastwood’s *Flags of Our Fathers* examines the mythopoeia and theatricality surrounding Joe Rosenthal’s photograph of the Marines raising the flag on Mount Suribachi on 23 February 1945 and the psychological trauma that haunted the survivors for years. Examining the historical and cultural relationship between Rosenthal’s Pulitzer-Prize-winning photograph and the single most-reproduced image to emerge out of the Ground Zero rubble, Thomas E. Franklin’s photograph of the three firefighters raising the flag, chapter five explores these images as performative acts shaping a national consciousness and argues for Eastwood’s film as a cautionary examination of fetishizing a photograph.

Serving as an intervention to the enigmatic War on Terror and unrestricted government power, Sam Shepard’s *The God of Hell* interrogates the patriotic jingoistic rhetoric against the material and economic reality of the American Heartland. Chapter six probes the play’s exploration of “enhanced interrogation” and the imagery of Abu Ghraib in the American heartland in order to safeguard against the omnipresent Enemy. *The God of Hell* deconstructs the regeneration through violence trope and its deployment in perpetuating war against the Enemy, foreign and domestic, real and imagined. Shepard hoped that his play would have an effect on the 2004 presidential election. While his play did not have the political effect the author intended, *The God of Hell* did serve as a comic corrective against the popular wave of xenophobic nationalism that swept through the nation in the aftermath of 9/11.

The concluding chapter returns to the dissertation’s beginning as it critically
examines two graphic novel representations of 9/11. The first is the commemorative issue of *Spider-man* published within weeks after the attacks, which demonstrates the tensions of trying to represent the impossible and performing a national, heroic identity as it transforms the encounter with the Real into a moment of regenerative violence, so familiar to comic book superheroes. The second graphic novel, *In the Shadow of No Towers* by Art Spiegelman, famous for his Holocaust survivor’s tale *Maus*, takes a very different tack in representing 9/11 as it performs Spiegelman’s desire to work through the traumatic event. *In the Shadow* offers a critical distancing to the violence of the terrorist attacks while acknowledging its own subjugation to the wound left behind.

In his seminal work, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard defined the postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements—narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. (xxiv)

Lyotard concludes that metanarratives have lost their legitimacy in postmodernity. While they may have lost their legitimacy, in the aftermath of 9/11 it is clear that metanarratives have not lost their performative power. The wounded public turned towards the American metanarrative of exceptionalism, which is underpinned by the regenerative violence trope that structures the bloody event into a positive experience, to make sense of trauma of 9/11. By exploring works that both re-inscribe the American mythos that employs regeneration through violence and serve as interventions against such
mythopoetic renderings, I wish to critically engage in the performances that not only participate in the sense-making undertaking of 9/11, but also examine their prescriptions for or intercessions against the idealized national character that serves as the protagonist within the American Experience.

While violence may be a part of the human condition—one of the last essentialist claims in post-modernity—its deployment and reception require a circumspect eye. Ours has been a nation that has celebrated violence as part of our American character and myth because of its regenerative quality, from the early settlers and the American Revolution to Manifest Destiny and the taming of the Wild West to our modern era and the elevation of the Greatest Generation who restored the United States from the Great Depression through World War II. The nationalistic belief in the regenerative properties of violence not only structures the violence inflicted but justifies—and valorizes—the violence to be. The trope structures our American experience but also structures our American responses to violence, leading us to greater acts of violence against those perceived to be the Enemy, rationalizing the starting of wars as a method to preempt wars, which follows the destruction of the hamlet of Ben Tre during the Vietnam War: to save a people from themselves, to destroy a village in order to save it (Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 535). The American character is, both ontologically and epistemologically, constructed on the performance of violence, which was projected on the encounter of the Real that took place on the morning of 11 September 2001. My dissertation critically examines those performances of 9/11, not in an attempt to bring about closure to the trauma, but serve as an entrance into the open wound.
Chapter 1

Re-membering The Guys

The sky was falling and streaked with blood

I heard you calling me then you disappeared into the dust

Up the stairs, into the fire

Up the stairs, into the fire

I need your kiss, but love and duty called you someplace higher

Somewhere up the stairs into the fire

“Into the Fire” by Bruce Springsteen from The Rising, 2002

The 9/11 attacks ruptured the Imagined American identity, the heroic male who intervened during crisis and evil, bringing justice, order, and civilization to the world. But as quickly as the Real disrupted the Imagined, the social body re-asserted the Imaginary in the American subject. Two entities emerged—along with the narrative that supported their signification—that laid claim to the heroic mantle even as that mantle destabilized. First was Rudy Giuliani, then Mayor of New York. Prior to the attack, Mayor Giuliani suffered from poor polling and was viewed as a “lame duck” mayor. After the attacks and in the ensuing chaos that followed, the media dubbed Giuliani “America’s Mayor,” mostly due to how he carried himself amidst the maelstrom. While his actions did little of substance in the direct search and rescue of the victims, his calm, defiant, and steadfast demeanor in the havoc projected the image of resolution, leadership, and heroism (particularly with a visibly absent president). The second entity
to emerge was that of the first responders, particularly the firefighter. Uncomplicated by the NYPD’s history of abusive power and seen as hyper-masculine, willing to throw themselves into a fiery building to save a man, woman, child, or dog, the firefighter came to represent everything viewed as heroic in the American Imago.

Between the time of the first plane crashing into the World Trade Center and the collapse of Tower Two, the televisual flow of images consisted of three major components: the repeating video clips of the two planes crashing into the buildings; camera shots of the people on the street with their heads cocked upward, watching smoke billow out of the buildings; and the constant flow of firefighters heading towards the World Trade Center as police cordoned the space and civilians were ordered away. The images of the first responders running towards the burning towers were so compelling that they captured the cultural imagination as they embodied heroism, sacrifice, and Americanism at its best. Time and again the surviving and sacrificed first responders in general and the firefighters in particular would be elevated by the media and politicians alike to heroic status, enjoying a special station within the social hierarchy. But this new ranking did not come from the lives rescued but from their sacrifice. The firefighter’s value as citizens rose because of their violent absence.

Originally staged on 4 December 2001, Anne Nelson’s The Guys is an early attempt at trying to represent theatrically the violent absence and trauma of 9/11. In this play, Joan (based on Nelson herself and her experiences) helps Nick, a New York City Fire Captain, through the seemingly insurmountable task of writing the eulogies for the firefighters lost in the imploding towers. Through their journey of re-discovering the missing and the dead, the two begin their healing process: Joan moves out of the “crisis
of marginality” (Nelson 7) that 9/11 had positioned her into; Nick is able to rediscover his voice, along with his true identity, as represented by the donning of the fire captain uniform. However, the beginning of their—and our, by extension—healing process is predicated on the perpetuation of violence, the violence of erasure, in order to re-member the missing and the dead, not as they were, but as desired and infallible objects worthy of praise and mythification. The violence and trauma of 9/11 is not the subject but rather the predicate that allows for the regeneration of the fallen, the transmutation of the mortal dead into the immortally perfect heroes: while the 9/11 attacks instigated the events of *The Guys*, the play’s narrative leaves the trauma behind as it becomes a tale of rescue of the dead and the redemption of the living. Examining Nelson’s preface to her published play provides insight to the discursive slippage of her text. This sifting through her preface and her play is not meant to show the failure of her text or diminish its subjective value but rather explores the praxis of American ontology: in an attempt to make sense of the traumatic violence of 9/11, Nelson constructs a narrative that displaces the Real of violence and trauma with a tale of redemption and the regeneration of a desired American identity.

Nelson discusses in her preface her need to find some expression to what she had experienced, a need to write in order to find meaning in 9/11: “writing was how I had always made sense of the world. I felt a building pressure to write something to help me make sense of what had happened, and was happening now” (xxi). But her desire to “make sense of what had happened” does not materialize in her play: there are no questions that pierce into the event, searching for the “why,” a failure Nelson does not address in her introduction. The events of 9/11 had ruptured the Symbolic, causing a
collapse of meaning and understanding—a break within the signifying chain—that was beyond comprehension. Any contemplation of 9/11 did not lend itself to sense-making as it proved inadequate to encompass the totality of the day. As Joan notes, “We can’t figure any of this out. It’s too big for us. People used to have religion. Something terrible would happen and they’d say, ‘Oh, it was God’s will.’ But we don’t… buy that now. God’s will? This wasn’t God’s will. There’s no reason. No explanation” (41). The events of 9/11 function as something of a black hole of understanding and reasoning in both the world of the play and the actual world. And this black hole’s continuing presence threatens to crush anything that falls within its gravity well. The inability to assign explanation to the unexplainable allows for the movement away from the traumatic event towards creating celestial bodies in stable orbits beyond the event horizon, the edge of the black hole of understanding where nothing can escape obliteration and loss, the ultimate absence.

After her experience with the captain in preparing eulogies for the fallen, what materializes out of the exchange is not the recitation of the eulogies alone, but Joan and Nick’s healing process as they move beyond 9/11. The major constituent of Joan and Nick’s healing process rests in the rescue of the fallen heroes by re-membering them in their eulogies, narratives that serve as verbal monuments. The fallen are not simply remembered by the survivors, but are re-membered, ideologically reassembled into desired effigies of the heroic. These narrative constructions reify the ideological matrix that shaped them. These re-memberings dictate how and what is to be remembered from 9/11, reminding us, the audience and the American public, never to forget the heroic sacrifice made by everyday citizens. As Nelson explains in her preface, those narratives
needed to be expressed to an audience beyond friends and families:

And I think that [the fire chief] was clear from the very beginning that this might serve as a memorial of words, both to those who had died and to those who were trying to find a way to go on. I told the captain I would change names and details in the interests of people’s privacy. He wanted to remain anonymous, and I said I’d do everything I could to achieve that. But I also said I wanted to share the essence of what I’d learned. ‘I want people to know about these guys,’ I said. ‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘So do I.’”

(xxii)

For Nelson and the play, the way to cope with 9/11, the way to “make sense” of the events, is to sidestep the totality of the event and direct attention to a particular aspect to which meaning can be assigned: the fallen firefighters. Focusing on the dead, writing their eulogy (praise) and constructing the verbal monument (command to remember), is how the event is dealt with. The dead can not speak for themselves, but are spoken for. Their voices, like their literal bodies, are missing. There is no attempt to reclaim their voices, but rather they are erased again, erased in order to erect the praise-worthy monument of the iconic firefighter. Their regeneration comes from the captain’s and the chronicler’s re-membering. The guys as individuals are not remembered but rather the iconography of the fireman is erected; the fireman-as-eidolon is reified, perfected, and monumentalized as it is brought to life within the signifying chain. Ironically this monumentalization undermines Nelson’s desire to not erect “plastered saints” but recognizable individuals (16).

Nelson’s intention to construct a theatrical memorial to the fallen and surviving firefighters does not reconcile with the performative monument that she in fact erects. While both words—monument and memorial—intersect with and are derived from memory, their ideological and performative functions differ. For clarification and
demarcation, I contend that monuments demand a passive audience consuming the monological narrative and meaning presented before them. The memorial, on the other hand, invites an active audience who participates in the production of meaning through dialogic exchange. While ideologically loaded, the memorial’s performative demands of an active audience promote individual micro-narratives, narratives that potentially can be transgressive to the dominant cultural reading of the historical event being memorialized. With regard to the monument and its univocal intended exchange, even an audience member’s transgressive act of constructing counter-meaning continues to perpetuate the meta-narrative the monument performs through the dialectical exchange of thesis/antithesis. The counter-meaning’s efficacy is contingent on the perpetuation of the original meaning’s sustainability. Without the original meaning the counter looses its raison d’être. The sense-making endeavor Nelson puts forth in The Guys confuses not only the terms of monument and memorial, but also their respective performative acts. The play does not invite dialogic participation, drawing on the audience’s memories and personal reflections—however ideologically and historically informed—to shape both remembrance and mourning. Rather the play fashions the audience’s memory into a determined monolithic narrative, one that is ideologically resonant with the existing cultural imagination, engendering what Henri Lefebvre describes as “textured” space. In his Production of Space, Lefebvre describes texture as space “informed by effective knowledge and ideology” (42). It is in this textured space that monumentality occurs, but its existence does not rest with a “text” to be read by the subject, rather the subject’s performance:

The actions of social practice are expressible but not explicable through
discourse; they are, precisely, *acted*—and not *read*. A monumental work, like a musical one, does not have a “signified” (or “signifieds”); rather, it has a *horizon of meaning*: A specific or indefinite multiplicity of meanings, a shifting hierarchy in which now one, now another meaning comes momentarily to the fore, by means of—and for the sake of—a particular action. (222)

For Lefebvre textured space provides a greater opportunity for various performances, however those performances are overdetermined by the horizon of meaning. While the audience may bring their multiple meanings and memories of 9/11 contributing to the “horizon of meaning,” these meanings and memories are reconstituted, they are themselves re-membered. This re-membering calls on the audience to recognize the dead as representations of the American hero.

The dead in the play are not individual and singular entities, inviting the audience to imagine them as distinct or as contributing to a pluralistic rendering of the fallen. The play dictates how the fallen are to be remembered and mourned. They are abstracted, symbolic eidolons that exemplify the “essence” Nelson discusses in her introduction. She renames the firemen to protect their identities, but this renaming lays bare the loss of identity and individuality that the operation enacts, transforming them into heroic sketches, concretized through the eulogies, the narratological monuments. The eulogy serves as a last word of the departed that both praises the dead and situates the living by framing how they should remember the dead. The monolithic narrative supersedes the survivor’s memory. The praising of the dead becomes the valorization of the dead, transforming the firefighter from the fallen rescue worker to the flawless and iconic hero. But the verbal monument’s efficacy rests on erasure—both physically and psychically—so that he can be re-constructed (re-membered), not as he was but as he is imagined to be.
The act of “re-membering” is not a mode of recognition of the traumatic event but a mode of regeneration by evading the event in order to reassert the national identity.

In order to create a sense of authenticity, the act of re-membering must come from among the ranks of the fallen, from someone who has intimate knowledge and is best qualified to bear witness. However, Nick is incapable of articulating what has happened, unable to represent that which resists signification, and calls on Joan to help write the guys’ eulogies: “But the families want me to say something. I’m the captain. What can I say to them? How can I explain it?” (Nelson 11). His position of captain fosters his responsibility to his men but also validates his authority of and over authenticity:

NICK: I keep hearing all these speeches from the politicians on TV. The pictures in the papers. Hero this, hero that. I don’t even recognize them.

JOAN: So that’s why it’s good you’re doing this. You can give their families and friends something they can recognize. You can do that. (12)

Nick’s authorial voice is paramount in the monument construction. If the monument’s monolithic nature consists of a singular narrative that supersedes all others, then it seems logical that the play functions as an extended monologue. It is Nick who discusses his re-memberings of his men. Nick supplies the rough draft of the narrative and Joan refines it as it progresses before it moves back to its point of departure, Nick. There is no dialogic exchange in the narrative construction, no multiple starting points or intersecting and converging vectors of meaning. Within the play’s construction of the eulogies, there is only a single voice that circulates between the two speakers and always returns to its authentic origin.

In point of fact, according to the play, dialogic exchanges obfuscate the image, making it unrecognizable. The media’s politicized portraits of the fallen firefighters have
rendered “his men” unidentifiable to Nick. The pluralistic renderings distort the firefighter’s fidelity. As the fire captain, Nick can supposedly provide the authorial voice that is beyond the political economy, which justifies their authentic heroic stature. His authenticity and authority are further validated by his initial recollection of the first fireman to be eulogized:

NICK: Bill. Yeah, Bill. Well, see, that’s the problem. There’s just not much to say. This hero stuff, like they were some guys in a movie. But Bill—he wasn’t like that. He was just an ordinary guy. A schmo. If Bill walked into a room, nobody would notice. (Looks up to her helplessly) You can’t say that in a eulogy. (12)

Nick’s initial view of Bill, particularly the descriptive “schmo,” seems to differentiate Bill from the hyper-masculine heroes of popular film. Bill’s lack of special-ness, his being “ordinary,” makes him invisible to the world, so much so that no one would notice his entrance into a room. However, his entrance into one of two burning towers elevates him to a celestial status. Nick recognizes the inappropriateness of such a recollection for a eulogy and is persuaded by Joan to continue, “Hey, it’s okay. Don’t worry. We’ll do this. I mean people who are ordinary … in … an extraordinary situation—that’s what this is about” (12). But the play soon reveals that Bill was not ordinary, but rather extraordinary. He was senior in his engine company and, despite his looking like “a plumber,” he had always looked after “his men,” all those that were junior below him. Not only was he a leader to his subordinates, he was also their mentor, teaching them how to properly handle the equipment. We also discover that Bill was a good Irish Catholic who did not bring attention to himself. While none of these attributes sounds exceptional individually, collectively they elevate Bill’s status as both a person and a
firefighter. Bill had another quality that set him apart from the “ordinary”: his encyclopedic knowledge and connection to New York City. According to Nick:

[Bill] loved New York, all its nooks and crannies. You know, these guys see the city from the outside and inside, underground and in all the hidden places. Bill wanted to know the history of everything. I remember him telling me, ‘Nick, just got this great book—A Walking Tour of Flatbush Avenue’ ... You want to have a guy like that around, especially downtown, with all these crazy streets. Nowadays, you get a computerized map when you get a call. But somebody can still call in and give you bad directions, or a building name with no address, or no entrance on that side of the street... (14)

Bill’s knowledge of the city exceeds that of any computerized system of New York mapping. It is that intimate knowledge of the city that leads Nick to think of Bill’s actions on 9/11, how he was leading his men to Tower One when they saw the second high-jacked plane fly into Tower Two: “They’re running down West Street in full gear about the time the second plane hit. And maybe they peeled off and went to Tower Two. But we don’t know where to look for them. (Stop, choked)” (15). As Nick begins to drift back to the traumatic event and Bill’s final moments, Joan draws him out and focuses his thoughts away from Bill’s death and onto his life. This evasion constitutes how the play attempts to “make sense of what happened”: avoiding the Real of the event and its ensuing trauma by shifting focus away from the totality of death towards the narrative and image of life. While Nick has a moment with his grief before being drawn out, there is no other mention of the event until the reading of Bill’s eulogy, when his death is transformed into life—not his own, but the lives he and his fellow men are responsible for saving. However, this conclusion does not come from working through the violence of 9/11 but comes from adopting the tropic regeneration through violence. Before Nick can lose himself in the black hole of 9/11, his attention is redirected to Bill’s life and his
eulogizing endeavor. Nick’s struggle to move on, with Joan’s help, not only focuses on Bill’s elevation into heroic status, but also marks Nick’s own elevation as hero. He does not allow himself to fall victim to the violence, but rather emerges from the event horizon to fulfill his duty and obligation, to be the voice of the fallen, to remind everyone of the dead, to rescue their memories from oblivion. Nick’s own trauma is a distant second to the celebration of Bill’s life and his ordinariness.

From the unbearable to the lighthearted, Nick relates Bill’s interactions with his fellow firehouse comrades. While Bill devises “zingers” describing his fellow firefighters’ cooking failures, he is “never mean” in his remarks. Joan comments favorably on Nick’s representation of Bill as she crafts the eulogy, “Okay, okay … Yeah, this is good. This works. ‘Cause you know, Nick, you want to give people someone they recognize. Not just a plaster saint. This is good” (15–16). Joan’s positive remark is revealing in that it expresses a desire to please the audience with the representation of Bill. Nick’s selectively remembering—and commemorating—Bill’s qualities runs the risk of sanctification, alienating the audience from Bill. The humorous, witty Bill does not become a “plaster saint” set apart from the rest of the people, but is recognizable. But while Bill as “lived” (the names have been changed so there is no “Bill”) may not be made of plaster, his sainthood is assured in the eulogy, as the man who was earlier not associated with popular hero representations as seen in movies is now the common man hero, heroic because of his “everyman” qualities:

NICK: [reading from the eulogy] … ‘But Bill was a quiet hero. Never one to show off, never blustered. He was a firefighter for sixteen years, and he was a good one. He had the most important quality for a firefighter. He was absolutely dependable… Sometimes it can be hard for the experienced men to show the young ones the drills year after year. But
Bill was always looking out for the new guys, showing them the ropes. And he did it in that quiet way of his, never made them feel small. ‘My men,’ he called them. ‘My men.”’ (16–17)

Bill’s celestial elevation is contingent on both his lack of histrionics and his constant and consistent ability to excel. Bill embodies the familiar “strong and silent” type, both reflecting and projecting the John Wayne persona, trading cowboy hats and spurs for fire hats and boots. While it may have been hard for senior firefighters to tolerate the young and inexperienced, Bill looked after “his men,” teaching and nurturing their development into fully realized firefighters. Joan’s representation of Bill captures the truth of the man, as Nick notes. But Joan makes a point that Bill is not something she crafted, “They’re your words. I just put them in order.” Leading to Nick’s response, “No. You got the craft. You know how to put it” (17). While they may be Nick’s words, it is Joan’s narrative crafting ability that erects Bill’s verbal monument. While politicians use the term “hero” loosely and for political currency, Bill’s discursive statue designates what it truly means to be heroic. However Bill’s final transmutation from “schmo” to hero rests at the eulogy’s end:

He loved his family, and he loved this city. On September eleventh, he was the senior man. The younger men could look to someone who was steady and professional, to show the way. We know that Bill and the other firefighters of New York saved thousands of lives that day. That means there are thousands of people and their family members who are able to go on because of them… (18)

The eulogy narrative fulfills Bill’s patriarchal responsibility to both his biological family and his extended family, his junior comrades. But it also valorizes his death through its regenerative qualities. The thousands of survivors and their families are alive thanks to
Bill and his fellow firefighters who died that day. His death is marked as something heroic in that it allowed thousands of others to live, transforming the everyman to hero. Veteran firefighters are not the only privileged group deserving monumental eulogies. That honor also includes more junior or probationary firefighters, whose celebrations revolve around their lost potential. While Bill’s eulogy rests on exploring his past accomplishments, “probie” Jimmy’s eulogy rests on examining what might have been—a nostalgia not for an idyllic past but for what Svetlana Boym describes as “the present perfect and its lost potential” (The Future of Nostalgia 21). Nick admits that he “hardly knew the guy” (Nelson 23) as he begins rhetorically to shape Jimmy’s death mask. Nick acknowledges his lack of knowledge concerning Jimmy, limited to Jimmy’s having a girlfriend who was “nice.” It was Jimmy’s girlfriend who informed Nick of Jimmy’s interest in bicycle racing, drawing attention to Nick’s personal disconnect with Jimmy. On a professional level, Nick’s formulation of Jimmy’s value revolves around Nick’s lack of information. Traditionally Nick’s contact with probationary firefighters came in the form of reports furnished by Nick’s subordinates, detailing their shortcomings in their development:

JOAN: … So how was [Jimmy] doing at the job?
NICK: I’m not real sure. He was still learning.
JOAN: I mean, if he was screwing up, you would have heard about it, right?
NICK: Oh yeah. I always hear about it if they screw up. (Pause while he thinks) I didn’t hear anything like that.
JOAN: (Writing) So he wasn’t screwing up. So he was doing fine. And he went through probation, and every guy goes through probation, so we can put that in, too, right?
NICK: (Tentatively) Yeah… (25–6)
Joan’s definition of Jimmy is based on inferring a narrative so as to fill in the lacuna of Nick’s memory and knowledge, ascribing excellence to Jimmy to which Nick is unable to give a full-throated endorsement, as expressed by his tentative “yeah.” Nick, in a moment of desperation, admits, “I don’t know, I just don’t know. He wasn’t there that long. And with everything that’s happened … (He looks at her desperately) This is terrible. This is a terrible thing. But I have to tell you—right now, I can’t even remember his face” (25). As in the case of Jimmy’s interest in bicycle riding, Nick’s inability to visualize Jimmy highlights his lack of knowledge. Nick struggles with the realization that for all intents and purposes, Jimmy is unknown to him, a stranger, so much so that the trauma of 9/11 erases Jimmy’s face from Nick’s memory. Despite Nick’s recognizing his lack of recognition, he still bears the responsibility for constructing Jimmy’s death mask and scribing his eulogy. But while Jimmy’s face is lost to Nick, Jimmy’s persona is not because Nick’s formulation of Jimmy does not come from the man who died but the idea of what the man should be, or what Althusser described as the “Subject par excellence.” For Althusser the Subject par excellence is the Absolute whose name, or idea, ordains the interpellative act, determining what the subject is to be as a subject. It is the Subject par excellence’s image that dictates subjection within ideology as the idealized individual to which all aspire to be (Lenin and Philosophy 121–122). Nick may have forgotten Jimmy’s face but he has not forgotten the image of the ideologically determined fireman/hero. Jimmy’s forgotten face is replaced by the remembered mask, which serves to fill the lack in (and of) Nick’s memory. Nick’s re-membering Jimmy shapes Nick’s eulogy not on who Jimmy was, but who he might have been, an imagined outcome based on an idealized subject.
As Nick relates, “[Jimmy] was willing to learn—it was always, ‘Show me more, show me more.’” (Nelson 24). However, based on Nick’s own admission regarding his lack of direct exposure to Jimmy, we are unsure if this memory comes from direct experience or was related to Nick by another firefighter. By taking this known fragment of the past and the inferred deciphering of the lacuna, Jimmy’s eulogy projects the telos of what might have/should have been: “Jimmy’s job was to learn as much as possible, as fast as possible. We could tell he was going to be good. He was quiet, helpful, and hardworking. The guys liked him, and they’re good judges of character” (29). While Jimmy could not be remembered, his lost potential is re-membered and stated as a fact: the guys could tell he was going to be good as a firefighter, and by their own insistence, they are “good judges of character.” Their privileged position of knowledge and foresight lays claim to a reality that should have been rather than the one they find themselves in.

As the play positions the audience to contemplate directly Jimmy’s lost potential as a firefighter, we are simultaneously positioned to meditate on Jimmy’s lost potential as a man through Jimmy’s unnamed girlfriend. Without a name, the girlfriend is not a particular subject but rather a subject position, a signifier emptied of any particular signification that a name might over-determine (ethnicity, class, religious background, etc). As a subject position, the girlfriend could be any heterosexual female that reinscribes hetero-normative narratives. Jimmy already holds the status of hyper-masculine by being a young firefighter. This Imago is reinforced by Jimmy’s athleticism (he races bikes) and his aggressive, seemingly overachieving attitude (“Show me more, show me more”). These signifiers inform Jimmy’s narrative, his lost potential. The
signifying chain that “is” Jimmy overdetermines the lost potential: Jimmy never had the chance to marry his girlfriend and they never had the chance to have their idyllic family in the suburbs with their kids, dog, and picket fences. This lost potential, the longing for the perfect life that never had the chance to be, is punctuated by Joan’s asking of Jimmy’s age:

JOAN: How old was he?
NICK: I got it here (He opens the file in front of him and leafs through a couple of pages, squinting) I think… let’s see… Yeah, he was… uh, twenty-six.
JOAN: Oh. (She writes slowly) What kind of things did he like […]

Nick’s utterance of “uh” is open to a range of possible meanings, from dispassionate verbal hesitancy as he struggles to read as indicated by his squinting to disbelief and dismay at the revelation of Jimmy’s age. Joan’s reaction, on the other hand, forecloses the possibility of meaning beyond that of sorrow over the lost potential as she slowly writes down the information and endeavors to reconcile herself with the new information. In this, Joan functions as the ideal audience member through her “outsider” position. She is meant to bear witness to the loss of the firefighters on 9/11, to understand fully their sacrifice for us, as she helps Nick write their eulogies. Her recognition and appreciation of their sacrifice, both the living life lost and the life never to be lived, as well as her emotional responses, dictate how the audience is meant to receive and process the same revelations.

As we are left to navigate through the longing of Jimmy’s life never lived, the eulogy transfigures Jimmy, from the “probie” learning his trade into a fully realized firefighter:
On that morning in September, Jimmy was going out on his first big fire. He was serving with the cream of the crop, and he was holding his own. They were ready for this day. It was the work they had chosen, work that was about risking everything—risking your life—in order to save others. In our grief, let us remember that. (30)

Not only is Jimmy elevated into the role of a firefighter, he is promoted to the top as he serves with the “cream of the crop” and holds his own, earning his place in the pantheon of fallen heroes. His age and inexperience are not an issue as he races into one of the two Twin Towers. In fact he, along with the others, was “ready” for that day. Of course, by Nick’s own admission, Jimmy’s readiness is based on a lack, drawing conclusions on what was not reported during his training and is reinforced by the emptiness of Ground Zero. We can never know how Jimmy performed on his “first big fire” since there were no survivors to evaluate Jimmy’s performance. Actuality matters less than the desire to see Jimmy as one of the “cream of the crop” in the construction of his eulogy. Jimmy becomes an emptied signifier into which a desired heroic signification can be poured. And as there are no witnesses to testify to the contrary, Jimmy satisfies the desire to have the heroic. Jimmy was ready for his “first big fire” because he was imagined into readiness.

Nick’s problematic memory of Jimmy while simultaneously writing—with Joan’s help—Jimmy’s eulogy calls forth the tensions between memory and history posited by Pierre Nora in his seminal “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire.”

5 The sad irony of this utterance in the play and its material reality connection was that the firefighters were not “ready” for the day. Despite the firefighters’ training and resolve, equipment failures and shortcomings, such as their radio equipment, and the first responders’ central command, foolishly located in the high-value target Twin Towers, revealed how unprepared they were for that dark day. By obscuring the material reality of the event, Nelson further monumentalizes Jimmy and, by extension, all of the firefighters.
Nick’s incomplete and contesting memory enacts Nora’s thesis that memory is “in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived.” Memory’s instability and ever-changing content is pitted against history, which is “the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer.” Where memory “is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past” (“Between Memory and History” 8). For Nora memory is the act of the eternal present, always fluctuating and never the same in its performance, the performance of remembering, against the “stabilizing” effect of history that attempts to pin down the past in an encoded, readable representation. Nora sees the two at odds with one another as “[h]istory is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it” (9). This push and pull between the two, memory and history, take place in the lieux de mémoire, the sites of memory, which come into being in the absence of the milieux de mémoire, the real environments of memory. Indeed, the sites of memory are “created by a play of memory and history,” the subject’s production, consumption, or rejection of official history even as s/he produces memory. Nick’s difficulty in remembering, his embodied performance of memory in the present, is in contradistinction to the official history he is writing down in the form of the eulogy. And while we witness Nick’s struggle between memory and history, the theatre itself becomes the site of memory during the play’s performance. The audience, with its own mutational memory, reconciles the traumatic present (or at least the trauma’s residual) with the writing of the
past into a decipherable and archival text that is an overdetermined and desired heroic narrative.

The heroic narrative formula that shapes Jimmy’s eulogy points to the raison d’être of the firefighter: risking one’s own life in order to save others. And it is that ability, sacrificing one’s own life, which we are asked to remember. Indeed, Jimmy’s true potential as a firefighter rests on that sacrifice. While we meditate on Jimmy’s lost potential, we are reminded—or rather, are being told to remember—that Jimmy-as-firefighter in fact did live up to his promise, he sacrificed his life. The violence of 9/11 allowed Jimmy to fully realize his calling, his fullest possibility. In that moment of death and destruction, Jimmy is constructed as having fulfilled his life. And it is that violence that allows Jimmy’s realized life to be “remembered.” Without the violence Jimmy could not have proven himself and earned his place in the pantheon of heroes, the “cream of the crop.” And the stability of Jimmy’s position is assured, as he is erased and re-membered into being.

From the beginning of the play, the act of monumentalizing the fallen is predicated on their continuing absence and erasure. Not only are they absent from the living but they are also absent as the dead, their bodies literally disappearing as the buildings imploded. In the aftermath of 9/11 some families held onto hope that their loved ones would be found and rescued, or at least recovered, from Ground Zero. Others had come to accept their loss and wished to move forward by holding services. But without a body to bury, the families used a photograph to represent the dead as the eulogies were given—the dead will be twice represented but never present. The services for the fallen lend themselves to both mystification and mythification as the absence of
the referent, the body itself, further alienates the living from the dead. In the absence of the referent, all that is left are the signifiers of and for the dead. For the living the signifiers need to be put together—to be crafted—into a coherent scenario that then, as Nelson describes, “makes sense.”

In this respect, the dead become what I would like to call spectral palimpsests. Palimpsests are manuscripts in which the original writing has been effaced in order to make room for later writing; however the traces of the original writings remain. Nelson’s guys become spectral palimpsests because their parchments, their bodies that were inscribed by their lived lives, have been materially erased from existence; what is left behind is an absence—a visible, empty space—that can be re-imagined and re-written. The guys can become that which we want them to be. This re-imagining allows for a shift of focus, from the unfathomable trauma of the Real to a trauma that can be re-imagined so it can be understood. It is that movement of re-imagining that allows the sufferers of the traumatic experience to re-locate out of the space of the trauma (or give the illusion of moving out of the traumatic space) and “move” forward. The intolerability of existing in the event horizon of trauma motivates the re-writing and the re-imagining of the traumatic experience so as to move beyond the traumatic experience. Joan briefly touches on this during one of her monologues. Joan discusses how she was invited (by whom is unclear) to Argentina after 11 September, a trip she had hoped would be helpful, an escape from the trauma she suffers. Several Argentinean journalists offer Joan their onto-historical reading—having survived their own 11 September with the Pinochet coup—of the U.S. government’s handling of the media and the terrorist attack. The journalists claim that the “United States is living under total military censorship” (Nelson
Their “proof” is the lack of published pictures of the dead. Joan lashes out stating, “Pictures of bodies? There aren’t any bodies. Do you want pictures of pieces of bodies? Censorship—that’s when information is blocked. They’re not blocking that information. We know they’re dead. People don’t need pictures. People don’t need pictures” (47; emphasis in the original). For Joan, there can be no pictorial image of the bodies because they are gone. The erased referent has made mimetic representation impossible.6

Even if the photograph was possible, it could not maintain its traditional function—conveying information and transporting the viewer to the cognitive space of the object viewed while still maintaining the subject’s distance. Joan’s resistance to and rejection of photographs of the dead recalls Barthes’s meditations on photography, for instance his assertion that the photograph is always already a “return of the dead” but with a complication (Camera Lucida 9). Barthes discusses how the photograph emanates from the photographed object’s “spectrum,” a term that is both connected to notions of the spectacle and simultaneously associated with the word specter, or ghost. The photograph captures a moment that is no longer, a moment that is now dead. But when the photographed object is itself dead, its death is multiplied, continuous, and ceaseless, not for the dead (they will always be dead) but for the living Spectator, to use Barthes’s terminology. Similar to the spectral palimpsests and the survivor’s task to re-member, the photograph of the dead forces the Spectator to contemplate what was and has been.

6 While there is a noticeable absence of published pictures of the bodies, there were numerous pictures of the rubble; the tattered and twisted remains of Ground Zero. The mutilated remains of the buildings came to signify also the dead, melding human to stone and steel: abstracting the former, while anthropomorphizing the other.
The photograph has a special connection with its referent in contradistinction with other modes of representation in that the “photographic referent” is necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens without which there would be no photograph. Painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse combines signs which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and are most often “chimeras.” Contrary to these imitations, in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and the past. (76)

The photograph authenticates the referent’s existence as “being there” to be photographed. The deception of the photograph, if any, comes from the “meaning of the thing, being by nature tendentious, never as to its existence” (87). Whatever meanings we may derive from the photographed dead, they are still dead and there can be no denial of the existence of 9/11 and its ensuing trauma; although impossible for the photograph to truly represent, it can echo the Real of 9/11.

However Joan’s reaction to and rejection of photographs of the dead is driven by 9/11’s continuance and the inherent violence of the photograph itself. As Barthes argues, “The Photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it fills the sight by force, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed” (91). For Barthes, the photograph forces itself on the Spectator, forbidding the Spectator to transform, omit, and/or re-emphasize the object(s) in the photograph. The violence of the photograph is a constitutive element in the phenomenological exchange between the Spectator and the dead, along with the incomprehensible violence in the photograph via the dead. The image would now threaten to transport the Spectator

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7 Of course we now have technologies that allow us to do that very thing, but in doing so we have changed the photograph into something else, since it no longer contains the “necessarily real thing” that was once before the camera lens during the photographic moment; the photograph no longer represents what-was-once but what-had-never-been.
to the precipice of existential abyss, threatening the subject’s existence. For the viewing American subject, the totalizing people Joan is referring to, there is no need for the picture because s/he is already standing on the edge of nothingness. We already know that the victims of 9/11 are dead, and pictorial representations of the bodies would fail in properly representing that which cannot be represented. Any attempt would simply be overkill. The only recourse left to the Spectator in the violent moment is to look away at something else.

The photograph’s danger does not lie in its impossibility to represent the impossible but its affect on the viewing subject, violently hurtling the Spectator into the abyss of nothingness, foreclosing the possibility of a positivistic outcome. As Barthes’s notes:

[I]f dialectic is that thought which masters the corruptible and converts the negation of death into the power to work, then the photograph is undialectical: it is a denatured theater where death cannot “be contemplated,” reflected and interiorized; or again: the dead theater of Death, the foreclosure of the Tragic, excludes all purification, all catharsis. (90)

In this dead theatre of Death, the Spectator loses his/her sense of self, as the subject becomes nothing without the object. The Spectator does not experience the cathartic release but undergoes an ontological, epistemological, and existential erasure, Absolute Obliteration. For Joan the photographs of the dead would foreclose the transcendent eulogizing she endeavors to accomplish as Tragedy is overwhelmed by the totality of Nothingness.

While the founding trauma maintains its indecipherable status, the void is “covered” by the comprehensible narrative. This happens through the lack of the
material body via the spectrality of the guys. Had their material remains been excavated from the ruins, their forms would draw the spectator/survivor back to the traumatic event. The return to (and of) the event would risk succumbing to the totality of the event, whereby the survivor suffers ontological annihilation. This is evident in the moment noted above, when Nick, during his description of Bill, is drawn back to the event of 9/11. As his thoughts are pulled into the traumatic gravity well, Nick begins to succumb to the totality of the event, risking what Lacan calls *aphanisis*, or the disappearing subject. Lacan situates the aphanisis “at the level at which the subject manifests himself in this movement of disappearance that I have described lethal. In a quite a different way, I have called this movement the *fading* of the subject” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 208). Nick’s disappearance as a subject manifests itself through his disappearing voice as he chokes up and is unable to continue until Joan coaxes him into thinking of Bill’s life (Nelson 15). But invoking the spectres of the guys, *sans* the material remains, allows for the dual move of both forgetting and re-membering the guys, achieving an orbit around trauma’s event horizon. With the apparent removal of the smudge, the *béance* of the Real, the survivors can envision a sense of agency, a perception of control in their world. The smear has not been removed but rather has become a blind spot in the picture, the anamorphic smudge of nothingness to be evaded in order to properly understand the narrative and not get caught in the abyss of the Real.8

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8 This echoes Lacan’s reading of Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* and the scopic nature of desire. In the painting’s foreground, resting “outside” the mimetic representation of the two ambassadors lies what appears to be a smudge. However, the smudge becomes a skull when viewing the painting at a different angle. Lacan describes this new seeing as being caught in its trap and realizing that the death head signifies our own “nothingness” (*Four Fundamentals* 92).
Re-membering Redemption and Rescue

This displacing the Real of the event with the imagining of Bill’s life, a life reconstructed through Nick’s forgetting and re-membering, allows for an emerging narrative that enables sense-making to occur. Constructing an understandable narrative that displaces the incomprehensible event allows the surviving subject to attain a sense of stability and control over the trauma: the subject now “owns” the trauma and is no longer at risk of *aphanisis*. The ability to write the narrative also authorizes the telos of the narrative, what form and function it will take and to what end. Not falling into the event horizon opens up narrative possibilities regarding how the “guys” are to be remembered, but also how the survivors can write themselves. By remaining at the event’s periphery—a cognitively recognizable space—the survivors have a sense of agency in mapping their own paths towards a teleological ending: that of redemption. Of course this agency is somewhat deceptive in that the familiar periphery does not simply emerge of its own accord, but is rather imagined into existence by the survivors, primarily through the omission of the trauma from the traumatic event. In this spectacularization of trauma, framing the trauma as a spectacle and an event, the survivor can watch it from a safe distance, outside and beyond the event itself, as s/he shapes the redemption scenario. As Dominick LaCapra reminds us, a “[r]edemptive narrative is a narrative that denies the trauma that brought it into existence” (*Writing History* 179). While the *event* initiates the need for redemption, the narrative quickly moves beyond the *trauma* created by the event, as the trauma threatens to consume the subject. For *The Guys*, the narrative becomes one of redemption, a narrative that can be, as mentioned above, imagined and
understood. The redemption is not for those who died on 9/11, but for those who survived: for Nick, “failing” to be at his post on that dark Tuesday, now “rescues” their memories through his re-membering; for Joan who is desiring to move out of her “crisis of marginality,” wanting to help those at Ground Zero but turned away because of her lack of special skills. She aids Nick in the narratological “rescue” effort by both helping him shape the eulogies and simultaneously bearing witness to Nick’s testimonials.

But a first step towards redemption demands a step away from the trauma. For The Guys, the step away from the trauma rests in ending the search for meaning or sense-making regarding the violence perpetrated on 9/11. As previously mentioned, Joan relates the incomprehensibility of 9/11, that it was “too big for us” (Nelson 41). The event, both in the actual world and the world of the play, does resist signification, a rupture of the Real whose existence resembles a black hole that threatens the subject with aphanesis. And while this is true in the context of the text (and the historical moment which the play attempts to convey), Joan’s role (and function) in this context invites additional analysis.

During Nick’s re-membering of his lieutenant, Patrick, Nick and Joan have a brief exchange regarding the attack:

NICK: They still haven’t found the guys. I don’t know where they are. Maybe after the second plane hit Tower Two, they went there. I just have no idea. I keep trying to figure it out.
JOAN: We can’t figure any of this out. It’s too big for us. People used to have religion. Something terrible would happen and they’d say, “Oh, it was God’s will.” But we don’t… buy that now. God’s will? This wasn’t God’s will. There’s no reason. No explanation.
NICK: Yeah. No reason. (41)
Nick’s attempt at understanding rests in the logistics of the event: where did his men go, which of the two towers did they enter, which tower were they in when the two buildings finally imploded? If he could understand that, perhaps then he could find the remains, or at the very least, know where to look. Joan extends the search for understanding beyond Nick’s particulars, expanding it into the realms of phenomenological and existential meditations, which extend beyond human comprehension. Joan’s ruminations and her conclusion reveal the move away from trauma of the event by identifying it as something beyond understanding. However there is a difference between being able to “figure it out” and having the ability to fully comprehend the event. The two are not mutually exclusive. Joan dismisses the geopolitical tensions that arise from globalization and hegemony as something that cannot be “figure[d]” out. One could figure out these tensions, that is, recognize that these tensions exist and are contributing factors, without accepting them as viable justifications for mass murder and terror.

The explanation as to why does not, however, necessarily allow for the integration of the traumatic event into the subject. Joan’s final “reading” of the event ends any further meditations on the trauma or risks of aphanisis. She tries to explain the trauma away through its inexplicability. This move, of course, does not explain the trauma away; the move’s efficacy rests in allowing a narrative to emerge that re-imagines the event and its trauma, transforming them into something that can contribute to the telos of the emerging narrative as it is “left” behind. Even though Joan apparently rejects religion, her totalizing of the event, its enormity as it were, transforms the violence into the sublime. While God may have nothing to do with 9/11, the secular consecration of Ground Zero sanctifies the event as the subject undergoes sublimation and is transformed
into something greater. Ground Zero becomes the cauldron in which redemption and regeneration can emerge. Again, following LaCapra:

[T]here has been an important tendency in modern culture and thought to convert trauma into the occasion for sublimity, to transvalue it into a test of the self or the group and an entry into the extraordinary. In the sublime, the excess of trauma becomes an uncanny source of elation or ecstasy… They may also give rise to what may be termed founding traumas—traumas that paradoxically become the valorized or intensely cathexed basis of identity for an individual or a group rather than events that pose the problematic question of identity. (Writing History 22-23)

LaCapra is referring to the survivors of trauma who take the event and transfix it into a red badge of courage, a marker of exceptionality through violence that becomes an integral part of the subject’s identity. Nick is able to reclaim his identity as Fire Captain as he “rescues” his men from psychic oblivion through his re-membering. Joan reclaims her American identity by helping Nick reclaim his position as Captain by both helping him articulate his re-memberings and simultaneously bearing witness to the re-memberings. By doing something active—a hallmark of being an American—she is able to leave her position of “marginality,” a state of inactiveness that constituted a crisis of being for her. But Joan has another function within the redemption narrative of the play: she becomes the victim who needs to be saved in order to complete the rescue scenario.

While going over Patrick’s eulogy, Joan is overcome with emotion, “Patrick O’Neill was many things to many people. Leader, friend, brother… husband, father… And none of us here will ever forget him. (As she finishes, her voice starts to quaver. Her face is distorted. Perhaps she is in tears...).” Nick notices Joan’s state and blames himself for her condition, “… look what I’ve done. I’ve dragged you into this. I shouldn’t a done that. I come along and unload all this stuff on you, and now you’re
wrecked too. I had no right to do that” (Nelson 44). The two have a short exchange
about their mutual suffering:

JOAN: No, you don’t understand.
NICK: You’re hurting. This hurts you.
JOAN: This is nothing, less than nothing, compared to what’s happened to you.
NICK: That doesn’t mean you should suffer.
JOAN: Can you use this? (She holds up the paper)
NICK: Yes. Yes! Now I’ll have something to say when I get up there. And the words. They’re the right words. But that doesn’t mean I should drag you into this. You were outside of it, and I dragged you in.
JOAN: Was I outside of it? I don’t want to be—not so far. This is my city, too. I can’t just watch it on TV. I want to do something. But this is all I know how to do. Words. I can’t think of anything else.
NICK: (Wonderingly) That’s okay. They’re your tools. (45)

Joan is overwhelmed by the sense of loss but also by her feelings of uselessness. She
holds up Patrick’s eulogy, her writings, and asks if it is beneficial to Nick. Joan
expresses her desire to be helpful, to contribute to the efforts surrounding 9/11, but
suffers from her “crisis of marginality,” leading to an existential emergency of being.

When Nick reiterates his regret of “dragging” Joan into psychic horror, she returns with a
question: “Was I outside of it?” She follows up, not with an answer, but with muddled
desire, “I don’t want to be—not so far.” She oscillates on her own position in relation to
9/11. She is unsure if she was outside of it and, if she was, does not wish to be too “far”
from the event. But she simultaneously occupies a position inside the event via the
trauma she endures, even as they acknowledge their traumatic experiences are not the
same; both of them are traumatized subjects. Her subject positions, both as an American
and as a New Yorker, have been destabilized due to her perceived inability to contribute
to what happened. Joan expresses regret regarding her ineffectiveness. She desires to do
something helpful but she only has words. Joan’s self-critique reiterates the value (or
lack thereof) of intellectualism—as signified by her being a writer—in the American character. The American character’s potency rests more in the ability to act and less on intellectual proclivity, as demonstrated in so many American action movies. Joan’s self-perception of inability expresses the impotence of the erudite. Her redemption equates to her regeneration not into a heroic subject, but rather into the scenario’s victim, contributing to its outcome by giving the scenario its *raison d’être*.

Nick, in hetero-normative fashion, comes to Joan’s rescue by telling her that her words, her “tools,” are indeed helpful to the cause. Nick will have the “right words” to speak when he gives the eulogy because of Joan’s efforts. Joan managed to construct narratives that capture the essence of the guys based on Nick’s fragments, his re-memberings. In this gesture, Joan manages to redeem herself through Nick’s words: not speaking for herself but finding Nick’s voice, leading him away from the void of in-articulation and non-mediation. But, as we shall see, Joan’s position of rescuer is short lived as she resumes the role of victim and conforms to American mythological scenario: the female needing to be rescued from the non-white terrorist. But this second rescue is not based on a physical crisis, rather a psychic one.

Nick’s redemption and regeneration into the heroic subject is contingent on being able to find his voice and rescue his men, something he could not accomplish on 9/11. Nick tells Joan that he was off duty that morning and at home in Brooklyn, “When it happened, I went outside to the street. I could see the towers on fire” (39). Nick explains that he arrived at the firehouse at 10:15, “twenty minutes after the second tower went down… (*Long pause*)” (40). The ellipsis that trails Nick’s line, indicating an incomplete thought that tapers off unspoken, followed by the stage direction of the long pause
situates the audience to focus on Nick’s arriving to the scene too late, a scenario familiar to melodramatic narratives. The hero’s arrival to the event too late becomes the failing act for which the hero must seek redemption. In such redemption tales, the protagonist emerges a greater hero at the end of the narrative, now having the ability to perform that which he could not earlier. As a firefighter, Nick was unable to rescue his men, along with the 3,000 others who died that day. Nick’s inability to rescue the victims, both civilians and firefighters, stripped him of this firefighter identity since his identity is contingent on his actions, on his performance. His failure to act and his loss of identity is visualized in his costuming. Throughout the play, Nick is “informally dressed” (7). The non-descriptive clothing marks his non-descriptive identity. While he discusses his role as a firefighter he is not dressed in any iconic firefighter clothing. The uniform’s absence comes to the forefront when Nick wears it at the end of the play, as he performs his rescues. But throughout most of the play Nick does not wear his uniform, a performative gesture recognizing his failure to fulfill his role as firefighter, his failure to “perform.” But Nick’s failure is tied not solely to the efficacy of his performance, but to his effectiveness as a firefighter as well.

In his book *Perform or Else*, Jon McKenzie argues for a general theory of performance that draws together its various conceptions. How theatre and performance studies think about performance in terms of its potential liminality and transgressiveness, its *efficacy*, differs from other socio-cultural denotations. In the performance management paradigm most associated with business and capital, performance is driven by its *efficiency*, achieving maximum productivity (and profit) with minimum effort or expense. In the techno-performance paradigm, performance is contextualized based on
its effectiveness, how successful was the object in producing its desired or intended result, such as gauging a missile’s performance on how effective it was in hitting its target. McKenzie argues for a general theory of performance that incorporates all three of the metamodels, cultural (efficacy), organizational (efficiency), and technological (effectiveness), “Cultural performance, organizational performance, technological performance, embodied performance, discursive performative, performance stratum—these are the main concepts composing our theory” (231). McKenzie’s encompassing theory is necessary since performance is the onto-historical condition of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (18). The failure of embodied performance to be effective in the performative task equates an ontological failure, a failure of being, and a failure of (and to) an identity. Nick’s uniform is a sign of an identity that is based on his effective performance to rescue. His absent uniform signifies his failure to perform and its presence at the end of the play his performing success, his effectiveness as rescuer as he rescues the memory of his men in the eulogies just as he rescues the rescue narrative itself. And for audiences watching the production that had experienced 9/11 themselves, they would also be moved by the uniform’s presence as it garnered greater socio-cultural capital, greater efficacy, during and in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks.

The play diametrically positions Nick’s inability to be there for his men, his ineffectiveness, against the last of the eulogized firefighters, Barney. Barney had the day off from the firehouse on the morning of 9/11 but had stopped by to meet his friend and fellow firefighter, Dave. Nick discusses how Barney was considered missing because he had not responded to the emergency call after the attacks. Only after Nick watched the firehouse security tapes does he discover Barney’s status. Nick tells Joan:
And we watched the tape. It’s almost nine in the morning, and Barney pulls up in his van and gets out. Then he’s there talking to Dave. And you see the street and the sidewalk… suddenly filling with papers… (Slowly, watching it in his inner eye) The companies go. Barney and Dave go. You see them both turn and walk away. Helmets… equipment… they walk away… (Nelson 56).

Barney, like Nick, was off-duty that morning but, unlike Nick, was able to join his fellow firefighters as they answered the call. Barney was considered physically missing before his image was found on the tape, only to disappear—both image and corporeality—in the collapsing towers. Barney’s being there both for his comrades and for the victims exemplified the Imago of the heroic firefighter. Whether the incident is read as providence or simply the randomness of life that brought Barney to that place at that time, he died fulfilling the essence of being a firefighter, sacrificing himself to save others—an image fortified by the signifiers that compose the firefighter, the helmet, equipment, and their movement towards the catastrophe. Barney’s corporeality cannot be saved, but his image is both lost and eternally rescued.

In the final scene of the play, the stage directions call for two pools of light on stage, with Joan occupying one and Nick the other. While Joan’s appearance remains the same as before, Nick is “in uniformed funeral attire” as he stands “formally” before the audience, “with the written eulogy before him” (56). The scene oscillates between the two: Nick gives his eulogy, building a verbal monument to Barney Keppel; Joan gives her final meditations on 9/11, from relating her attempts to avoid the trauma to demanding a return to the time before the event. Joan wishes that life were no longer reality but simply the televisual medium that broadcasted the horror of 9/11 to millions of televisions over and over again:
Let’s just play the tape backwards. Start with a shot of the rubble. The dust and steel rise and untwist, and form back up into the buildings. The flames are sucked back into Tower Two, then Tower One. The planes fly backwards across the river, take a curve, and land backwards in Boston. Everyone gets out of the plane and drives backwards home. The guys from the ladder truck run backwards. Barney’s there. He’s next to Dave. This time Jimmy’s in front and Patrick’s in back. They all get into the truck, back up. The orange traffic cone falls out on the street, and the truck backs in the station. Barney gets into his van and backs off home. That’s it. That’s the deal.

But. I just … I just have nothing to bring to the table. *(She wilts.)* (58–9)

Joan recognizes the futility of her desire to bend space-time and conform reality to her will. Accepting her impotence to shape reality, she “wilts,” which implies a sense of deflation in her physical presence. In performance, that deflation could range from a simple sagging of her shoulders and lowering of her head or slowly lowering herself into her chair, to a more extreme physical display, such as collapsing to the floor. Joan’s monologue is in stark contrast to Nick’s eulogy. Nick’s demeanor is antithetical to Joan’s movement from sorrow and denial to defiance to wilting. Instead, “[Nick] begins the oratory, in a simple, unpretentious, dignified way. He reads well and confidently, with affection. He’s in control” (56). While Joan bootlessly demands an actuality to which she can never return, Nick successfully recovers his identity through his controlled performance as he “rescues” his comrades.

Nick begins the eulogy with a familiar melodramatic trope, the act of self-nomination: “I am Nick Flanagan of Ladder Company 60” (56). The act of self-nomination in melodrama reveals the true identity of a character, which may have been hidden, threatened, or missing. Nick reclaims not only his name, but also his sense of self by linking his name to his ladder company. This linkage, along with the visual
representation of the uniform he now wears, brings together the formally disjointed signifiers—that of firefighter dismembered by 9/11—into a unified whole. Where previously Nick came dangerously close to losing himself entirely to the abyss of 9/11, he now manages to find (locating Barney when his status was missing) and “rescue” his friend and comrade. Nick’s eulogizing of Barney structurally follows the previous eulogies, elevating Barney to heroic status. Nick discusses how Barney had an “unstoppable sense of humor” that “lifted your heart.” But beyond Barney’s ability to lift the soul, he was also a genius with metal, “He could weld it, bend it, bolt it, drill it—you name it. And then he brought in—creativity. He’d notice something around the firehouse that didn’t work very well, something we just took for granted. And he’d think up a solution” (57). So gifted was Barney that he had the ability to fix something “before [the other firefighters] even defined the problem” (58). As with Jimmy, the text positions the audience to meditate on the lost potential and all of the solutions he will never conceive, solving problems before they are fully recognized and resolving issues before the issues are even recognized, a position fortified as Nick relates that Barney’s workbench at the firehouse “isn’t going anywhere” (54, 59) as it becomes a monument to Barney. The bench where Barney performed his acts of genius and creativity will stand in for the lost body, itself serving as a palimpsest. Even though Barney is no longer able to work at his bench, to write his story, it maintains his trace as the audience contemplates that which will never be, writing narratives that will never be. Nick continues to rescue Barney through his re-memberings, allowing him to live in the now: “[Barney] made us smile—and he still does, just thinking of him” (59). Nick’s ability to rescue Barney’s memory resurrects Barney’s essence, regenerating his being in that it
defies his corporeality, a regeneration that is contingent on the violence that Barney suffered in death and the incomplete re-memberings of his life.

While Barney’s spectral regeneration is only cognitive in nature, Nick’s includes the corporeal. In his embodied uniform, Nick carries the authority to speak for and of his men, validating and valorizing their lives and deaths. But Nick’s regeneration as firefighter is not limited to rescuing his men’s memories, but to rescuing us, the audience, as well by reclaiming the conceptual space of the hero in the midst of death and destruction. Nick’s rescue performance is successful because it accomplishes the intended triad of efficacy, efficiency, and effectiveness. Nick’s rhetorical performance, his “controlled,” “confidant,” and “affectionate” reading of Barney’s eulogy marks a distinct shift from his earlier inability to speak. The efficacy of Nick’s speech, not only in the words but also in its aural qualities such as tone, inflection, and resonance, along with his embodiment—stance and costuming—situates the audience in recognizing Barney’s efficiency as a visionary craftsman whose contributions continue even though Barney is no longer alive. Barney’s efficiency coupled with the efficacy of Nick’s speech combine to reassert and reclaim the heroic and effective identity, as embodied by Nick. Nick re-asserts his identity as fire captain even as it situates the audience into accepting Nick’s reclaimed identity, particularly when juxtaposed with someone needing to be rescued. As noted above, Nick carries himself formally, simply, unpretentiously, and in a dignified way as he gives Barney’s eulogy, while Joan “wilts” on stage, unable to cope. This dialectical relationship is highlighted by the final passage and stage direction of the text:
Nick refers to the tools that Barney has left behind, tools—as mentioned above—that carry his essence, his trace. Barney’s tools carry the presence/essence of the firefighter, signifying strength, certitude, conviction, and stability, a presence/essence that emits “light.” While Nick is not Barney, he has reclaimed his identity as firefighter, sharing the same qualities as his comrades and satisfying the Imago to which he is beholden. His final gesture of redemption and regeneration is his consoling look to the distraught Joan, a promise to rescue her from her own abyss. And Joan fulfills her role in the rescue narrative, performing the victim needing to be saved.

Joan’s needing to be rescued reifies heteronormative gender power relations but is by no means an isolated incident within the play. While working on Patrick’s eulogy, Joan and Nick’s conversation moves away from the dead and onto the living. In the midst of the general state of uncertainty and disheartenment Joan discusses how she went to a tango wedding party and relates the fantastical quality of the experience:

Only in New York. He’s Japanese, she’s a blonde from California, and they met at their tango club in Central Park. The party was in this restaurant down on Thirty-eighth Street. The whole place was done up all white and silver, with candlelight. They had a little tango trio—real Argentines. And they played, and after the dinner people danced—ten couples, the bride and groom. They were really good! […]

And the women were all dressed up, with their hair up, wearing little high-heeled shoes with pointy toes. You don’t see that anymore.
When they got going on the dance floor, their feet just flashed. It was so beautiful. It was like a dream intermission in the middle of—all this. And there was drama, too. On the eleventh, the groom was flying in from the West Coast, and the bride was working downtown. And there were hours and hours when each one thought the other one was dead. But they weren’t. So they had this incredible evening. It was beautiful. They were beautiful. They were beautiful. They made us all beautiful. For a few hours. (35–6)

Beyond the privileging of New York as the bastion of possibilities and multiculturalism, Joan’s story resembles a familiar romance tale where two lovers are unaware of the fate of the other. We can imagine their reunion as they rush into each other’s arms, in the cliché and banal trope of their two bodies becoming one. Their physical union becomes a spiritual one as they join together in matrimony, celebrating both love and life itself as the partygoers come together in a festival of bodies in movement (as opposed to the stillness of the dead). The event becomes a “dream intermezzo” in the middle of the 9/11 trauma, a break from what Barthes calls the “dead theater of Death.” A joyously small but significant narrative emerges from the greater narrative that immersed the city. The intermezzo, if only momentarily, overwhelms the dead theatre of Death, infecting with its beauty all who attended. But the infectious beauty was not in spite of 9/11 but because of it: the event’s beauty stood as a stark contrast to the otherness and ugliness of the twisted metal, the vaporized bodies, and the acrid smoke that lingered both physically and psychically. The beauty of liberal multiculturalism and conservative hetero-normative matrimony formulates the small community, offering a respite from the surrounding horror.

A stronger indicator of Joan’s position as the perpetual victim in need of saving comes at the end of this scene. After Joan’s story, Nick relates to her that he is a dancer
himself, proficient in swing, ballroom, and tango, considered “the top dance” (36). Nick continues to discuss the intricacies of the tango:

[...] if you push your partner’s hand—here, give me your hand—(She remains seated. He takes her right hand with this left, in ballroom posture) If you push your partner’s hand... (He pushes her hand, palm to palm, and it gives way easily) ... and it’s like cooked spaghetti, that’s no good. Here, put up your hand again. (She does, and he takes it. This time it’s firm but pliant) You gotta have some resistance. You got to feel the whole body move in the same direction. Cha, like this. (Now when he pushes, her torso turns a bit to the side) Otherwise it’s no good. (They drop hands, smiling self-consciously). (37)

Joan does not rise when Nick demonstrates the moves, but remains seated, maintaining a very passive posture. But even in the seated pose, Nick illustrates, through the use of his body, the necessity of resistance in the dance—too placid and the body becomes “cooked spaghetti” and ineffective. Strength and resistance is needed in order for the two bodies to synchronize their movements, as the bodies move in rhythm with one another, coming together in abrupt and amorous freezes. Nick physically leads the demonstration, taking an active role to Joan’s passive one.

There should be little doubt regarding the sexual tension that arises in the moment. The tango’s choreography hinges upon sexual chemistry, and Nelson highlights this tension through her stage directions, “They drop hands, smiling self-consciously.” Their self-conscious smiles indicate their awareness that the two have crossed, if only a moment, the threshold of intimacy. But rather than re-establishing their former social positions, the lesson continues:

NICK: And if you’re lucky, it all comes together. When people move in synch. Sometimes it’s real heard for these modern women, you know. They’re professionals, they’re educated, they’re used to being in charge. But when you’re dancing, you got to be able to follow. You’ve got to be able to feel the lead.
JOAN: You’ve got to let go.
NICK: Yeah. It’s not so hard. You just follow. Here, like this.
(He gently takes her hand. The lights slowly dim, except for a spot on them. Soft music rises—a few strings playing “Hiro’s Tango”) (37–8)

Nick discusses the difficulty of dancing with the “modern” woman since she has the problem of “being in charge.” The problem’s resolution lies in the “modern” woman forgoing her agency and allowing herself to be led. She simply has to, as Joan phrases it, “let go,” a simple problem that is “not so hard” to rectify. This performative utterance is followed by a physical performance. Joan—acting as surrogate for the “modern” woman—does what she is told, allowing Nick to lead her in the dance. In doing so, Joan surrenders her power to Nick and is led to the beauty of the tango:

NICK: You know, there are only eight steps to the basic tango. Just lean into me, feel where I’m going. Yeah—step step cross step, step step step foot up. There you go, you’re getting it.
(They go through the steps several times. They do not hold each other close. Their posture is slightly formal but friendly. At first he is encouraging and she is tentative and awkward in the steps.)
NICK: Don’t look down.
(After a few tries, it becomes smoother, more fluid—but never melodramatic. The dance becomes more confident. Their movements synchronize. Then the music begins to fade. NICK retreats into the darkness to his chair. JOAN turns to the audience, still in the light) (38)

Nick quickly teaches Joan the fundamentals of the dance, something that would have proven difficult had Joan maintained her modernity. This is especially true when dictating the most basic rule of dancing, “Don’t look down,” a command that is also uttered to victims being rescued from tall buildings by firefighters to prevent panic. The phrase’s dual usage conflates the two notions. The rescue from modernity also seems implicit in the lesson.
The stage directions of the dance move to reaffirm the social formality the two had previously violated, as they “do not hold each other close.” Such punctilious decorum de-sexualizes both the already sexually charged tango in general and this specific moment in particular. The de-sexualization is reiterated when it is followed by their formal but friendly interaction as they dance. Indeed the stage directions go so far as to indicate that their dancing becomes smoother and more fluid but never “melodramatic.” By melodramatic, the text refers to the passion of the tango, where the bodies forcefully come together as the male-designated dancer abruptly pulls the female-designated dancer close, their bodies making full contact, freezing in sexually codified poses. Since Nick is leading, he dictates the passion, or its absence, in the dance. Nick chooses to de-sexualize the dance as he pushes and pulls Joan in the space. And in order to ensure the play has positioned the audience correctly, Joan informs us directly:

JOAN: (Addressing the audience quietly) Of course, that never happened. We didn’t dance. He just gave my hand that little push, like the demonstration of a cantilever. It was all—proper. We never even got up from our chairs. But after that touch—whenever I watched him after that, I noticed how light he was on his feet. I could imagine him moving quickly and usefully across a landscape of flame and broken glass. (37–9)

What is most revealing about the entire exchange is that it never happened, which begs the question: why is it included? The whole dance is desire given form. However, it is not sexual desire, a familiar tactic in numerous Hollywood musicals of the 1950s and 60s when censors strictly prohibited explicit sexuality, thereby transforming the dance into sex’s surrogate (Prince 267). In opposition to the citational cultural readings of the implicit sexual exchange derived from the musical genre, the text explicitly de-sexualizes the fantastical exchange. The desire manifested is the desire to shed modernity in this
time of insecurity, re-establishing the feminine-masculine dichotomy of the past. Susan Faludi’s book *The Terror Dream* investigates the resurgence of the traditional dichotomy in the media, revolving around the rescue narratives that celebrate the firefighters of 9/11 as the “cowboys of yesterday” and “medieval warriors” who rescue the damsels in distress (4–7, 68). As the nation reels from the attack, left in a traumatic state and existential crisis, the exchange in *The Guys* reveals the desire to be rescued, a scenario that requires both a rescuer and a victim in need of rescue. The imagined dance manifests the nostalgia for the return to the masculine hero coming to the rescue of the feminine (and feminized) victim.

Had the dance happened, one could argue that this slippage into hetero-normative power dynamics was in and of the moment and not a longing to “return” to former demarcated roles, roles that carry power and signification and whose boundaries have been eroded by modernity. But the dance did not happen beyond Joan’s imagination. Joan discusses the properness of the tango demonstration, equivalent to an exhibition of a cantilever. A cantilever is a long projecting beam or girder that is fixed at one end of a structure and is used in the construction of buildings and bridges. Drawing attention to the phallic imagery of the cantilever is to draw attention to the obvious and while the phallus here is seemingly void of erotic energy, it is filled with masculine potency.

That masculine potency is brought to the forefront as it determines Joan’s reception of Nick, “after that touch—whenever I watched him after that, I noticed how light he was on his feet.” While it was Nick’s touch that initiated the dream-dance, it is Nick’s lightness on his feet that transports Joan into a imagined narrative that calls for Nick to move “quickly and usefully across a landscape of flame and broken glass.” Joan
inverts the culturally loaded term of lightness, resignifying its feminized reading into a masculine attribute as it runs through fire and shards of glass. Nick’s movements dictate his usefulness, in contrast to Joan’s crisis of marginality and her uselessness. In Joan’s imagined narrative, Nick crosses a seemingly endless vista of danger and destruction as he is running to someone’s rescue but never finishing the act. Nick is always running to his intended victim, caught in an eternal process of rescuing, rescuing without resolution. While the finality of success is absent, so is the finality of failure as we are ensnared in the everlasting moment, trapped by the emotional torrent that oscillates between Nick’s nick-of-time arrival and his being-too-late. While Joan has never physically seen Nick traverse such terrain, she locates him on an imagined disaster area, possibly Ground Zero. Littered with fire and glass, Nick could brave the dangers and conceivably rescue everyone prior to the towers’ collapse, instead of the reality of the day. The desire to locate Nick on an imagined Ground Zero reveals a desire to rewrite history. The fantasy relocates not only Nick into the space-time of 9/11, but Joan as well to witness his heroism. But we are left to wonder whether Joan takes an outsider role in the fantasy, as an audience member would, watching him move through glass and fire, or a character-role in the fantasy, watching Nick run towards her as she plays the victim in need of saving.

The fantasy-dance and its consequent fantasy-rescue articulate Joan’s restorative nostalgia, a longing for the “past” by elevating the singular, monolithic narrative of hetero-normative ideologies. As Svetlana Boym argues, restorative nostalgia calls for a “return to national symbols and myths” in its longing for an imagined community and home (41). This past need not be an actual past, but rather can be a desired history, one
free from guilt (Boym xiv). The desire to “return” to the past means not necessarily a return to a physical location designated “home,” but an ontological return to an imagined identity. The return in this case is a return to the hetero-normative ideology of the American identity, where the masculine and feminine are identifiable and secure in their positions. Following Faludi’s argument of the media’s participation in the resurgence of conservative, hetero-normative narratives that 9/11 offered, *The Guys*, through Nick and Joan, embodies and fortifies patriarchal gender roles and subject positions through the rescue narrative. For the masculine, the role is that of the strong and heroic type who succeeds in saving lives and protects those who need protecting. For the feminine, it is the role of the victim, the one who needs to be protected, needs to be led, and needs to be rescued. This narrative is yet another reiteration of the American rescue narrative, which emerged during the early Puritan period and was then re-imagined by novelists, playwrights, and newspaper writers as the nation expanded, overtaking the frontier. In the earlier iterations it was the white man saving the white woman from the non-white savage, usually the Native American. In this re-tooled post-9/11 version, the victim must be saved from the terrorist.

The attacks on 9/11 destabilized these roles, particularly for the masculine. As cameras converged on lower Manhattan on that Tuesday morning, the images that filled the nation’s television screens consisted of planes flying into the symbols of American power and potency. This singular event repeated time and again, from multiple angles and at different speeds, elongated the subject’s experience of the violence from seconds to minutes, then hours and days. As the Towers burned, the cameras watched as people, trapped in the upper floors and cut off from the lower floors because of the fire, jumped
to their deaths rather than be consumed by fire. Rescues for these people were no longer options as they decided to save themselves from the fires, even if the only safety was in fatal flight. The resulting collapse of the Twin Towers, again played over and over, reiterated the inability to save the lives of those who were trapped—both civilians and first responders—as the binary relationship between rescuer and those needing rescue collapsed into the latter. As the towers were imploding, the cameras focused on people running away from the ash and smoke. The cameras themselves thrust the televisual audience into the moment as the camera operators ran from the onslaught, giving the audience a first-person perspective on the frenzy of the moment, as if the audience members too were running away from the death that threatened to overwhelm them. As the dust began to settle in the immediate aftermath of the imploding towers, the cameras began to focus on the living dead: those people covered in ash in a state of shock as they slowly moved zombie-like through the streets, ash comprised of the towers and the victims as they were reduced to dust in the implosion—the living covered with the dead.

But monumentalizing the firefighter into heroic iconography based on their dying and not their rescuing fails to conform to the American heroic identity, an identity whose value is based on its ability to succeed. *The Guys*, in becoming a redemption narrative, becomes the suture that stitches the wound closed, what Zizek refers to as the “ideological anamorphosis,” which attempts to reconcile the Real and the incompleteness of ideology (*The Sublime Object* 99–100). Nick rescues the “memories” of his men, transforming them into monuments of quotidian exceptionalism. Nick’s ability to rescue his men allows him to rescue himself, to reclaim his firefighter identity at the end of the play, signified by donning his uniform as he eulogizes his men. But Nick’s rescuing
efforts extend to Joan, who emerges from her crisis of marginality to relocate herself within the redemption/rescue narrative as a victim-needing-rescue. Thus *The Guys* rescues the rescue narrative itself—a narrative whose *puissance* collapsed and re-emerged on a Tuesday morning in September.
Chapter 2

*Terror Vérité*

One of the obstacles, and it was an obstacle, is to take a series of real events and make them dramatic.

To actually spend two hours in a hole is not going to make a movie.


In September 2001, I worked for San Diego’s Public Broadcasting Station affiliate KPBS as the Assistant Traffic Manager. Despite the title, my duties had nothing to do with freeway conditions or helicopters. I was responsible for maintaining the daily Federal Communications Commissions (FCC) logs that account for every second of airtime. From programs to interstitial material, I was responsible for programming and tracking all the content. Normally my job was quite mundane and repetitive, but in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 it was anything but. For several days our regularly scheduled programming was interrupted by news reports concerning the attacks on New York and Washington. And since I worked in a television station, many of the offices, including my own, were equipped with televisions. We were glued not only to our own channel, which broadcasted continuous feeds of British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and *The Newshour*, but to other channels, including the cable news networks.

In the twenty-four hours following the terrorist attacks, the focus of the news was dedicated to the death and destruction at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, with a constant video loop of the planes crashing into the Twin Towers and their inevitable fall.
But several days after the attack, a new story began to break through concerning the plane that crashed in a field outside of Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Originating out of Newark International Airport (renamed Newark Liberty International Airport in 2002 to honor those who died on 9/11) and bound for San Francisco, United Airlines Flight 93 was hijacked by four of the nineteen terrorists some forty minutes into its flight. The terrorists overtook the cabin and changed course, flying towards Washington, D.C., possibly targeting either the White House or the Capitol Building. In the immediate flurry of reports that dominated the airwaves, United 93 received relatively little attention, as it lacked any compelling imagery and circumstances were unclear. However, as recordings of telephone conversations from United 93 to loved ones, General Telephone and Electronics (GTE) phone operators, and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) agents were pieced together and began to garner airtime, a new narrative of defiance and sacrifice emerged. News reports aired describing how the passengers on United 93, after hearing about the attacks on the World Trade Center from friends and family via cell and GTE airplane phones, decided to storm the cabin and overpower the hijackers in an attempt to gain control of the aircraft. It was through these telephone calls that the media and U.S. officials were able to piece together the events that took place on the airplane. According to the news reports, the passengers were unsuccessful in taking control of the plane, but were successful in preventing the hijackers from flying the plane into their Washington DC target.

I was in the office of the Programming Director at KPBS, Keith York, during a particular broadcast on MSNBC concerning United 93. We watched as the various recordings from the passengers were played and the newscaster repeated the now famous
phrase that would be transformed into the battle cry, reiterated again and again in the weeks and months that followed, from the President of the United States to soldiers in both Afghanistan and Iraq: “Let’s roll.” Once the report ended, Keith stated that if a movie were to be made about 9/11 it would be about United 93. Still overwhelmed by recent events, I could not imagine any film being made about that day—how could any film capture the horror? Why would one even try? I asked Keith why he thought a film would be made of that particular incident and he said, without missing a beat, “because we won that one.”

While it was hard for me to comprehend a “win” regarding 9/11, Keith’s adumbration proved correct. Though it took several years, in April 2006 Paul Greengrass’s United 93 premiered in movie houses across the country, telling the story of the flight’s highjacking and passenger revolt. But that was not the only film to premier in 2006 depicting the events of 9/11. Oliver Stone’s World Trade Center premiered in August of that year, centering on the true story of two Port Authority officers, John McLoughlin and William J. Jimeno, who were trapped in the South Towers for several hours after its collapse.

In order not to appear exploitive of the national tragedy, both Greengrass and Stone emphasized their respective films’ fidelity to what happened that day, stressing

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Although more famous, Greengrass’s United 93 was not the first film to depict the highjacking and revolt. The cable channel A&E aired the made-for-television movie, Flight 93 in January of 2006. While Flight 93 and United 93 essentially tell the same story, there are some notable differences between the two films in what each chooses to emphasize, such as the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer in A&E version, which invokes a higher level of religiosity that frames 9/11 as a battle between Christianity and Islam. Due to space limitations, I will not investigate the A&E film at this time, but an exploration between the two films bears further attention.
their adherence to the facts and meticulous research, which included interviews with FAA and military officials and victims’ family members, drawing from the U.S. Government’s 9/11 Commission Report, and casting FAA officials, police, firefighters, and rescue workers as themselves. Both directors frame their films as truthful representations of the events depicted, free of unnecessary embellishment, alterations, and sentimental or melodramatic aesthetics that are common in many Hollywood non-fiction films or “biopics.” In their adherence to the truth, the films endeavor to be apolitical representations of the horrific events. Both films explore positivistic stories regarding 9/11, the “wins” that came out of the horrific events. Given how highly mediated the event was, not only for me as someone who worked in a television station during the attack but for most of the nation that watched it unfold on TV, it should come as no surprise that part of our cultural negotiation of the 9/11 would take the form of mediatized productions. For an event that “look[ed] like a movie” to those who witnessed it live, it seems to follow that movies would participate in the ongoing sense-making of 9/11. However, as this chapter will explore, both films are far from apolitical descriptions of the events but are rather ideological prescriptions for how to view the events, transforming a day of violence and trauma into a day of rebirth and triumph.

**Plausible Truths**

Newscasters, pundits, and politicians re-articulated 9/11 into a narrative of horror, sacrifice, and heroism that represented the American character embodied by the first responders who charged the Trade Center and whose bodies disappeared in the Towers’ collapse. These erased bodies, as already discussed in chapter 2 on Anne Nelson’s *The
Guys, became spectral palimpsests whose absolutely eradicated physical bodies were re-membered as mythologized eidolons. This practice of reinscribing narratives on the erased was also extended to the passengers of Untied 93, particularly Todd Beamer who had uttered, “Let’s roll.” In his address to the joint houses of congress on 20 January 2001, President Bush discussed en masse the passengers on United 93, but singled out Todd Beamer by name, saying, “We have seen [the state of the union] in the courage of passengers who rushed terrorists to save others on the ground. Passengers like an exceptional man named Todd Beamer” (http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/gen.bush.transcript/). President Bush does not construct Todd Beamer as a person who, along with the other members of United 93, stormed the aircraft cockpit trying to save himself from the terrorists and died that Tuesday morning, but rather inscribes Todd Beamer as a character who saved the potential victims in Washington, D.C. through his sacrifice.

Bush’s scenario that inscribes the intention of saving stranger’s lives behind Beamer’s and the rest of the passengers’ actions is a more desirable construction since it transforms the passengers and crew members of United 93 from victims into heroes, even though such an intentions are ultimately unknowable as there were no survivors. President Bush’s performative speech act re-frames the terrorist hijacking and passenger response as an act of regenerative violence where the lives of the few were freely given for the many on the ground in Washington, D.C., rearticulating Todd Beamer to fit the Imago of the American hero. As international studies scholar Cynthia Weber notes of this speech:

Todd Beamer becomes a mediator through whom a shaken American
public can find their collective purpose. That Todd Beamer is a fallen hero is particularly convenient for the President. For as a dead hero, Todd Beamer cannot speak for himself. He cannot confirm or deny what he said or did. Nor could he confirm or deny the motivation the President attributed to his and his fellow passenger’s and crew’s actions—‘to save lives on the ground’. This means that others—the President and the Beamer family—are at liberty to provide supplementary information about what Todd Beamer said and did without fear of contradiction by Beamer himself. (142)

The Todd-Beamer-as-male-hero image is complemented when President Bush acknowledges Todd Beamer’s wife by asking his audience, “And would you please help me welcome his wife Lisa Beamer here tonight?” Seated next to the First Lady in the viewing gallery, a seat normally reserved for foreign dignitaries or VIP, Lisa Beamer received a standing ovation by the members of congress. Her transformation into a symbolic icon participates in the re-membering of Todd Beamer as a symbolic icon himself. Through Lisa Beamer’s presence before the President, First Lady, Congress, and a mourning public, Todd Beamer’s physical absence is transformed into an imagined presence as the fallen hero. And her own transformation into the grieving widow prescribes the gendered construction of United 93. Whereas Todd Beamer is cast as the man of action who selflessly sacrifices himself for the greater good, leading his compatriots with his command “Let’s roll,” Lisa Beamer is relegated to the role of the submissive, non-speaking wife, who lacks agency and whose recognition and value is contingent on her dead husband’s actions and voice.¹⁰

¹⁰ On 26 September 2001, Lisa Beamer became the subject of controversy when she “usurped” her husband’s voice as the foundation she created to honor her fallen husband, the Todd M. Foundation, sought trademark protection for the phrase, “Let’s roll.” The foundation’s executive director Doug MacMillan told the Associated Press that any money raised from the commercial use of the phrase would go the families of those killed in the 9/11 attacks. Lisa Beamer and co-writer Ken Abraham used the phrase for a
The President, pundits, news reporters, and politicians participated in remembering Todd Beamer and the rest of the crew and passengers of United 93 within a scenario of self-sacrifice and heroism as the events of 9/11 were re-imagined through the tropic regeneration through violence. But whereas the politicians and pundits were verbally scribing what was erased on that Tuesday morning, Greengrass sets out to embody the dead cinematically through his film *United 93*. And in doing so Greengrass reiterates the construction and performance of the spectral palimpsest. Like the firefighters eulogized by their captain, the passengers and flight crew of United Airlines Flight 93 have been materially erased from existence leaving behind an absence—a visible, empty space—that can be re-imagined and re-written. Yet there is a marked difference between Nelson’s play and Greengrass’s film: in *The Guys*, the eulogized firefighters are re-membered in the captain’s sometimes shaky recollection of his fallen comrades through language; in *United 93*, the re-membered become embodied, performed palimpsests constructed out of the fragmented recordings made while the plane was in flight, the material evidence recovered from the crash site, as well from their surviving loved ones’ memories. Where *The Guys* delves into the problematics of commemorative book concerning United 93 entitled *Let’s Roll!: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Courage*. By putting an exclamation mark at the end of the phrase, Beamer and Abraham tap into the national ontology of the statement, determining that the phrase is a passionate and performative command. However, after Wal-Mart used the phrase as part of its employee motivation slogan and as a theme for its annual shareholders meeting, the foundation and Lisa Beamer herself were accused of profiteering from the 9/11 attacks and sullying the purity of the performative command and its ideological currency and transforming it to a commercial slogan equivalent to “Where’s the beef?” For more on this controversy, see Nick Gillespie’s “Logocentrism” (http://reason.com/archives/2002/11/01/logocentrism) and Charles Paul Freund’s “Valuable Heroism: Trademark ad absurdum” (http://reason.com/archives/2002/05/01/valuable-heroism).
memory and trauma, *United 93* situates itself as plausible truth based on material findings. Although how the palimpsests are realized in *The Guys* and *United 93* differ, in both the erased are re-written with the desired character traits that satisfy the narrative of terror and sacrifice while promoting mythologized gender and nationalistic identities.

Greengrass endeavored to construct a truthful representation of what happened on 9/11, both on the ground and in the air. In the DVD commentary, Greengrass discusses his adherence to the *9/11 Commission Report*, what he calls his “bible,” regarding how the events unfolded. But the *Report* could not address those elements outside of its purview, the characteristics of the passengers and crew and what might have been said and done beyond what was recorded and recovered in the ensuing investigation. These lacunae of *United 93* would be filled through improvisation, based on the over 100 interviews Greengrass conducted with the victims’ families and the compiled dossiers on each passenger that were given to the actors. The actors themselves also interviewed the families of *United 93* passengers and crew to get a firsthand sense of whom they were portraying in the film. After two weeks of workshopping and rehearsals with the actors, a scenario was written with minimal dialogue, most of which was taken from transcripts from the recorded phone calls and flight data boxes. During the film’s shooting, dialogue was improvised creating what Greengrass calls a “plausible truth” (Marcks 3). The dialogue improvised by the actors provides a layer of authenticity since the words and utterances organically come directly from the actors reacting to various inter- and intrapersonal stimuli. The fragmented, sometimes incoherent phrases and mumbled delivery provide genuine voices opposed to learned lines conveyed with the illusion of invention. In the improvisation, the audience bears witness to the actors/characters
discovering not only what they need to say but also how they are going to articulate it, reproducing and recreating the moment even if—and especially since—the moment is unknowable.

Even though Greengrass relied on the actors’ abilities to draw from their psychological and emotional wells in order to create authentic performances through improvisations, their executions would still conform to traditional performance modalities derived from the actors’ imagination. Therefore to add an additional layer of authenticity to *United 93*, Greengrass deployed the use of technology and stagecraft to somatically inform the actors’ performances. As he discusses in the film’s DVD commentary, Greengrass used the reclaimed fuselage of a Boeing 757, the aircraft model of *United 93*, and mounted it on gimbals. By placing the reclaimed aircraft on an apparatus consisting of rings pivoted at right angles, Greengrass and his special effects crew could re-create the plane’s violent movements along its x, y, and z axes points, otherwise known as yaw, pitch, and roll. Instead of shaking and moving the camera, along with the actors mimicking the physical effects of yaw, pitch, and roll, to indicate the sudden turns and falls of the aircraft, Greengrass used the gimbals to replicate the actual flight’s turbulent movements, minus the g-force created due to rapid shifts in acceleration. The actors no longer had to rely on their imaginations to envision their environment as it was replicated in nearly every detail. The director and his special effect team were so effective in their endeavors that, according to Greengrass, many of the actors became nauseated during the filming, and several became physically sick (DVD).

The actors’ physical reactions and discomforts from the violent movements of the gimbaled fuselage provided a layer of authenticity to the film’s re-creation by creating
what Greengrass considered honest reactions to the stimuli of the environment, similar to the physical reactions the passengers and crewmembers of United 93 felt, if not necessarily the situation (while the actors may have become sick during the filming, the land-locked set within the London studio was never in any real danger of crashing). Greengrass’s emphasizing genuine reactions from the actors instead of pre-planned simulations gestures towards a desire to recreate the Real of United 93 in order to create an authentic, “plausible truth.” To act out, in the traditional sense of theatrical performance, the events of United Airlines Flight 93 is somehow to cheapen and diminish the horror—physically, psychologically, and emotionally—that the passengers and crew of the doomed flight faced. To function simply as surrogates, without experiencing at least some of the trauma and violence, the actors would offer only facsimiles of the terror and courage of United 93, not an authentic and plausible truth of the moment. By subjugating the actors to physical discomfort and violence, Greengrass purportedly resurrects the lives of those who died on United 93.

Greengrass extends the film’s plausible truth by casting unknown actors in the film as the passengers and crewmembers on United 93. By casting unknowns, Greengrass essentially tries to avoid what Marvin Carlson calls “ghosting,” where a known actor’s body is inscribed and “haunted” with previous roles played, performances that make the actor recognizable. Along with the previous roles, known performers, particularly those acknowledged as celebrity, have the added “halo” effect, which overdetermines audiences’ expectations by bringing the actor’s perceived personality into the performance matrix (The Haunted Stage 58–59). I discuss Carlson’s “ghosting” in greater detail in the next chapter and how it is used as a political and performative tool to
shape public perception on the War on Terror and the ensuing war in Iraq. But for our purposes here, Greengrass’s pursuit of recreating the events of 9/11 relies on the actors’ unknown statuses to create the illusion of historical accuracy instead of an imagined cinematic construction, rather than drawing on their abilities to convey truth physically, emotionally, or psychologically. In short, the actors are spectre free. By using unfamiliar actors, audiences are positioned into not bringing their collective cinematic experiences and memories to the viewing, but solely maintaining their collective 9/11-as-traumatic-event experience. Greengrass continues the sense of historical accuracy, as well as the authoratative voice of authenticity, by casting several key people outside the plane to play themselves, such as FAA National Operations Manager Ben Sliney, “re-enacting his harrowing first day on the job” (Marcks 3). Greengrass notes in the DVD commentary that using the actual FAA employees, air-traffic controllers, and military personnel and having them “relive” the events of that day gives the film “veracity,” an accuracy that could not be accomplished by casting actors to portray the still-living. And in a manner similar to the actors’ physical discomforts in conveying authentic performances, but perhaps even more ethically problematic, the filmmaker calls on the people who navigated the horror of 9/11 in their professional lives to revisit their trauma in order to lend credence to its cinematic representation.

Greengrass strives to immerse the audience in the events of 9/11 by deploying the filmic techniques and aesthetics borrowed from cinema vérité or “cinema of truth,” a form of documentary or non-fiction film that lays claim to truth by seeking to avoid all artistic dissimulation (Gollin 205). Shaky camera movements, in-the-moment focusing and zooming in/out on the subject, asymmetrical framing, flat lighting, and lens flares
form the aesthetic vocabulary of *cinema vérité*, all of which testify to the actuality and authenticity of the event filmed. Coupled with quick, disjointed editing that creates chaotic, fragmented narrative structure, *cinema vérité* has been deployed in various fictional films, such as Steven Spielberg’s twenty-minute opening sequence of the D-Day invasion in his 1998 *Saving Private Ryan*. The technique of *vérité* in both fiction and non-fiction film has a double ontological position. The first conveys the sense of pure objectivity, as the camera is situated within the action and is positioned to watch the events unfold before its lens. The camera conveys the idea of empirical truth as it does not consciously frame the event before it in a manner to over-determine the audience’s reception but rather simply captures the action as it transpires. As the events happen in real time, the camera does not have the opportunity for dissimulation.

The second ontology of *vérité* is a pure subjectivity in polar opposition to its first. The camera’s jerky movement and inability to cleanly capture the moment promotes the sense of the camera’s human manipulation, of a cameraperson operating the device. The cameraperson’s immersion in the action blurs the line between the subject(s) being filmed and the filming subject. The cameraperson moves amid the action, sometimes rushing to capture the events as they unfold and nearly missing the moment, as indicated by catching the speaker in mid-sentence or the actor in mid-action. Other times, the cameraperson is caught up in the physicality of the action, being pushed and pulled by the action it is catching on film, such as is the case in *United 93*’s final moments, as the passengers rush the cabin and overpower the terrorists (which I will discuss in greater detail below). And as the camera serves as the audience’s mediated eye, the blurring between witness and actor (“actor” referring to both the historical subject and the
performer) shifts the audience position from the third person watching to the first person doing by proxy. The immersion creates an intersubjective state as we, the audience, seem to share the experience with those who lived the event. The camera’s shifting frame becomes our jarring eye as we lose ourselves in the emotional distress and achieve empathetic connectivity with the characters on the screen. It is the closest thing to being there without being there.

Of course the use of cinéma vérité is a conscious act of framing, or rather mis-framing (even missed framing) the action, but the style plays against traditional Hollywood cinematic techniques as a way of separating itself from artifice, as it gestures towards veraciousness. In many popular comedic films and television shows, such as the mockumentary This is Spinal Tap or the fake-reality situation comedy The Office (in all of its international manifestations), these vérité gestures are used ironically and are a substantial part of the humor. But in dramatic pieces, the director’s deployment of the vérité style positions the audience to view the piece as honest and unfiltered, particularly when the film is based on true events, as United 93 promotes itself to be. By using improvisation and cinéma vérité aesthetics, Greengrass not only attempts to recreate the events of 9/11 realistically but also attempts to do the impossible: represent the Real of 9/11.

In the DVD commentary Greengrass also uses the phrase “believable truth” as he maps out the film’s narrative based on the 9/11 Commission Report’s sequence of events as well as interviews with family members to inform character traits in order to construct the truth, a mixing of empirical evidence and subjective beliefs. But the construction of a plausible or believable truth does not simply rest on the film as a self-contained object.
Plausibility and believability are contingent on the object’s conforming to the viewing subject’s worldview—the object must in some manner affirm the subject’s epistemological and ontological being. The object does not claim plausibility or believability, but rather the viewing subject bestows those attributes onto the object.

United 93’s DVD release includes a behind-the-scenes documentary entitled United 93: The Families and the Film as part of the disc’s bonus material. The documentary includes interviews with several different family members, discussing their reflections on the making of the film as an attempt to create a cinematic representation of 9/11. Carole O’Hare, whose mother Hilda Marcin was a passenger on United 93, discussed her reason for participating in helping make the film:

I’m doing this in my mother’s name. You know, to save her memory. To, to make sure that these people are honored. I mean they sacrificed their lives to save many more people. […] And I think there are positive things that have happened. I mean, you know, the memorial process. Um, like I said, the, you know, the movie. I mean, those are positive things. They are trying to tell the story in the right way. (DVD)

O’Hare’s desire to create a memorial, or perhaps a celluloid monument would be a more fitting designation, to her mother and the other passengers and crew should come as no surprise to anyone. It should also come as no surprise that she wishes the story to be told in the right way. But she, like President Bush in his speech before congress and to the nation, projects a motivation and intention behind her mother’s actions and those of the other members of the flight. For O’Hare, the believable, plausible truth is one where her mother and the others were not fighting for their personal survival but sacrificing their lives “to save many more people.” The movie done “the right way” will not simply tell the story of what happened to the people aboard United 93, but “honor” them as well. In
several rather touching moments in the documentary, family members of different
passengers meet with the actors who portray their dead loved ones. The family members
relay their memories of their husbands, wives, sons, and daughters and in nearly every
exchange the family members paint their missing ones with understandably loving brush
strokes. Very reminiscent of Nick’s portrayal of his fallen comrades in Nelson’s *The
Guys*, the quotidian aspects of the passengers and crewmembers of United 93 become
their exceptional characteristics of strength, reliance, generosity, and willingness to
sacrifice for their loved ones. If the dead had any negative qualities, the still-grieving
living erase them as they expound on the positive qualities.

The families’ collective re-membering of their loved ones’ lives transforms the
dead into spectral palimpsests, as who they were no longer exist and they are transformed
into desired images, free of blemishes and faults. These are the biographies and character
breakdowns that inform Greengrass’s dossiers and which the actors embody in the film.
By transforming the dead into pure entities, the terrorist acts of 9/11 take on a
Manichaean quality of good and evil. The film positions the audience to recognize the
purity and innocence of the passengers and crewmembers and situates the perpetrators in
diametrical opposition, melodramatically framing the event. This is not to say that the
victims did not suffer a great evil in acts perpetrated by the terrorists, nor does it diminish
the courageous acts the passengers and crewmembers performed in trying to take control
of the airplane. But the character constructions erase the materiality of the people who
died aboard the flight so as to conform to the “memorial” process O’Hare and other
family members desire. The characters’ complex and complicated material erasures
mirror a second erasure Greengrass performs in the film, eliminating the knotty geo-
political tensions in favor of simplified parabolic conflicts.

In the DVD commentary Greegrass states that the beginning of the film was
originally set in Afghanistan. The film’s opening scene initially involved a meeting
between Osama Bin Laden and Khalid Sheik Mohammed, the architect of the 9/11
attacks, in an al Qaeda training camp. Greengrass was interested in starting the story
amidst the poverty of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, but decided to cut that opening
sequence seeing it as redundant to the scene of the four highjackers praying in their
American hotel room at dawn, which became the film’s opening instead. While
Greengrass’s original opening would have gestured toward the global tensions, though
not explicitly addressing those tensions, the finalized opening of the film diminishes, if
not outright eliminates, the geo-political in favor of the cinematically recognizable
scenario of the foreign Other terrorist within our midst.

Greengrass appears to be aware of the dangers of collapsing the terrorist Other
with the Islamic worshippers, and in the DVD commentary goes out of his way to avoid
simplifying the Other as a total homogenous representation of Islam. As he notes in the
commentary:

It was something we discussed a lot, myself and the actors [who played
the terrorists and are themselves Muslim], the fact that there were two
hijacks that day, the first hijacked being the one we—we know and
understand, the hijacking of the four aeroplanes and the innocent people
who died and the buildings, the death and destruction, all of that, we
understand. But the other hijack is the hijacking of a religion. (DVD)

Greengrass goes on to discuss how the nineteen terrorists, along with the radical Islamic
forces that make up al Qaeda and the Taliban, very selectively cite passages of the Koran
as justification for their actions. These radical forces promote a closed system of belief that willfully ignores the Islamic traditions of learning and tolerance and celebrates a “medieval religious rapture.” But Greengrass is conscious of his own subject position as a British national and Christian and explicitly draws on the authenticity of the Muslim actors to legitimize his desired framing of 9/11:

What I wanted to convey, what we, and when I say we, I mean myself and the four actors, was the depths of the religious pieties of these young men, their certainties, uh, cut against the modernity of New York skyline. It seems to me that sets up the forces in play on that day: our conspicuous modernity, the symbols of our modernity, the New York skyline, and young men in medieval religious rapture. [...] It’s a closed creed and it goes to the heart I think of 9/11. (DVD)

Greengrass’s choice of words as tools of framing deserves some analysis. He describes the Islamic terrorists as “medieval” in their thought, as opposed to the “modernity” they seek to confront. Not only does he invoke the historical period of the Crusades, by describing the terrorists as medieval Greengrass relegates them into a primitive and backwards mindset, which is a reductive misunderstanding of the enemy. Greegrass implies that the terrorists reject modernity in their medieval, primitive mindset, when in fact the terrorists relied on modernity to carry out their acts of terror, in effect using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house.¹¹ The terrorists used airplanes—an engine of modern travel—to attack the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the unknown Washington, D.C. target, but they also timed the attacks to assure maximum exposure via the modern media. The ontology of terror does not simply rest with the dead bodies it creates through its acts of violence but also with the fear induced

in the living that bear witness to the violence. By coordinating their acts as they did, the terrorists maximized the terror induced by guaranteeing that news cameras would transmit the follow-up attacks while covering the carnage of the first, especially in New York City, the media capital of the world. Using the term medieval, Greengrass’s understanding of 9/11 conforms to the popular reading of the War on Terror as a cultural war between the West and Middle East, pitting the West in the present and in line with historical progress against the backwardness of the enemy. Greengrass acknowledges that when the United States entered into the War on Terror, we were fighting an enemy that we did not really know or understand. Part of Greengrass’s stated intention in making the film was to understand better the enemy we fight and recognize the complexity of the historical moment. By marking them as “medieval” and omitting the geopolitical-historical forces that informed the terrorists’ acts, Greengrass inadvertently transforms the enemy from a material reality into a symbolic Enemy that does not require or demand rigorous acts of understanding since they represent a time long dead.

By removing the opening Afghanistan scenes Greengrass’s film forecloses any intercultural reading of 9/11. On the contrary, the film’s opening scene indicates a unilateral move of the foreign Other against the United States, a contagion infecting the healthy social body, as opposed to more complex multilateral moves of global social, political, and economic exchanges. After the film’s opening moments where we see the four terrorists perform their morning prayers, they are seen exiting their rooms before the camera cuts to the skyline of New York City, with the Twin Towers visible. In the foreground we see rows of freight containers, which, along with the Towers, signify modernity via global capitalism. However, the “global” capital is relegated and limited
to the United States. As the scene shifts to the airport, the camera oscillates between the terrorists and the general public making their way through Newark Airport, some of whom we see on the ill-fated flight as passengers, flight attendants, and pilots. The camera reveals marked differences between the innocent bystanders making their way through the concourse and the terrorists. The various passengers and crewmembers, both those who will embark on United 93 and those who will not, have quotidian expressions of fatigue (as it is an early morning flight), boredom as they wait for their departures, and quite a bit of laughter as they discuss their loved ones (sons and daughters, mostly), while the terrorists not only have determined looks but also secretly exchange glances among themselves. These distinct and unmistakable embodied gestures convey not only a sense of horror, particularly against the smiles of the passengers and flight crew, as we already know the fates of those people who make their way on to United Airlines Flight 93, but they also punctuate the villainy of the terrorists. The villainous gestures the terrorists perform do not come from any material evidence found, such as physical actions that were captured by the electronic surveillance cameras that recorded the terrorists making their way through security or recalled by security personnel. These gestures instead are what Schechner termed as “restored behavior,” physical actions that can be separated from the actor and that are encoded with social significance. These gestures are standardized signifiers that convey conspiratorial intentions and actions, standardized and codified through the medium the audience is currently engaged in, film. Hollywood blockbusters such as *True Lies* (1994), *Executive Decision* (1996), and the earlier *Delta Force* (1986) are just some examples of film’s structuring and informing our ability to
read gestures and body language as code for terrorists, and Greengrass relies on those embodied signifiers to create his plausible truth.

The camera’s interplay between the actions of the terrorists and those of the passengers and crewmembers prior to getting on the plane and taking off signals an important difference between the director’s stated intention and the film’s performance. The film does not allow the audience to know the enemy better, allowing some insight to their thinking or reasoning in the attack, beyond their hatred of us. There is neither effort to understand the historical forces that motivated the attack nor any insight into the socio-political thinking of the terrorists that fueled their actions. The film presents, like so many other films before it, the terrorists as radical Others who are so rapt in their religious fervor that they are willing to murder not only everyone else on the plane but themselves. Obviously this is not to imply that the terrorists should be depicted in the same manner as the passengers and crewmembers on the flight as they clearly were performing acts of unqualified terrorism, with the intention of inflicting greater acts of violence on the people in Washington D.C., whether the target was the Capitol Building or The White House. And there are times when the terrorists are viewed in a humanistic light, showing their own fear and (perhaps) hesitancy to carry out their mission, but the

12 Some of the most notable negative criticism against Greengrass’s film in the United States was his sometimes-sympathetic portrayal of the terrorists, such as Mick LaSalle’s biting comment in his otherwise positive review of the film in the movie review section of The San Francisco Chronicle (28 April 2006). LaSalle condemns the film’s opening with the terrorist praying and questions whether Greengrass recognizes “the moral nature of the event he's depicting?” For LaSalle, United 93’s narrative does not, and should not, invite a question of moral relativism, “It was a good-versus-evil story of unarmed citizens, who, in a matter of minutes – facing the most terrifying situation imaginable – overcame their fear, got organized and fought for their one slim shot at survival. In the process, they spared their country a cataclysmic trauma (the destruction of either the
film does not offer any special insight that the U.S. general public had not already been told time and again by commentators, politicians, pundits, and Hollywood terror-thrillers.

Regardless of the semiotics that inform cinematic terrorists’ performances, Greengrass argues that his film is an authentic representation of what had happened on United 93 through his meticulous research. But there are several moments that can never be known, which make up the lacunae of United 93. Two such moments deserve special attention. The first moment of note comes in the scene prior to the passengers storming the cabin in their attempt to take control of the aircraft. After the terrorists have taken over the cabin by killing the pilots and threatened to blow up the plane with a fake bomb, the passengers and flight attendants make frantic phone calls. They learn of the attacks on the World Trade Center and realize that they will share a similar fate. The passengers decide to take action and try to wrest control away from the terrorists. Greengrass constructs a fictional exchange between several passengers and flight attendants in the seats and in the back galley section of the plane. In the scene, the female flight attendants are overwrought with terror and nearly immobilized and are directed by the male passengers in their upcoming roles in the attack. In one exchange, a middle-aged passenger, Thomas E. Burnett, Jr. (played by Christian Clemenson) quickly and calmly ascertains what is happening and takes the lead in formulating a plan of attack. Burnett tells flight attendant Sandra Bradshaw (played by Trish Gates) what needs to be done, but she is so emotionally distracted that it prompts Burnett to ask, “Are you listening?” to which she responds “Yes.” She then quickly follows up with her own question, “What

White House or the Capitol) and became heroes. Not fake heroes, not the creation of propaganda, but that rare, real thing.”
are we going to do?” with Burnett patiently re-explaining what needs to be done.

Burnett, along with Mark Bingham (Cheyenne Jackson) and Jeremy Glick (Peter Hermann) make their way to the back galley of the plane along with the female flight attendants to further map out their plan of attack, with the flight attendants passively taking in and learning their responsibilities.

There is no evidence that the scenes took place the way the film depicts them beyond Bradshaw’s phone call to her husband, where she states “the guys have come up with a plan.” Surely there was an exchange between and among the passengers and flight attendants to coordinate their attack on the terrorists; the phone calls made during the flight suggest as much. To rally the passengers and crewmembers to act and then properly execute their plan would take some direction, assigning roles, and creating a plan of attack. However, who is devising the plans and coordinating the efforts forever remains unknown and has become a site of contention regarding representation. In his 24 April 2006 *New York Times* article entitled “Paul Greengrass’s Filming of Flight 93’s Story, Trying to Define Heroics,” Jere Longman identifies the tensions surrounding embodied performances as the “politics of heroism,” as several families questioned the authenticity of the depiction of the pivotal moment in the back galley. Some family members were concerned that the depiction of a few men separating themselves from the rest of the passengers to make unilateral decisions about how to proceed seemed to contradict the popular narrative of the passengers collectively deciding on their course of action. Others were concerned with the privileging of certain passengers as being more heroic than others, as if heroism were like an Olympic sport and “some passengers received a gold medal for gallantry while others had to settle for silver or bronze”
Those families did not question the heroism of the four men but rather the film’s elevating their status while diminishing others.

Longman’s “politics of heroism” focuses on the tensions among the families regarding how their lost loved ones are depicted and their level of involvement in the planning and execution of resistance in United 93. But the questioning voices point towards a larger question regarding the “politics of heroism,” which is the general consensus of the events-as-performed as representative of a plausible or believable truth.

Greengrass’s depiction conforms to heteronormative power exchanges and performances. Having the three men, who are later joined by Todd Beamer, take charge and lead everyone into the battle plays out the familiar scenario of the hyper-masculine male(s) taking charge in contrast with the hysterical women who need an authoritative strong hand to calm them down. While some of the family members may have questioned the depiction (if not necessarily in these terms), the scenario perpetuates American heteronormative ideology and mythos.

In order to represent the missing parts of the narrative, the lacunae of United 93, the film constructs a series of events and performances that conform to the sense-making narratives that are already in circulation throughout the cultural matrix, while simultaneously reinforcing the gender roles. And by doing so, the film offers up a performative feedback loop, whereby it reifies the very truth claims it seeks to validate in its own actions and narratives. The film’s constructions of plausible and believable truths are derived from what is already ideologically familiar rather than what is considered evidence-derived fact, from who took charge in the revolt to how far the passengers got in their storming of the cabin (which I will address below). The mythopoetic, or myth-
making, framing of 9/11 through the regenerative violence trope, along with its narrative
structures and constructions of the gendered hero, overdetermines what is considered
believable and plausible. Bingham, Glick, Burnett, and Beamer were all former athletes
so it is “believable” given our cultural celebration of the hypermasculine that these men
take charge of the situation while the women and weaker men are initially immobilized
by fear. The plausibility of the moment comes from its conformance to American
gendered performatives.

While there may have been some tensions surrounding the levels and degrees of
heroism among the passengers and crewmembers as performed in United 93, the film is
universal in its ideological prescription: all of the American passengers were heroes.
This prescription is especially highlighted against the foreign Other onboard the airplane.
However, the foreign Other is not simply the Arabic terrorists but also the sole voice of
appeasement towards the hijackers and of dissent against the counter-attack, a voice with
a noticeable German accent. Dubbed the “surrender monkey” in the British press
(Harris) actor Eric Redman’s portrayal of German businessman Christian Adams is a
stark contrast to the American passengers, particularly Bingham, Glick, Burnett, and
Beamer. In the film Redman’s Adams quickly believes he understands the situation,
telling the other passengers how hijackings work, “This is like Mogadishu. They will
ask, you know, for money, they will ask for ransom, they will let us go” (DVD). Of
course from the audience’s (and history’s) perspective, this assessment of the situation
amounts to little more than naively wishful thinking. But even after the news of the
World Trade Center and the Pentagon attacks, Adams goes on, arguing for restraint and
telling the other passengers that they should not interfere. In the moment just prior to the
assault against the terrorists, the film depicts Adams as blocking the pathway and yelling a warning to the hijackers before violently being taken down and muzzled by several passengers.

Unlike the other United 93 passengers’ and crewmembers’ families, Adams’s wife, Silke, did not participate in the film’s making, saying that it was still too painful to discuss. Redman based his performance on an interview he read with a colleague of Adams who described him as someone who never made any rash decisions. Redman also believes that Adams would not have been like the “gung-ho Americans wanting to storm the cockpit and smash those people's skulls in” (Brooks, “United 93 ‘Surrender Monkey’ Defends Role in Film’). However, Redman’s portrayal of Adams was also influenced by Greengrass’s direction. During the rehearsal period Redman’s Adams participated in the storming of the cabin, but Greengrass had wanted to show how some of the passengers would have had reservations or would have been too frightened to participate in the attack, so Redman changed his character’s disposition, as well as Adams’s raison d’être in the film. While making a point to say that his portrayal of Adams is not a portrayal of cowardice, it is a marked difference against the mindsets of the Americans (Youngs).

As critic John Harris notes, Redman’s performance of Adams plays into the United States political and jingoistic rhetoric concerning old Europe’s lack of backbone and willingness to appease terrorists (Donald Rumsfeld’s famous distinction and dismissal of France and Germany as “old Europe” when they resisted going to war in Iraq in contrast to the “new Europe,” mostly eastern European nations that joined the Coalition of the Willing). There is no evidence of Adams (mis)assessing the situation and then trying to persuade his fellow passengers to doing nothing, let alone literally
standing in the way of the counter-attack and yelling warnings to the hijackers in an attempt to foil the insurgency out of fear of his personal safety onboard United 93. While it is believable that not everyone would have participated in the attack and may have indeed been against such a plan, Greengrass’s speculative embodiment plays out nationalistic idealisms of character and the “politics of heroism.”

Greengrass defends his inclusion of the appeasing Adams in an interview when asked how Adams’s family might resent such a representation and its factuality, saying “We don't know, no, but you have to set the parameters of the film as they actually are and explore it, and in the end, audiences have to make their own minds up about whether that's a credible, believable portrait” (Harris). During the entire process of the filming—as well as in pre- and postproduction—Greengrass has emphasized his fidelity to the truth and his meticulous research in order to strive towards an authentic representation of United 93. This adherence to the facts was a key selling point in the film’s marketing. Unlike other popular films, United 93 was not a Hollywood fabrication but positioned the audience to see it as a representation of reality-as-it-was. The film does not pose a question, asking the audience to evaluate critically the scenarios performed before them, but presents events in its vérité style as if the cameras were there and the footage somehow survived the crash. We are not asked if it is believable that there were some who resisted the idea of charging the cabin and trying to take control of the plane; we are asked to believe that the German national capitulated and appeased terrorism.

If there were other non-participating revolt-performances in the movie, the camera did not make them centerpieces of the film’s narrative. And there is a difference between passive non-participation and active attempts to hinder the counter-attack as
Redman’s Adams performs. How would U.S. audiences react if the film had used an American passenger to voice and embody what Redman’s Adams embodied? Given the re-inscription of the spectral palimpsests, transforming the dead into sainted martyrs, it is possible to believe that Greengrass’s film would never had been released in the United States if the voice of dissent had an American accent. What family would sacrifice the memory of their loved one in the eternalness of film? Nor would it have been seen as either a believable or plausible truth to American audiences who have culturally participated in metaphorically rendering 9/11 to conform to the regeneration-through-violence mythos. The ideological message of the moment seems clear: the true heroes of 9/11 were all-Americans in every way and if you were not with the Americans, you were actively against them.\footnote{There was a second foreign national aboard United 93, Toshiya Kuge of Osaka, Japan (played by Masato Kamo). Kuge does not factor in United 93’s narrative beyond being a terrified body among the others. There is no indication that Kuge was involved in the planning or physical attack against the terrorists onboard or any resistance against the attack so there really is no reason for any attention to be afforded him, but the same was true for Christian Adams. As Adams has come to represent the “surrender monkey” of old Europe, Kuge’s non-involvement in the film’s story marks a secondary erasure (the first being his actual death) as the film punctuates the American national heroic character.}

We have been looking at spectral palimpsests as the dead being re-inscribed as heroic ghosts. But in Adams’s case his re-inscription and celluloid representation as one of cowardice, passivity, and appeasement functions for the benefit of highlighting the American palimpsests.

A Civic Duty

As United 93 approached its April 2006 release date, criticism arose from audiences, advocate groups, and 9/11 victims’ families not connected to the film, such as
Paula Berry who had lost her husband in Twin Towers’ collapse. Berry’s criticism targeted not the making or distribution of the film but rather the film’s trailers that were shown prior to the screenings of other films, assaulting unsuspecting moviegoers. As Berry put it, “A trailer is, you're sitting there to see another film, and then you see something you’re unprepared for” (Waxman). The unexpected return of 9/11 in the form of a trailer threatened to thrust audience members out of their movie experience—for most of them, desired as an escapist getaway from the tribulations of life—and into the violence of memory. Despite the criticism Universal Studios, the film’s distributor, decided to air the trailers but they would only run them prior to R-rated and adult-targeted PG-13 films. In a climate still suffering from the trauma of 9/11, it was questionable whether or not the film would find an audience.

When Greengrass’s film did finally premiere, it proved to be both a commercial and critical success. It was ranked second in its opening weekend in box office sales and stayed in the top ten for over a month. *United 93*, which had a production budget of $15 million, grossed over $31 million in its two-month run domestically and earned an additional $44.8 million in foreign sales (boxofficemojo.com). Critically the film received a largely positive reception domestically, making its way to 214 critics’ best of 2006 lists and garnering 47 number one positions (criticstop10.com) and two Oscar nominations, for best editing and director. Moreover, *United 93*’s acclaim extended beyond its artistic qualities as it found praise in the political world as an honest historical representation of 9/11. As pundit George Will wrote in his 7 May 2006 op-ed piece for *The Washington Post* entitled “Civic Duty: Go See United 93,” Greengrass’s movie makes “minimal and minimally speculative departures from the facts about the flight
painstakingly assembled for the Sept. 11 commission report.” Will compares United 93 to Oliver Stone’s JFK, and uses the term “docudrama” as a pejorative term to describe the film on the Kennedy assassination. Will describes JFK as a film that “was ‘history’ as a form of literary looting in which the filmmaker used just enough facts to lend a patina of specious authenticity to tendentious political ax-grinding.” Will sees United 93, in comparison, as an accurate and apolitical piece of history that strives towards authenticity, noting the film’s usage of both unknown actors, some of whom have worked as flight attendants and pilots in their non-film lives, as well as members of the military and aviation agencies who were directly involved in the 9/11 events.

It is this belief of authenticity and historical accuracy in the film and its own placement in the post-9/11 historical moment of 2006 that leads Will to call on the American public to see the film as part of their “civic duty,” writing:

People more often need to be reminded than informed. After an astonishing 56 months without a second terrorist attack, this nation perhaps has become dangerously immune to astonishment. The movie may quicken our appreciation of the measures and successes—many of which must remain secret—that have kept would-be killers at bay.

Because so much time has passed since 9/11 without a second attack the American public has fallen into a state of complacency and have become “immune to astonishment.” The success of America’s security from terrorism is due to the government’s ongoing successes, many of which must “remain secret” and thereby impossible to qualify or quantify. The surest sign of complacency is demonstrated in 2006’s political climate in the United States and the popular and vocal dissatisfaction with the Iraqi War. The film acts as a reminder of the acts and actions needed to maintain the peaceful existence at home, but most importantly it reminds audiences of the importance of the heroes who
perform those acts. Quoting from Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.’s 1895 speech, Will writes:

“In this snug, over-safe corner of the world . . . we may realize that our comfortable routine is no eternal necessity of things, but merely a little space of calm in the midst of the tempestuous untamed streaming of the world, and in order that we may be ready for danger . . . Out of heroism grows faith in the worth of heroism.”

The message of the movie is: We are all potential soldiers. And we all may be, at any moment, at the war’s front, because in this war the front can be anywhere.

Will calls on the American public to perform different roles through his citation and rumination on United 93. We must first perform the role of soldier, or to be more accurate, we must perform the role of understudy to the soldier. Like the actor’s understudy, we must learn our role and always be prepared to walk on stage/battlefield and perform, seamlessly, and at a moment’s notice. The role of understudy calls for us to be ready for action but not necessarily act until called to do so. In other words we are asked to not-act, to perform inaction wrapped in the illusion of action, to perform without agency. But if we are ever asked to fulfill our performance as soldier—when we are finally called to act—it may not take place on a recognized stage dedicated to the theatre of war, but can take place anywhere, making any and all spaces the “front.” In its totality, Will’s reformulation is an interesting War on Terror modernization on Shakespeare’s “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women are merely players,” even if we are merely understudies to the players.

Another role that Will calls on us to perform is that of an audience member and, like the understudy role, it demands a level of inaction and patience. Will distinguishes between being reminded and being informed. To be informed implies a level of
intellectual agency concerning the content. However, being reminded does not ask for intellectual agency or the production of thought, but rather merely the consumption of content, propagating the performance of consumerism, vital to contemporary capitalistic practices. The title of Will’s op-ed piece commands us to perform our civic duty and see the film. When we discuss civic duty and our responsibilities as citizens in the United States, it usually involves our participating in jury duty, paying taxes, or voting, all of which are considered active and participatory acts for the betterment, cohesion, and stability of the national social body. But for Will, being a spectator to and consumer of acts of heroism are social responsibilities as well. Will makes it a point to include Holmes’s line, “Out of heroism grows faith in the worth of heroism,” in his editorial. Holmes was discussing the soldier’s immersion in war and his actions, and those of his comrades, on the battlefield, whereas Will shifts the experience of heroism from an act of doing to an act of watching. But Will does not command us to go to the movies in the same vein that President Bush urged the public to go shopping as an act of defiance and patriotism against the terrorists who hate our freedom. Will’s command to go to the movies is not simply to perpetuate capitalism but to perpetuate ideology (even though they are tied together in the act of going to the movies). Will’s civic-duty command requires the American public to be schooled in what constitutes the American character. For Will, the film becomes a prescription of American character and heroism rather than a description, especially because and not despite of its claims to authenticity.

In that same section from “A Soldier’s Faith,” and immediately preceding the section Will quotes, Holmes states, “War, when you are at it, is horrible and dull. It is only when time has passed that you see that its message was divine. I hope it may be long
before we are called again to sit at that master's feet. But some teacher of the kind we all need” (Holmes 91). Holmes’s phenomenological rendering of war as both the “master” “teacher” and “divine message” conforms to the regeneration-through-violence mythos that constitutes the structuring foundational metaphor of the American experience as the subject is elevated by the violence performed. And as a foundational metaphor, its reiteration in United 93 as a performative command to domestic audiences dictates how 9/11 is to be contextualized and understood. United 93 positions the audience to read properly the traumatic events of 9/11 not as acts of terrorism but rather as an act of war. In its original cut of the film, the logic of United 93 culminates in the final title card at the end, “America’s war on terror had begun” (Lim). While the original ending title card did not make the final theatrical cut, the logic leading up to the epitaph remained. The film’s contextualizing the terrorist acts of 9/11 as an act of war reformulates the encounter of the Real into the anthropomorphic mythic entity, War, at whose feet we can study.

This logic is embodied in the film’s Romantic ending. As already discussed, Greengrass emphasized his film’s adherence to the facts in order to create his believable and plausible truth. Although Greengrass used the official document of that dark Tuesday, The 9/11 Commission Report, as the basis to construct the scenarios depicted in the film, there is a pivotal difference between the Report and United 93 regarding the passenger revolt and the flight’s final moments. According to the Report:

The passengers continued their assault and at 10:02:23, a hijacker said, “Pull it down! Pull it down!” The hijackers remained at the controls but must have judged that the passengers were only seconds from overcoming them. The airplane headed down; the control wheel was turned hard to the right. The airplane rolled onto its back, and one of the hijackers began shouting “Allah is the greatest. Allah is the greatest.” With the sounds of the passenger counter-attack continuing, the aircraft plowed into an empty
field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, at 580 miles per hour, about 20 minutes’ flying time from Washington, D.C. (14)

The section entitled “The Battle for United 93” (in contrast to the other sections entitled “The Hijacking of American 11,” “The Hijacking of United 175,” and “The Hijacking of American 77”) unequivocally states that the hijackers remained in control of the aircraft, even if they felt that that control was in jeopardy by the attacking passengers. It is not clear that the passengers were able to penetrate the cabin door, but given the description of the plane rolling on its back in mid-air, it is unlikely that they were able to maintain their footing to achieve access. It was the hijackers alone who crashed the plane into the Shanksville field.

Greengrass’s depiction tells another story. In the film, two of the terrorists are in the cockpit (Zaid Jarrah played by Khalid Abdalla and Saeed Al Ghamdi played by Lewis Alsamari) and the other two (Ahmed Al Haznawi played by Omar Berdouni and Ahmed Al Nami played by Jamie Harding) are in the seating area watching over the passengers. Haznawi is strapped with what appears to be a bomb equipped with a detonation device in his hand. Although he is holding up the device in full view as a way of keeping the passengers at bay, the passengers spring into action and charge him. After tackling Haznawi and forcing him to the ground, Mark Bingham begins beating the terrorist over the head with a small fire extinguisher. The camera quickly flashes on the bloody and immobile terrorist (we are not sure if he is dead or alive) as another passenger rips the bomb from his body, revealing it to be a fake.

The passengers then move onto the Nami who has already alerted his comrades in the cockpit. Jarrah, who is flying the plane, jerks the aircraft to and fro in an attempt to
disorient the oncoming attack. In the film, Jarrah had taped a picture of what appears to be the U.S. Capitol Building to the steering wheel, apparently to remind him, and us the audience, what his Washington, D.C. target is (the camera never properly focuses on the picture but, even blurred, the domed roof is unmistakable). That picture remains in frame as the camera focuses on Jarrah’s hands as he violently steers the plane affecting its pitch, roll, and yaw. Nami resists the passengers, first by pushing a serving cart in front of the passengers and blocking their path to the cabin, and then by discharging his own fire extinguisher in an attempt to blind the onslaught. However, both tactics prove to be ineffectual and Nami is wrestled to the ground where passenger Jeremy Glick, a former Judo champion, grabs Nami’s head from behind in a chokehold and breaks his neck. The passengers manage to maintain their footing during Jarrah’s violent flying and ram the serving cart into the cabin doors. After several blows, the passengers manage to dislodge the cabin door enough to rip it off its hinges and storm the cabin. Ghamdi tries to protect Jarrah but the passengers overpower him. As the passengers storm the cabin, the camera tightens its shot making it hard to distinguish the various passengers trying for the airplane’s controls. The multiplicity of passengers is lost to the singularity of intention, as the many arms seem to come from one body. The only face that remains visible is Jarrah’s but his visage is soon lost in the sea of hands and arms that envelope him as they grasp at the steering wheel and the cabin is filled with English and Arabic screams. In the ferocious fight the plane begins to veer downward as the camera shifts its focus from the steering column and the multiple hands to looking outside the window. Even though the plane is plummeting to the ground, from the camera’s first-person perspective, the
Shanksville field appears swiftly to approach the window, the ground swirling as it gets closer and closer until everything goes black and ends in silence.

The film’s final moments are markedly different than the Commission Report’s descriptions of the same event. The Report does not mention what had happened to the terrorists who were in the passenger section of the aircraft. While it is safe to assume that they were at least overwhelmed, given the difference in numbers between the passengers and the terrorists and the sounds recorded from the cabin indicating that they were making their way through the door, what had actually happened to them prior to the plane crashing falls under the heading of artistic license. But the struggle in the cockpit is clearly different. In the DVD director’s commentary of the struggle, Greengrass states:

> We know this fight lasted some six or seven minutes. We’ll of course never know precisely what happened. But we know enough to know that it must have been something a bit like this. In a sense, that was what our job was, to create a believable truth of what happened on this aeroplane and what happened on 9/11. (DVD)

Greengrass is of course correct when he says that we will never know precisely what happened but he follows up uncertainty with a level of precision when he says, “it must have been something a bit like this.” His use of the modal phrase “must have” exercises a level of certainty in the torn and missing pages of history. And he extends this certainty even when it contradicts the foundational argument of his film’s authenticity: “We’ll never know precisely how far those passengers got. The 9/11 Commission Report said they were seconds away from overwhelming the hijackers. Were they through the door or were they not, they must have been very close” (DVD). Parsing the words, Greengrass is correct in stating that we will never know how far the passengers got, whether they made it through the door or not. But being very close is not the same as physically
clawing at the terrorists and having multiple hands on the steering wheel in an attempt to control the flight of the aircraft.

Greengrass willfully deviates from the official record in his reconstruction of the final moment. The Report is permeated with its own lacunae that it fills with subjective suppositions and elisions. But its description of the final moment is based on the material evidence recovered from the site, including the plane’s flight recorders. It is, however, Greengrass’s own speech acts and his claims of logocentrism and fidelity to the Report in constructing a believable and plausible truth that problematizes the moment. His claims of being faithful to the Report (calling it his “bible”) and his copious research imbues his film with authenticity as an honest representation of what happened aboard United 93, implying that it is devoid of ideologically informed subjectivity. However, the believable truth that Greengrass formulates in the final moment is one that is based on the erasure of the official record in favor of his own inscription. As he notes in the director’s commentary during the imagined struggle in the cockpit between the passengers and the terrorists, “to me these final images are, of course, images of that day, but they’re also images, I think, of our tomorrow. Of where we’re headed unless we find solutions. A fight for the controls of our world. We still have time to find another way” (DVD).

Greengrass collapses an imagined past with a metaphorical future with his visual and performative representation on the screen. The imagined past is rooted in a desire for the passengers to make their way through the cockpit door and physically challenge the terrorists, while the metaphorical future points towards an existential struggle that we are now and will continue to be in for the foreseeable future.

Greengrass’s re-imagined ending gives American audiences a sense of agency,
something that was lacking on 9/11. Instead of the terrorists flying planes into buildings that were also symbolic representations of American military and economic power, the film strips the terrorists of their agency (and their lives as the passengers kill two terrorists to get to the cabin) and places it in the many hands grabbing the wheel of the Boeing 757. The passengers and crewmembers become the first American combatants engaged in the War on Terror instead of victims of terrorists’ actions.

The film’s embodied characters and their imagined actions in the cabin filled the béance left behind by the Real of 9/11 in a manner that would have been less effective had the film followed the Report’s assessment of the situation, leaving the passengers at the cabin’s threshold, in the symbolic empty space of in-between-ness, or in the negative space of outside the cabin. In an interesting reworking of melodramatic finishes, the film’s imagined ending plays out the hero’s success via the “nick-of-time” trope. The passengers breaking through the door, wresting control from the terrorists, and driving it to the ground is the last-minute rescue of the innocent victims of Washington, D.C. The picture on the steering wheel of the Capitol Building—which remains within the camera’s frame during the battle for the wheel—transforms the victims of the flight, the passengers and the crew, into the heroes, subtly projecting onto the men who fight for control the same motivation as President Bush did in his address to Congress and the nation in which he emphasized their choice to rise up against the terrorists. If the film had stopped the passengers’ progression at the threshold or outside the cabin, the passengers would have a diminished heroic status since they only achieved an incomplete insurgency and were symbolically too late to save their own agency.

Greengrass endeavored to create a believable and plausible truth in his United 93.
However, truth does not emanate from the object onto the viewing subject but rather the reverse happens, the subject projects truth onto the object. The viewing subject determines whether or not the object is plausible or believable as it conforms to his or her worldview. In the final moments of the film, as the plane rushes headlong into the ground, leaving a crater in a Pennsylvania field, the believable and plausible truth is not limited to whether the struggle in the cockpit happened the way it was performed. The plausibility and believability extends to the audience and our own participation in the cabin. In a variation of Stanislavski’s famous “Magic If,” if we were in this situation under these given circumstance, the film implies that we would act the same way. The film’s cinéma vérité style situates the camera in the action taking the audience out of the third-person perspective of supposed objectivity and into the first-person subjectivity. We are not merely watching what is happening in the plane but are participating in the event itself, whether that participation consists in witnessing the act performed by the others or our own feeling of immersion and participation in the action. The film situates the audience to envision its hands among the many that reach out for the steering wheel in an attempt to take control and we symbolically die with the passengers as the screen goes to black. But our—and their—symbolic death is not that of a victim but of a hero.

The believable and plausible truth on the screen that we are invited to meditate on is not just “did this happen” but also “we need to do the same.” And so the film moves beyond describing events as they happen into prescribing desires for agency and action that constitute a national heroic identity. George Will’s call to see the film as a performance of a civic duty is a call to forget the trauma of 9/11, the crater in the Pennsylvania field, and re-member the American character and the imaginary way the
crater was formed, a character that we are to understudy and perform when the time comes. Even as the American *Imago* prescribes our possible future performance, we project ourselves onto the desired image. Despite the director’s stated intentions and the marketing of *United 93*, the film operates not as a believable and plausible truth but as an ideological interpellation of the viewing subject.

**Out of the Hole**

If the dominant final image of Greengrass’s *United 93* is the fast approaching ground from the cockpit window of the doomed flight, a descent into the earth if you will, then Oliver Stone’s *World Trade Center*’s (*WTC*) dominant final image is its opposite, the ascension out of the earth. Whereas *United 93* ended with the screen going to black and symbolic death, *WTC* ends with the screen bathed in brilliant light and a rebirth of life. But where Greengrass’s stated task of *United 93* was to fill in a plausible and believable truth for the lacunae of United 93, Stone’s film elides the traumatic events and condenses time in order to frame 9/11 within the familiar rescue narrative as it makes its own claims of authenticity.

Stone’s film focuses on two Port Authority police officers, John McLoughlin (played by Nicolas Cage) and Will Jimeno (played by Michael Peña) who volunteer to participate in a rescue mission into Tower Two only to be trapped amid the twisted steel and concrete after the building collapses. Until they are found and rescued some twenty-two hours later, the film alternates between the men struggling to stay alive in the wreckage and their distressed wives, Donna McLoughlin (Maria Bello) and Allison Jimeno (Maggie Gyllenhaal), trying to find out the fates of their husbands while taking
care of their distressed families. Like Greengrass in *United 93*, Stone and other members of the production team go to great lengths in the DVD commentary and the bonus *Making of the World Trade Center* documentary to discuss the authenticity of the film, dedicating tremendous amounts of time and energy in their meticulous research: who was doing what where when the planes crashed into the Twin Towers. But where Greengrass focuses on trying to tell a believable and plausible truth and, it seems, nothing else, Stone is very conscious of and openly discusses his negotiations between the empirical facts of the event and his desire to tell a compelling story cinematically. In interviews as well as his own commentary in the DVD features, Stone draws attention to the elisions and rearrangement of events along with the condensation and elongation of time in order to conform to causal narratives and audience expectations. As the epigraph from the DVD commentary states, “One of the obstacles, and it was an obstacle, is to take a series of real events and make them dramatic. To actually spend two hours in a hole is not going to make a movie.”

On its surface Stone’s statement concerning this obstacle seems packed with irony as it seems impossible to make the series of real events from 9/11 any more dramatic than they were on that horrific Tuesday and continue to be to this day. However, given the tastes and aesthetics of contemporary audiences, along with their horizons of expectations concerning not only cinema, but also Oliver Stone as a director and 9/11 as an historical event itself, there is validity in his observation as Stone’s primary concern is to make a movie. Stone’s own history as a controversial filmmaker haunted his film. In the DVD commentary Stone discusses the concerns that were raised surrounding *WTC*, such as whether or not he would politicize 9/11, and his confrontation by commentators who
asked if he would “dishonor America.” As Stone states in the commentary, his film was “never a political movie outside of making you feel the day, remember the day, memorializing it” (DVD). And while his film is both dogmatically muted and aesthetically unobtrusive compared to some of his other films such as *Platoon*, *JFK*, and *Natural Born Killers*, and it conforms to conventional cinematic story telling and characterizations, it is not apolitical insofar as he wishes to memorialize the day and frame its remembrance in a way that is rooted within the structural metaphor of the American experience: regeneration through violence.

In an interview with Ric Gentry for *Film Quarterly* (Summer 2007), Stone discusses the film’s meditations on death, at which the interviewer makes an astute observation of the overall message of the film:

> [The movie’s exploration of death] is very interesting because not only is this part of the spirituality of the film and a later sense of resurrection for the characters but, in another sense, a rebirth of a kind for the viewer, the way we look at 9/11 through the experience of World Trade Center. There’s a regeneration out of the cataclysm.

To which Stone responds, “I think that’s the most important message of the film. You can come back, survive these horrible things. It’s not always true but we’d like it to be true. It was true for John and Will” (56). Stone’s film openly participates in the regeneration-through-violence trope as the structuring metaphor of the American experience. The film uses various cinematic techniques to tell this story of regeneration and the emergence of the heroes, a theme that is common in Stone’s past films such as *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*. Gentry discusses Stone’s affinity for the heroic narrative, recalling a quote Stone had made in a previous interview, “I think the meaning of heroism has a lot to do with evolving into a higher human being. Heroism is tied to
the evolution of consciousness. […] the hero transcends self and death in the belief of something more.” And it is this transcending of self and death in the belief of something more that maps out *WTC*, as Stone replies, “That’s what I was hoping for, a kind of transcendence, a cultural surge with the movie. But I don’t feel that in the culture” (56-57).

Stone’s desire for his film to facilitate a transcendental cultural surge betrays his previous statement concerning the non-political nature of his film. While not promoting a specific left/right issue that normally shapes popular political discourse or offering a counter-narrative that furthers some conspiratorial claim, Stone wishes *WTC* to engage with and influence U.S. culture. Stone’s film frames 9/11 as a moment of rebirth rather than destruction, focusing on the rescue of the Port Authority officers and their connections to their families while buried under the rubble of the Twin Towers. As he explains in the DVD commentary to the film:

[...] we threaded a hard needle, a very small needle. We had to make the film authentic at the same time not so authentic that it would be, uh, impossible to watch. There’s no question that from combat alone, the war is worse in many ways and, uh, what they went through. But we did a reflection of that day and we did it, I think, with enough grit so that, I know it has enough grit because I know many people who won’t see the movie for fear of that, but with enough grit and yet we managed to get the feelings of the men, as miserable as they may have been, to have a sense of inspiration and glory for everyone. That love does matter, that faith in something, other than yourself, as corny as it seems, matters.

Rooted in the humanistic and Romantic endeavor of love (not only romantic love but also love of Man and community) saving and conquering all, the film plays out the rescue narrative familiar to many disaster films as well as 9/11 discourses and scenarios. And in doing so, the film reiterates the same performative strategy already discussed in Nelson’s
The Guys, where LaCapra’s acting out the trauma of 9/11 within a redemptive narrative evades the traumatic event as opposed to working through the originary violence.

However, Stone’s film does not avoid the traumatic event as much as it misses it. The opening of the film focuses on the two officers, McLoughlin and Jimeno, telling the story of 9/11 through their perspectives. Just prior to the first plane crashing into Tower One, Officer Jimeno is helping a Japanese couple locate the corner of First and Ten on a map just outside Grand Central Station. As the three look into the map, a shadow passes over them, accompanied by a faint whoosh sound indicating quick movement. As Jimeno turns towards the object casting the shadow, it has already passed but the camera cuts to the side of a large building and both the audience and he see the distinctive shadow of a plane fly across the building’s front before the screen fades to black. The camera then quickly cuts to a low angle shot looking up at the two Towers, the last time we see them untouched, before we cut again to inside the Port Authority office where two officers are talking at the water cooler. When the first plane hits Tower One, there is a thud sound and the shockwave from the impact causes the building to tremble and the water in the cooler to bubble and ripple. The police officers that are walking their respective beats, including Jimeno, are called back to headquarters but none of the street officers knows why. The film then cuts back into the Port Authority’s meeting room, which is equipped with a television. Jimeno comes into the room to see the initial CNN report covering the 8:46am crash of American Airlines Flight 11 into Tower One. While only blocks away from the World Trade Center, Jimeno and the officers miss the attack and are mediated witnesses to the destruction.
Of course the shadow that races across Jimeno’s body and the wall of the New York building represents American Airlines Flight 11 while also symbolically representing the angel of death, but I would offer another reading of the shadow and its connection to the missed event. Cathy Caruth identifies trauma as a wound of the mind where the originary event “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.” But even this reoccurrence does not equate to a knowing of the event as it continues its “unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on.” For Caruth, the mind is unable to process the unexpected event and thus this event is missed. Trauma then is more than simply an illness but “is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or a truth that is not otherwise available. This truth […] cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language” (Unclaimed Experience 4).

Put in Lacanian terms, Caruth’s unclaimed experience, the cognitive rupture whose traumatic manifestations of actions and nightmares point towards a truth even as they fail to articulate what that truth is, indicates the subject’s encounter with the Real, that which disrupts and defies representation. The unknown event continues to remain unknown as its manifestations fail to make sense through representation and communication. As language continues to fail, the event continues to be missed. In this sense, the nation missed the plane crashes and the buildings imploding even if we saw it play out in real time, either directly or through mediation. We missed the events because, even though we saw them, we still do not know them, as 9/11 ruptured the ontology of
the American Self. And in its own way, that is the film’s most authentic moment of
representing 9/11: not showing the plane crash into the building. The film utilizes
photorealistic computer generated images of Tower One damaged and on fire, along with
papers floating from the devastated offices. It would have been relatively simple to
construct similarly a photorealistic image to replicate the visual of the horrific end of
American Airlines Flight 11, but that would have been ineffectual in capturing the Real
of the moment.

The image of the plane’s shadow gestures towards the event’s occurrence but not
its knowability. To represent something is to know it symbolically, as the act of naming
something simultaneously defines it; the film acknowledges its own inability to know and
therefore refuses to show the Real. But the film does intersect with the Real and, as film
is a visual medium, images of the traumatic event float in and out of the screen, like
scintillating scotoma, the floating visual aura within one’s scopic field that generally
precedes migraines. Without receiving too much time or focus the violence of 9/11
moves across the screen as the film moves to the unbearable pain to which the two central
characters will soon be victim. As McLoughlin, Jimeno, and the other officers make
their way downtown to evacuate Tower Two as a precautionary response to the damage
done to Tower One, they pass a large man lying on his back being attended by several
pedestrians. The man on his back is clearly injured, but it is unclear whether he is alive
or dead. The film shifts from normal speed to slow motion as the camera looks out the
window to see the fallen man. Slow motion has often been used to highlight and glorify
violence in such films as Samuel Peckinpah’s The Wild Bunch, the Wachowski brothers’
The Matrix, and Stone’s own Natural Born Killers, just to name a few, and WTC uses it
here when the characters confront the violence of 9/11. However, the noticeable shift of
time flow in the film does not glorify the violence but rather gives it a surreal quality
while simultaneously drawing attention to itself, that both gestures at the tension of the
moment as the officers slowly move towards Ground Zero and acknowledging its own
phenomenological shortcomings in trying to represent the Real and know the
unknowable.

The film uses slow motion in three other occasions, all leading up to the officers’
entrapment under the rubble of Tower Two. First as the officers run towards the Tower
to aide in its evacuation, the camera follows McLoughlin’s perspective and shifts into
slow motion. The camera/McLoughlin focuses on a damaged airplane tire lying on the
street, presumably blown clear from the airplane’s collision, and then moves upward to
the ash snowing down on and covering the street as an injured woman, blood streaming
down her head and covering her face, runs screaming “It’s on fire.” As the men continue
to run and with time moving slowly, the camera cuts to a low angle shot looking up at
Tower One ablaze and papers littering the sky. The film then cuts to McLoughlin and his
men gathering equipment inside Tower Two and the film resumes normal time. In the
second incident of slow motion, the officers are walking through the concourse of
commercial shops within the enclosed World Trade Center plaza and pass a line of the
walking wounded, streaming out of the Tower, heading outside. Starting at its regular
pace, time gradually shifts into slow motion as the camera tracks the injured walking
across the screen, bloodied, dirty, and in a daze, unable to make sense of what they had
just experienced. This shift in movie time is not as drastic as in the other two moments or
the final time it is used in the film’s opening act, so as not to overplay the technique, rendering it ineffectual.

But the final instance is also the most drastic shift in movie time. As the men are about to make their way upstairs to help with what they think is simply an evacuation of Tower Two, McLoughlin receives a radio call from his supervising officer who orders all of the men out of the building; the film cuts between McLoughlin and his supervisor whose shirt is covered in blood, presumably someone else’s and not his. McLoughlin is unaware that a second plane had already crashed into the building they were in since communication between the first responders and the outside world was nearly nonexistent. McLoughlin and his men assumed the shakes and explosions heard in Tower Two were coming from Tower One, where the first crash had happened. And since the film focuses on the men and not the event, we miss the second plane crash as well. During their exchange, the sounds of the concrete and steel support beams buckling fill the concourse as the firefighters draw their—and the camera’s—attention upward as the ceiling begins to crumple. The film shifts into slow motion as the camera shifts its focus between McLoughlin’s face, and his growing realization of what is happening, and the glass windows, ceiling, and column supports shattering and cracking. McLoughlin’s eyes dart to and fro across the concourse until he sees a service door next to an elevator. He then calls out to his men, still in slow motion, to run to the elevator shaft, the most architecturally secure area of the building. All of the men begin to run to the shaft as their world literally begins to fall on their heads and ash and debris begin to fill the frame. The camera, through falling wreckage and dust, catches the deaths of several of the officers; some are crushed from above while others fall as their floor gives way, never to
be seen again, before the frame is engulfed in light as the sound crescendos before
everything goes to black.

Stone discusses in the DVD commentary how the elongated sequence runs for
nearly a minute but in actuality the event lasted only several seconds. Stone explains that
his reasoning was more for storytelling necessities than for dramatic effect, though it did
heighten the dramatic tension of the moment. By moving to slow motion, the audience
could properly read the realization, fear, and decision making on McLoughlin’s face as
the Tower is imploding around him and his men. Slowing down time in order to draw
attention to McLoughlin’s facial expressions allows the audience to recognize the years
of his experience coming to the fore and his ability to make life-saving decisions within
seconds, thus highlighting his heroic stature and actions. But the use of slow motion is
also a self-reflexive move, drawing attention to the film’s attempt at constructing the Real
of 9/11. Even as the men have the world fall about them and on them in the film, the
representation fails to capture the moment it seeks to represent. Instead it creates a
surreal moment that both gestures at its own attempt to represent the Real and
acknowledging the impossibility of the task. While we may recognize the moment we
watch before us on film, it is a reminder of what we missed on 9/11, and continue to miss
even in (especially in) its return: the unknowable moment of 9/11 that crashed on our
heads.

After the Tower collapses, the film emerges from the black to reveal the trapped
McLoughlin, Jimeno, and Dominick Pezzulo (played by Jay Hernandez). Both
McLoughlin and Jimeno are badly injured and pinned by the rubble, unable to move.
Only Pezzulo is able to move in the tight quarters. Physically closer to Jimeno than to
McLoughlin, Pezzulo tries to free his fellow officer but is unable to lift the concrete slab and rubble pinning Jimeno down. Before Pezzulo can decide what to do next, we hear the rumbling of Tower One imploding next to them (but we don’t see it—yet another missed event), dislodging debris above the three officers, causing more wreckage to fall and crushing Pezzulo, eventually killing him. As McLoughlin and Jimeno are the last two survivors trapped in the rubble, the camera moves from the darkness of the trapped officers upward vertically, giving a sense of how deep the hole is until it breaks through into the daylight and we see a vista of twisted metal, concrete, and crumpled façades of the Towers. While we have missed the originary violent events of 9/11, we see the open wound, manifested as Ground Zero. But we do not stay in the immediacy of the gash: as the camera continues its ascension, the lens points downward creating a “bird’s eye” subjectivity as the shot widens and pulls back. The rubble is lost in the smoke as the camera pulls back until we see lower Manhattan from space.

Stone’s visual/subjectivity shift from the micro narrative concerning the individual characters to the macro story shows the world’s response to the horror of 9/11. Viewing the entire world within a single scopic field re-imagines it as a global community, one that is shrinking through technology as a communications satellite enters into the frame, transmitting the images across the planet. The film’s global view invokes utopic musings articulated by astronauts who viewed the world sans national borders. The film begins a montage of actual news images from around the world, highlighting the world’s sympathetic reaction to the terrorists’ attacks. These images range from crying women and disbelieving men to various religious leaders including rabbis, priests, and especially imams praying for the living and the dead and denouncing the attacks. Even
though Stone didn’t see his film as a political statement, he freely uses the images that constituted the good will many across the world felt towards the United States that day as stage props to act as a reminder of what the Bush administration squandered as we went to war with Iraq, a political jab at an administration Stone openly criticizes. The film does not show images of crowds cheering the destruction of the World Trade Center that took place in countries around the world, cheers that prompted many in the United States to ask, “Why do they hate us?” nor the various religious figures both in the United States and around the world who saw the terrorist acts as God’s retribution. By omitting those non-mourning images the film participates in the ideological performative act of ascribing virginal innocence onto the United States and foreclosing any critical engagements concerning national or global political tensions.

The shift from the micro to the macro narratives repeats the ahistorical approach to 9/11 that Greengrass’s *United 93* performs. Stone’s film does not frame the material and historical forces that shape and create the terrorist attacks, but rather treats the moment as a zero-sum originary event with no anteriority, only posteriority. History emanates out of Ground Zero but not into it. The treatment of 9/11 as the originary event of history manifested itself in various political and cultural discourses in the United States, marking the birth of a post-9/11 world and rendering the pre-9/11 episteme void of substance and value. Instead of engaging in the material and historical forces that led to the terrorist attacks, by collapsing the micro and the macro 9/11 narratives the film perpetuates the myopic America-centrist worldview. The film invokes the world’s sympathetic responses in order to frame 9/11 in absolutist ahistorical terms only to erase
the world once it has fulfilled its emotional impact when the film returns to the micro
story of the trapped officers, their families, and the rescue efforts at Ground Zero.

The refocus on the micro story of McLoughlin and Jimeno in the film’s second
act begins the heroes’, particularly McLoughlin’s, regeneration. Stone reinscribes
Ground Zero and the hole the men are in from a site of devastation and death into a site
of life. Stone describes the horrific violence of the two Towers’ collapse into the
darkness and silence of the hole:

    We want to create the sound so big, the end of your life sound that’s the
    last thing you hear roaring in your ears would cut to complete silence.
    What else could be more contrasting than complete silence? And then we
    would come back from the death [sic] so to speak; we come back into the
dark, the dark of the womb where he’s born again. This is John’s second
    chance. (DVD)

Stone transforms the space of death into a space of generation. Stone romanticizes the
pain the two men feel as their physical bodies are slowly crushed by the weight of the
concrete and steel that entrap them. Stone comments elsewhere in the DVD commentary
about being in awe at the pain threshold of the two men, especially McLoughlin’s, as
they remained conscious during their time underground, resisting the body’s natural
tendency to shut down when experiencing copious amounts of pain. In her seminal work
_The Body in Pain_ , Elaine Scarry discusses how the subject’s cognition ruptures when the
body is in pain. Under the stress of physical pain the subject’s sense of self collapses and
the subject’s world is unmade. Pain “has no referential content,” Scarry argues. “It is not
_of_ or _for_ anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other
phenomenon, resists objectification in language” (5). Scarry’s assessment points towards
the impossibility to perform pain as it knows no registers and resists performance’s
doubling. An actor can mimic the exterior, outward codified gestures signifying pain to the viewing audience, as Nicholas Cage and Michael Peña do as they scream incoherently several times in the film, when their characters are overwhelmed. But the men cannot be in pain and call that acting, because for the suffering subject, pain simply is; it collapses dialectical relationships between self and other. But one subject’s pain can be re-imagined and objectified by another. Stone projects a signifying chain of heroic birth onto the bodies of the men whose very senses of selves begins to collapse. Their pain of near-death is erased and replaced with the pangs of birth.

If we were to carry Stone’s metaphor to its logical conclusion, Ground Zero becomes the symbolic birthing Mother. The interiority of the symbolic woman, the womb/cavern, carries the dual significance as the site of life and death. The duality of life/death carries through to the end of the rescue. After being discovered, Jimeno is rescued and sent to the hospital in the dark of night. But it will be several more hours until McLoughlin will be rescued as he is trapped further down the hole and under more rubble. When he is finally cut free, the rescue workers strap the injured officer to a scoop stretcher and carry him out. Due to the tight quarters of the hole, the rescue workers carry him out by forming a human chain and hand the stretcher off to the next man down the line, similar to a bucket brigade used to put out fires. In effect the men become the birthing canal that push McLoughlin out of the hole. The birthing imagery reaches its apex as McLoughlin is carried to the surface that is filled with light in contrast with the darkness we have been witness to. The camera alternates between close-up shots of McLoughlin’s face and shots of the hole’s opening, so that we share his subjective position and perception as he is slowly lifted out of his tomb/womb. As McLoughlin is
lifted into the daylight, the thin, rectangular aperture that resembles both the opening to a grave and a vaginal opening. His second birth now at its end, he is carried along the human chain down the rubble of Ground Zero before he is taken to the hospital to receive medical treatment.

The film’s feminizing of Ground Zero is not limited to McLoughlin’s rebirth and the intertextual images of grave and vaginal openings at the cavern’s hole. During his time pinned under the rubble, the real McLoughlin has visions of his wife being in the space with him, offering words of assurance and love, a scenario Stone wished to maximize in his story. Stone did so by placing the imagined meeting just prior to McLoughlin’s being rescued, a pivotal moment in the film’s storytelling. However, the vision happened earlier in McLoughlin’s actual experience trapped in Ground Zero. Stone’s moving of the exchange is one of many elisions, condensations, and rearrangements Stone admits to for the sake of cinematic storytelling. Symbolically McLoughlin’s wife Donna was part of his rescue—the nick-of-time arrival before succumbing to his injuries and death, a point driven home when McLoughlin sees Donna in the hospital and says several times to her as he is being carted to surgery, “You saved me.” The image of his wife kept McLoughlin alive, while her material body was elsewhere.

It is not simply that Donna is in the cavern with McLoughlin but how she physically occupies the space that intertwines her existence with Ground Zero, while the men, such as McLoughlin and Jimeno, are separate and can be extracted from the space of life/death. We first see her in the rubble as a faint figure slowly coming into focus and whose spectral presence is slowly illuminated, indicating that she has been occupying the
space prior to McLoughlin’s and our seeing her. She slips in and out of darkness, the camera capturing her figure at an angle. When she is fully illuminated, the camera has a tight shot of her angled face, filling the frame. The camera’s focal point only covers part of the plane, allowing only part of the actor’s face to be in sharp focus while the surrounding area transitions from soft to blurred focus, creating an otherworldly, spiritual effect. Donna’s image becomes her essence disembodied from her presence (which is in the hospital waiting for his arrival in the film). And it is her essence that fills the space, the cavernous space of death/life as well as the frame. The film’s cutting from the spectral Donna (the symbolic Woman) in the hole to the real Donna (the actual woman) in the hospital marks the hole as being filled with a disembodied presence of essence while simultaneously conveying a sense of absence, as she is physically not there. When McLoughlin is rescued, we see male bodies exit the gash of Ground Zero while the essence/absence of the female body is left behind. And Donna’s essence/absence occupying Ground Zero echoes the emasculating shift from the presence of the dual phallic Twin Towers to the absence of a gash, an opening, a hole.

The reiteration of the woman occupying the symbolic space of absence with the male hero undergoing regeneration through violence reifies the heteronormative American male hero, but WTC goes beyond gendered normative performances of both bodies and space by erasing ethnic and racial diversity as part of the 9/11 narrative in order to localize the American identity on a primarily white body. This claim may seem contradictory as Jimeno is Columbian-American and is played by Michael Peña, who is Mexican-American. Their combined singular Latin body occupies a great deal of the film, but in the story Jimeno is a supporting character to McLoughlin’s lead. It is
McLoughlin whom we track as an audience throughout most of the film and McLoughlin is the focus when the two characters occupy the same moment. While Jimeno is relegated to the supporting role, his family—that is, his Columbian family—is nearly erased from the narrative entirely. After the collapse of the Twin Towers, *WTC* oscillates between the men trapped in Ground Zero and their respective families. The film turns its attention on the officers’ wives, focusing on how they have to navigate and negotiate the personal traumas of not knowing the fates of their husbands, looking after the well-being of their traumatized sons and daughters, and coping with a national crisis. At the McLoughlin household, Donna engages in normative maternal activities (laundry, meals, etcetera) as a way of maintaining a sense of normalcy for her family, which leads to confrontations with her son J.J. (played by Anthony Piccininni), who is unable to reconcile with idea that his father may be dead.

In the Jimeno household, the film primarily focuses on his non-Latina wife Allison as she strives to find out what has happened to her husband while worrying about having to tell her daughter that her father may be dead. Her own father consoles Allison as the film focuses on Allison’s immediate family dynamic, including her brother and mother. Jimeno’s mother and father, though present in the film, are relegated to the margins of the narrative. The only moment of note any one of them has in the film is when Allison walks in on Jimeno’s mother crying while she prays holding Rosary beads, a common signifier in the cinematic register of Catholic Latinos’ identity. Stone discusses the Jimeno family’s marginalization (though he never put it in those terms), saying “The parents of Will were Columbian. Their interactions with the other side of the family were not really as dramatic to me as what was going on inside Allison’s
family, so I went with that but certainly there was a drama going on the other way”
(DVD). Stone recognizes the pain the Jimeno family was suffering as the “drama going on the other way,” but silenced their own voices in the film, literally relegating their spoken Spanish to nothing more than a soft whisper in prayer, as their drama did not speak to him. Stone’s silencing the Latin voice marks a privileging of an American identity, as McLoughlin becomes the central character, the U.S. Latino Jimeno becomes a supporting side-kick, and the Spanish speaking-only character weeps. Stone’s provincialism and lack of identification with the Jimeno family symbolically isolates and marginalizes the Latin 9/11.

If the Latin body, apart from Jimeno himself, was seen not heard, the black body was neither seen nor heard but was completely erased from the film’s scopic field. One of the subplots in the film centers on David Karnes (played by Michael Shannon), a Connecticut accountant and former Marine who, after seeing the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing devastation, left his job, donned his Marine uniform, and drove to Ground Zero to help search for survivors. Because Karnes was wearing his Marine fatigues, no one questioned his presence and he moved freely about Ground Zero. On the rubble, Karnes meets Jason Thomas, a fellow ex-Marine from Long Island who had the same impulse to don his Marine fatigues, and together they search for survivors and help those in need. Stone found Karnes’s story fascinating, a devout Christian ex-Marine in his early forties walking away from his life in Connecticut, driving several hours into Manhattan while many were desperately trying to get off the island, who happens to find the two trapped
Port Authority officers, all in service to God and country. As Stone says, “it sounds like something made up, but it’s true” (DVD).

While so much focus was given to the truthfulness and authenticity of the Karnes character, little thought was given to his fellow Marine and co-rescuer, Thomas, so little thought that they cast William Mapother, a white actor, to play Thomas, who is in reality African-American. In the DVD commentary Stone acknowledges in a somewhat blasé manner, “it turns out that Thomas is an African-American” and a “very nice fellow” (which is a very strange comment given that Mapother’s portrayal did not indicate that Thomas possessed any dominant socially maligned qualities). Stone’s adherence to his research became a primary selling point, defending the film’s authenticity in the various press junkets promoting its premier. Stone and the film’s production often discuss their meticulous research and fidelity to the facts in the DVD bonus commentaries and documentaries, *The Making of World Trade Center*, *Common Sacrifice*, and *Building Ground Zero*. It seems that for a production that credited itself in its adherence to truth, facts, and authenticity, such a mistake would garner a stronger response than a simple glossing. The misrepresentation of Thomas points to the privileged status of the white body within rescue narratives in general and 9/11 in particular. The media saturation of the days and weeks that followed the terrorist attacks highlighted authoritative positions that were in charge of rescue, recovery, and defense, such as the President, Vice

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14 The actual Karnes has been somewhat critical of Stone’s depiction of him in the film. Karnes did not participate in the filming since he re-enlisted into the Marines after 9/11 and was serving a tour of duty in Iraq as WTC was being shot, nor was he consulted prior to the film’s release. While Karnes is a devout Christian and did leave his job in Connecticut to search for survivors and provide aid at Ground Zero, he does not agree with simplistic “Christian Soldier.” See Rebecca Liss’s article for *Slate.com* entitled “How the 9/11 Rescue Really Happened,” posted 9 August 2006.
President, Secretary of Defense, Mayor of New York, New York’s Police Commissioner, and New York’s Fire Commissioner, just to name a few. Whites mostly held these positions of authority that became the positive public faces surrounding 9/11, while non-whites occupied the subject position of the terrorists. As the authoritative heads became the synecdoche for all the rescuers, the bodies of color disappeared from the 9/11 televisual images, and thereby from the cultural consciousness. The film participates in the ongoing erasure of the black body within the cultural consciousness of 9/11 by reiterating the sole presence of the white body as heroic rescuer even while laying claim to truth and authenticity. There was no reason to research Thomas’s identity as it took the default-racialized body, white.

This authenticity itself is performed and embodied at the film’s end as it closes on a party with the actors and their living counterparts. The real McLoughlin and Jimeno families and friends intermingle with the actors who played them, Nicolas Cage, Maria Bello, Michael Peña, Maggie Gyllenhaal, and others on a beautiful day with the New York City skyline as a backdrop. In the picnic festivities the representations collapse with the referent as identities are both lost and revealed. McLoughlin and Jimeno’s presence at the end of the film acts as a signature authorizing and validating the film, as if saying, “This was a true representation of our lives and experiences. If it wasn’t, we would not be here.”

This collapse between the actors and their real-life counterparts not only signifies a nod towards authenticity through the actual McLoughlin and Jimeno presence, but also signifies a regeneration of life. In the film’s prior shot, we see the Jimeno family members walking down the hospital corridors with pictures of the missing hanging from
the walls. The photographs, tagged with names and brief descriptions of the pictured subjects, replicate the many makeshift Missing Persons walls that became ephemeral memorials that covered lower Manhattan in the days and weeks following the attacks.

The walls came to represent the absent bodies, the dead who were erased in the building’s collapse. The dead confront us as the camera pans along the wall only to cut quickly to a sunny field where a picnic party is taking place, filled with laughter and life as the actors honor the survivors, their families, and loved ones. While McLoughlin and Jimeno’s presence is made clear, their families also take focus, particularly the children. The children of both families contribute to the emotionality of the film as we become sympathetic to their plight and fears. But they do very little to move the plot or subplots forward, with the exception of J.J. McLoughlin. At the film’s end, both the actual children and their child-actor counterparts act as emotionally loaded signifiers as they play with each other and laughingly run into their parents arms. But they also contribute to the film thematically as they represent continuity, longevity, and the future. The film dislocates the death of the Memorial Wall to centralize the life that is celebrated, growing, and vivacious as absence is replaced with presence. The film’s final scene fulfills the regeneration-through-violence structuring metaphor as the multiplicity of family extends out of the singularity of the trauma McLoughlin and Jimeno suffered. A trauma is erased by the smiling children.

As I discuss in my introduction, Hayden White notes that narratives are emploted based on already encoded facts within an arrangement of elements and adhere to distinguishable plot structures. In essence, White argues that stories are already written sans the details. The details taken from life are later inserted into the already formulated
narrative. But not all of the details are inserted into the narrative, only those privileged elements that both support the narrative and carry the proper codification. These protonarratives are shaped by and perpetuate existing worldviews, serving as an underpinning to communal and collective identities, and constitute what Frederic Jameson identifies as ideologemes. In his *The Political Unconsciousness*, Jameson describes the ideologeme as an amphibious formation, whose essential structural characteristics may be described as its possibility to manifest itself either as a pseudoidea—a conceptual or belief system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice—or as a protonarrative, a kind of ultimate class fantasy about the “collective characters” which are the classes in opposition. (87)

While Jameson articulates the ideologeme in terms of a “class fantasy,” the term crosses class distinctions and is inclusive when participating in constructing a national collective. Jameson discusses how these protonarratives are woven into the cultural consciousness and construct what is perceived as the essentialist genetic makeup national identity. This essence of a national identity participates in the subject’s formulation of its “worldview.” For Jameson, the ideologeme is the “semic complex which can project itself variously in the form of a ‘value system’ or ‘philosophical concept,’ or in the form of a protonarrative, a private or collective narrative fantasy” (115).

Jameson’s notion of an ideologeme as “the conceptual or semic complex” functions as a kernel of ideology’s narrative, which can be projected into other forms of discourse beyond narratives. Jameson’s notions of the ideologeme and the modality of genre in their deployment are reminiscent of Hayden White’s meditations on tropes and emplotted narratives in his *Tropics of Discourse*. Emplotment is used as a method of making sense of the facts through a recognizable narrative. Mediated through language,
which is embedded with tropes and structures, the chronological events are written into a sense-making discourse. These tropes and structures are formed by, and function in the reaffirmation of, ideology. The sense making allows for the subject to understand the reality that surrounds her/him. Both films deploy, in their own way, regeneration through violence as a way to understand the encounter of the Real, affirming the national identity through its resolution and rebirth in the face of terror and violence.

Both Greengrass’s *United 93* and Stone’s *World Trade Center* set out to accomplish (at least) three tasks: to tell good cinematic stories, to be authentic and truthful in their representations, and to honor the memories of the 9/11 heroes. The desire to honor the memories of the heroes carries a series of loaded and overdetermined parameters since honor, memory, and hero are all encoded concepts within the American ontology. The films follow the protonarratives of revolt and rescue, both key ideologemes that reiterate the American eidolon. Honoring calls for a level of reverence to and of the hero, whose enactments are separate from the person acting. The hero’s actions are restored behaviors, citational gestures that are recognizable as well as embodied prescriptions. The depicted actions need to be the *ne plus ultra* of heroism already encoded as such. The film acts as a memory machine, but within the matrix of memory, hero and honor, the desire to remember is contingent on the demand to forget. Memory is not total and inclusive but partial and exclusive, as it must support the other two — just as honor and hero must be something worth remembering. Those traits that detract or are unsupportive of the heroic character are lost to history.

We should not misconstrue the cluster of hero, memory, and honor as being in conflict with the other two accomplishments the films desire to achieve, telling a good
cinematic story and their quest for authenticity. Indeed they are all part of the American cinematic cultural matrix. Authenticity is subjective and its success is determined by the audience’s episteme and ontology. As mentioned above, assessing an object’s authenticity is based on its conforming to the audience’s suppositions and definitions of the criteria used to formulate its verdict. The films’ quest for authenticity lies not in their reproduction of the Real of 9/11 but to our collective and shared value system that determines what hero, honor, and memory mean. And the films’ confirmation of our already existing beliefs contributes to the reification, affirmation, and prescription of those beliefs, amounting to an edifying performative feedback loop.

The directors’ desires to tell compelling and good cinematic stories are tied to the ontological and epistemological framing discussed above concerning honoring the memories of the heroes and authenticity. And like the other two aspects, the valuation of good is subjective to the tastes of the viewing public. Both movies immerse the audience into the narrative, following the dramatic formula of linearity. Both films begin with exposition, have an inciting event followed by a series of choices and outcomes that produce rising tensions and actions, leading to a climax, and end with a resolution. Both films elicit the audience’s absorption into the story, calling on them to emotionally lose themselves in the action—to feel rather than think. Both filmmakers lay claim to their works’ fidelity to the facts surrounding their respective films, but Stone openly discusses his desire to tell a compelling story and is perhaps being more intellectually honest about his project. However, like all artists, Greengrass is equally culpable of manipulating the audience as he promotes a perspective and agenda in his film. For both Greengrass and Stone, their artistic manipulations are not viewed as distortions of truth, but rather
celebrations of it. The truth revered, however, is not the facts of what transpired but the interpretation of events and performances that fit an already understood and affirming narrative. The trope of regeneration through violence is so strong in American culture that narratives need to conform to it in order to create a “plausible truth.” Fidelity lies to the idea more so facts. Anything else would simply ring false.
Chapter 3

Bush’s Theatre of War: Melodramatic Ghosts and the American Identity

Nobody ever told me I was going to come back from the war without a penis…

Oh God, Oh God, I want it back! I gave it for the whole country…

I gave [it] for John Wayne.

—Ron Kovic (Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation 519).

When trying to describe the spectacular crash of United Airlines Flight 175 in to the South Tower of the World Trade Center during a live interview with NBC’s The Today Show, Jennifer Overstein said it looked like a movie. For millions of Americans watching the nationally televised morning news program, Overstein’s descriptive had a doubling effect on the phenomenology of the moment as camera operators had fixed their lenses on to the already burning North Tower and captured second plane crash live. Americans across the country not only saw the attack, as if they were watching a summer blockbuster movie on television, but a voice articulated the framing of the collective experience. The “like a movie” phenomenological reading was soon joined by numerous references to, and connections with, Pearl Harbor and World War II. Newscasters, pundits, politicians, and the general public used the already familiar matrices of cinema and World War II to serve as interpretive strategies to make sense of the impossible.

Suffering from an ontological rupture of the terrorists’ attacks, the American public drew on their collective history to re-articulate the national identity. However, the collective history is not limited to the chronology of events that happened prior to 9/11,
nor is it relegated to the constructed narratives within the history texts taught in schools. The collective history also includes the popular imaginings and mythopoetic renderings brought to life through mass entertainment, such as film and television. The performed representations permeate the cultural consciousness that shape both the interpretive strategies and expectations. The following chapter explores the intersection between the cultural production of a national identity that is rooted in an imaginary innocence and social performances with material world consequences. I first look at Lavonne Mueller’s *Voices from September 11th*, a series of monologues that function as testimonials to the national spirit and the loss of innocence because of 9/11. Mueller’s play participates in the mythopoeia of the national character as it presents itself as a cross-section of the American public. *Voices* then shifts its tone from a sense of loss to a promise of action as retaliatory violence provides the imagined identity a means of rebirth. In the final monologue, *Voices from September 11th* utilizes the mythos of World War II to frame 9/11. However, the play goes beyond using the mythos as a description of 9/11. *Voices* uses the World War II frame as a desired prescription for further action. By calling on the ghost of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s dog Fala, the play collapses popular imagination and history in an attempt to re-create the Greatest Generation.

The second section of this chapter uses the concluding sections of *Voices* as its jumping board to investigate the Iraq War as a performance. Immediately following 9/11, the Bush administration moved to wage war against Saddam Hussein and Iraq. Although there were no connections between al Qaeda and the secular dictator, the administration shifted the nation’s focus from Afghanistan to Iraq in the opaque War on Terror. Casting Iraq into the Axis of Evil and feeding the media’s desire for compelling
stories, the Bush administration crafted the pre-emptive war as a melodramatic performance. The fusion of popular culture and history reached in the now infamous and theatrical “Mission Accomplished” moment aboard the USS Lincoln. Now widely viewed disparagingly, the aircraft carrier performance embodied the national desire to view 9/11 and the War on Terror through a cinematic frame and reclaim the heroic national identity.

**Fala’s Day**

Lavonne Mueller’s *Voices from September 11th* is reminiscent of Anne Nelson’s *The Guys* in that it works to erect a dramatic monument. But where Nelson’s monument focuses on a specific group of people, the firefighters, that emulates the best of the American character as it orbits around the trauma of 9/11, Mueller’s series of fictional monologues monumentalize all Americans whose worlds had forever changed, by articulating their performative national identity. Mueller’s play begins with the familiar iconography that emerged from 9/11, that of the firefighter. Earl, a firefighter from Trenton, New Jersey, opens his monologue with a quotidian scenario interrupted by terror:

I was getting my son ready for pre-school. I had just helped him put his Cookie Monster t-shirt over his arms when I noticed a bruise on his elbow and was about to worry myself into thinking that it was something bad when my wife came running into the bedroom screaming, “Earl! Earl! You won’t believe what happened.”

My wife had been in the kitchen with our dog, Homer, and I figured the mutt had pulled one of his stunts. Like the last one when he dug into a pan of chocolate cupcakes cooling on the oven rack and got muffin tins stuck in his jaw for a vet bill of one week’s groceries. “What’s Homer done now?”

“We’ve been attacked.” Jenny began to cry. (Mueller 1)
Jenny’s crying causes little Jimmy to burst into tears as the mischievous dog runs into the room, jumping on the new cover bedspread. In that moment, Earl realizes Jimmy’s bruise means “absolutely nothing” before jumping into his car to race to New York to help his “brothers,” the FDNY (2).

Mueller’s beginning concisely portrays a Rockwellian Americana ruptured by terror. We open with the heteronormative nuclear family, Earl, Jenny, and Jimmy, along with their rascally dog, Homer. The play begins with a scenario of innocence and an eye towards the future. Earl dresses his son in his sentimentally loaded Cookie Monster t-shirt as he gets his son ready for pre-school. The play’s dual move of “getting ready” for “pre-school” situates the audience in recognizing the multiplicity of loss. Not only is the possibility of the day lost due to the terrorist attack, but so is Jimmy’s innocence as his future school years are forever enveloped in a post-9/11 world. Earl’s calm reaction to the news and his resolve to join his firefighter brothers is a stark contrast to Jenny’s emotional entrance, an emotionality that seems to be the norm, given Earl’s initial assumption as to the problem, Homer’s reoccurring “stunt.” Jenny’s tears become infectious as they transfer onto the young Jimmy. While women and children have the luxury of emotions rendering them helpless, Earl cannot succumb to such weakness. In the micro-world of the family, Earl nearly fell victim to worries over his son’s bruise but in the macro-world of terror and destruction, such childhood quotidian malaise is rendered “absolutely nothing.”

Called “One Hundred Days,” Earl relates his experiences at Ground Zero, witnessing the horror of twisted metal and ash, and joining his fellow firefighters. He
talks about two separate occasions where he helped victims—both women—to safety. Earl also discusses his hatred of fire, the “enemy; the red devil, the enemy” (3). It was that enemy that would burn in the heart of Ground Zero for one hundred days. As his monologue draws to a close, Earl goes into specifics about the debris that littered the area, including paper, licenses, security cards, teeth, and a working watch. But all around the carnage, the flame continues to dance, burning everything, including the birds, “I picked up a white pigeon from the boiling crud—its wings crusted with ash, silt, and glass shards […] And I thought, as I looked at the scorched creature in my hand: No, this isn’t a pigeon. It’s a dove. And America’s not blessed with peace anymore” (5). From the idyllic to the horrific, *Voices from September 11th* situates the audience to read 9/11 as a devastated Eden now engulfed in the ravages of war.

Earl’s monologue is just one of twelve that enunciates and performs an imagined America, one seemingly free of violence prior to 9/11 as it explores the iconography that constitutes a national identity. From the baseball player and part-time veterinarian assistant, Elmore “Torch” Vaughn, discussing the importance of baseball and the World Series between the New York Yankees and the Arizona Diamondbacks in bringing the nation together, to Cora, a high school student, who meditates on the providence of St. Paul’s Episcopalian Chapel’s miraculous escape from destruction even as the Towers fell all around the building, each of the monologues highlights an exceptional trait of America even as some venture into the national trauma’s perimeter. And given the ontological-historical moment, it should be no surprise that the idea of war, both as a material reality and as a conceptual space, runs through *Voices*. But there are two monologues that are particularly dedicated to war, “Daisies” and “War Dogs.”
Given the dominance of male images involved in war scenarios, “Daisies” disrupts expectations while simultaneously reinforcing the feminine: the monologue begins with Captain Alley Sand, a female U.S. Army officer, holding a bouquet of daisies. Sand draws attention to the cultural rendering of 9/11 and the focus on the World Trade Center, reminding the audience that the Pentagon was also attacked that Tuesday morning. A survivor of the Pentagon attack, Sand relates the initial confusion within the world’s largest office building as its inhabitants were mostly unaware of what was transpiring when Flight 77 crashed into the side of the building, creating a hole six stories tall. Sand goes onto relate that “she is no stranger to this enemy” being a veteran of the first Gulf War, Operation Desert Storm. While in Saudi Arabia she mingled with Arab officers and read Qaddafi’s book to “get a feel of those people” and comments on the Colonel’s literary “scatter shot” style, “Take it from me, he’s more ramble than Rambo” (75). Now in the new theatre of war, Sand discusses her deployment and duties in Afghanistan, “assigned to an MC-130 Cargo Plane dropping Daisy Cutters…” The Daisy Cutter earns its name by the circular pattern left behind where it hits, but “unlike a daisy, it’s the size of a small car and incinerates everything within 600 yards with 12,600 pounds of explosives” and is a “marvel of technology” due to its destructive power (76).

Sand’s monologue highlights two important performative gestures. The first is the formation of the Enemy Other. The play situates the audience in accepting Sand’s knowledge over the Enemy as authoritative since she has first hand experiences with and intellectual knowledge of the Enemy. However her Enemy composite is simply that: a composite. She understands Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, the Taliban, and Afghanistan through reading a book by a Libyan dictator, spending time with Saudis, and fighting
Iraqis. For Sand, North Africa, Arabia, and South Central Asia are the same region as she collapses religious and cultural commonalities into a homogenous Enemy Other, regardless of the significant ethnic, political, economic, and social differences that separate them. And this enemy stands in sharp contrast to the American *Imago*, the hypermasculine as steroid embodiment of Sylvester Stallone’s Rambo.

The second performative gesture is the monologue’s ending and its relationship within the larger dramatic structure of *Voices from September 11th*. Discussing military victories in Afghanistan, Sand discusses the liberation of Mazar-i-Sharif. As Sand suffers from abject poverty, he tells how ordinary citizens performed their new emancipation from the Taliban:

> A native man immediately shaved his beard—his towel draped over a blown-apart donkey. Balloon vendors raced on their bicycles to the market place. Women uncovered their faces. One old man sold pictures of Indian movie stars in bikini-saris alongside kids playing in a mound of 122-millimeter shells. Some weird Afghan singer called Naim Pupal sang on the sound system of many shops. A one-legged man hobbled down a tank trail with a second-hand TV strapped to his back. Two little girls, with red balls of yarn in their hair, gave me flowers. It was like Ike liberating Paris. Somewhere in a cave, Sheik Osama must have been furious. (77–8)

The town of Mazar-i-Sharif, free of the oppressive yoke of the Taliban, “westernizes” its identity, with men shaving their beards and women uncovering their faces. And in this liberation comes globalized televisual connectivity, the objectification and commodification of the female body, and children playing amidst the spent artillery casings that at one time brought death but now are toys to play with. There is no sense of irony in Sand’s statements, viewing the liberation as free of negative cultural
consequences. The final section of Sand’s monologue punctuates the positive outcome as she intertwines flowers with bombs:

*(She begins to smell the daisies.)* The daisy. Poets call these… “day’s eye.” They’re nearly a weed. But hardy. They even make a good flower wine. Good lineage, too. During the time of the troubadours, daisies were their coat-of-arms. And as Alice in Wonderland knows, daisies can talk. These would probably quote Machiavelli: “All armed prophets won and the unarmed perished.” Yes, sir, daisies can talk. (79)

Sand’s dénouement points towards an ending to the War on Terror as life emerges from the death and carnage of the bombs through providence—though providence based not on the intervention of a higher power but on the force of arms, its utterance, its speech act: “daisies can talk.” Death and life collapse into one as the daisy flower, hardy in its ability to live, is turned into the bomb that is a “marvel of technology” in its destructive force, which brings about new life that is free from oppression. The daisy returns to the flower, a signifier of life, as Sand takes a moment to take in its fragrance. Sand’s smelling her flowers is later followed by her taking a daisy and putting it behind her ear, an embodied gesture that reiterates her femininity. Sand’s gesture stabilizes gender constructions, which had been destabilized when a female body discussed combat.

As the penultimate monologue in *Voices*, Sand’s account marks the completion of the regeneration-through-violence narrative, a narrative that started with Earl and the loss of the idyllic and ends with its return, along with a liberated nation and flowers, a happy ending of sorts. While the voices in *Voices* may be dispersed and polyvalent (at least in who is speaking, if not necessarily what is being said), the arc of the play is linear and singular, as it progresses to war, both materially and abstractly with an Enemy whose specific identity gives way to a generalized Other whose Middle East locality is
conceptual rather than topographical. However the theoretical framing of war is based not on the material reality of the moment but rather on a performative gesture that derives meaning and power from its citation. Nearly every monologue in *Voices* makes some reference to World War II, ranging from the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor to the importance of national unity in times of war to Sand’s own referencing of Dwight D. Eisenhower and the liberation of France. Given the rupture of the Imaginary by the Real of 9/11, the public (and the play) cite World War II functions as a way of making sense of the terrorist attack, placing it back into the Imaginary. However, the citational gesture also situates the public, dictating how to think and perceive 9/11 and the War on Terror, oscillating between descriptive and prescriptive. And the play’s final monologue, “War Dogs” very much situates the audience to frame the current conflict with the war against the Axis powers.

With its title, “War Dogs” may recall Marc Antony’s famous line from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, “Cry ‘Havok,’ and let slip the dogs of war,” as he prepares for war against Brutus and Cassius over the killing of Caesar. The idea of unleashing hell in the face of a profound injustice would not be misplaced in the aftermath of 9/11 (the original name of the Afghan war was Infinite Justice, which invoked divine retribution). But the “War Dogs” in the final monologue refers not to Marc Antony but rather to Fala, Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Scottish terrier. While the other monologues are performed by “real” people, that is realistic characters, the final monologue is performed by an actor who plays Fala and occasionally an amalgamation of the dog and FDR: “*(At rise: We see an actor in a black body suit with black Scottie ears wearing a World War II Navy cape and holding a cigarette holder sitting in a 1940s wheelchair)*” (81). The Navy cape,
cigarette holder, and wheelchair are articles closely associated with FDR, particularly in the later part of his life and the waning days of World War II.\textsuperscript{15} And at the beginning of the monologue, given that the audience is viewing a human actor dressed in human clothes, sitting in a wheelchair made for the human body, and smoking a cigarette that is normally associated with human habits, the play semiotically foregrounds the monologue as being delivered by a representation of FDR, despite the dog ears. The humanness of the character is furthered by the monologue’s opening line, “Do you think… that you people are the first to ever experience an attack on the homeland? Our country was hit before. In 1941. At Pearl. Remember?” Given the matrix of signifiers and the trajectory of meaning, along with the audience’s expectations, it would seem that the ghost of FDR will deliver the final monologue until the character ruptures the illusion by standing from the wheelchair, a virtual impossibility given FDR’s polio condition, and identifies himself, “Name’s Fala—Franklin D. Roosevelt’s dog” (81). While the play makes no attempt at hiding the humanness of the actor, the audience is asked to accept this transition from realistic portrayals of the previous monologues to this non-realistic and self-reflexive theatrical performance, a performance that, while enjoying the playfulness of postmodernity, is seemingly free of irony.

The content in Fala’s monologue is twofold. The first part, understandably given the character, is canine-centric as he talks about the heroic efforts of the search dogs that suffered, both physically and emotionally, on Ground Zero. Physically the dogs’ heightened sense of smell and comparable-to-human eyes burned from the acrid smoke

\textsuperscript{15} Fala’s personal and cultural association with his master was so strong that a statue of the dog has a prominent place in the official FDR memorial in Washington DC, sitting at the feet of President’s own Navy cape-draped statue.
emanating from the fallen Towers (83). The rescue dogs suffer emotionally as they are trained to locate the victims, too often an impossibility given the atomized nature of the destruction. The dogs’ inability to find victims leads to their whining and “scratch[ing] themselves restlessly” (84). But the dogs have agency in their actions as Fala reveals that the “Taliban experimented with nerve gas on us dogs. Psychologists say that notorious killers often vent their fury on animals. That made rescue-canines even more eager to do their job” (83). The rescue dogs’ efforts are not simply limited to fulfilling their training but are motivated acts of resistance against the Taliban and their mistreatment of Fala’s brethren. The imagery plays on two linked emotional vectors. The first vector connects the Enemy to psychotic killers and the popular narratives of serial killers who exhibit traits of animal cruelty in their youth as an early manifestation of their psychotic tendencies. These killers, like Ted Bundy and Jeffery Dahmer, are beyond reason in their psychotic state. The second vector, tied to the first, plays on the emotional capital of dogs, made evident in the popularity of animal characters in popular culture, such as Lassie and Benji. By uniting the two vectors into a singular image of the vilified Enemy, Fala has positioned the audience to view the Enemy as a totalized and alien Other.

The other major subject component of Fala’s monologue focuses on World War II and its relation to post 9/11 America. Fala discusses the similarities between the two historical periods, particularly the fear that gripped the nation during both times:

I guess that’s why I’ve come back. Consider me a historical therapy dog come to comfort you. I just want you to know that we went through really terrible times in the past. And we made it.

Oh, when we heard about Pearl… I won’t lie to you and say we weren’t scared. ‘Cause we were. All of us. Like most of you right now. (85-86)
The choice of words surrounding Fala’s return is important, that he is our “historical therapy dog come to comfort you.” But unlike a real therapy dog whose primary therapeutic benefit is its presence, allowing the patient comfort through tactile contact as well as a sense of being needed, Fala’s presence is metaphorical. Fala’s comfort is more than simply a reminder of the nation’s ability to overcome difficult times, including times of war. Fala’s comfort is a return to an imagined identity and past, a comfort in nostalgia. Fala goes on to cite examples of troubled times in the past and link them to the present condition, capping his case by relating a pivotal moment in U.S. history that he bore witness to, “Why, I was on Franklin’s lap when he gave this country very good advice. You people today need to hear it: ‘This great nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. We have nothing to fear but fear itself’” (86). But if we follow Fala’s narrative, FDR’s “Fear Itself” speech was given as a way of calming the nation after Pearl Harbor, except it was delivered not after the attack of 7 December 1941 but on 4 March 1933 as part of the President’s first inaugural speech. The national crisis wasn’t a World War but rather a Great Depression (and seeing as Roosevelt delivered the speech standing up, Fala is just lying when he says that he was on Franklin’s lap). Fala’s invoking the inaugural speech while discussing Pearl Harbor as it relates to 9/11 conflates history into an imagined and nostalgic narrative that affirms a desired identity more than contextualizing the historical moment via its relation to other historical moments and epochs.

Fala’s monologue “War Dogs” is distinctly different from the other monologues in *Voices from 9/11*, so much so that it seems to break away from the rest of the play and acts as a dramatic coda. While the other voices “from” 9/11 can be considered survivors
of the national trauma, Fala is ontologically distinct. Structurally speaking, the efficacy of “War Dogs” rests not in a continuation of the narrative, both of the play specifically and 9/11 in general, but rather as a framing device that can prescribe understanding and sense making, rather than objective description. The final monologue situates the audience to view 9/11 and the ensuing War on Terror through a refracted gaze, not through the material reality of the moment but rather through the medium of World War II nostalgia. The performative framing is punctuated in the final visual of the piece, “[T]he lights come up on the actors as they stand holding each other up (for moral support) so that they are looking like the famous Iwo Jima picture” (87). The final tableau of the play literally shapes the bodies of the actors, molding and conforming them into the image into the iconic image of World War II that came to represent strength, perseverance, and victory (an image that I discuss in detail in Chapter 5). World War II is used as a way of framing, of making sense of, the Real of 9/11. Instead of acknowledging the onto-historical moment of 11 September 2001, the terror attacks are re-imagined to conform not to the material history of the late 1930s to mid-1940s, but rather to the cultural fantasy of World War II, produced by Hollywood and its stars, such as John Wayne and his fantasy legacy.

The final image of the actors holding each other up and replicating the Iwo Jima flag raising photo not only expresses the interpretative strategy of World War II nostalgia in order to make sense of 9/11, but also gestures towards a desire to restore through familiar behavior the imagined heroic American character. The play’s performative prescription as embodied by the Iwo Jima tableau underpins the cultural reading of 9/11 and the larger War on Terror. The play’s demonstration of desire also serves as the
launching point in my discussion of the Iraq War. Although widely viewed today as a
distraction from battling al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, seven out of ten
Americans supported Operation Iraqi Freedom at the war’s outset in 2003 (Newport).
There is little doubt that the Bush administration manipulated the public’s perception
concerning Iraq and supposed weapons of mass destruction, but such an overwhelming
unity in a normally polarized public body suggests other forces at work. Given how
World War II nostalgia was used as a dominant interpretive strategy by the
administration, media, and public at large, the prospect and imagined execution of a war
with Iraq fulfilled the desire to restore the American identity through violence in an
accessible and already understood performance, a performance as spectacular as 9/11 or
any piece of cinema.

Re-Imagining War

Hours after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, President Bush addressed the nation to
offer words of resolve and comfort, which included the following: “Terrorist attacks can
shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of
America. These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve”
(www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html). The effectiveness of
terror lies in the psychological trauma and not necessarily in the physical. Although the
spectacle of 9/11 lead to the destruction of a large portion of lower Manhattan, a section
of the Pentagon, and an empty field in Pennsylvania, the true impact of the planes

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16 As a show of ideological solidarity, newspapers across the nation inserted a
reproduction of the United States flag with Bush’s quote on the back, reproducing the
ideological trope through a performative gesture of patriotism.
crashing into the Twin Towers destabilized the American subject as an ideologically shaped entity and, despite the President’s address, did “touch the foundation” of America. The events of 9/11 expose the precarious nature of the American subject as subject in Lacanian terms, in that the violence of the Real exposes the hole within the Imagined ideology of America, much like the exposed hole in the skyline left behind in the absence of the Twin Towers. The power and efficacy of ideology lies in its ability to reassert itself onto the subject in times of contention and insecurities. Ideology’s strategy of reassertion in the face of its own inadequacy when confronted by the Real is two-fold: the first lies in its ability to identify an Enemy onto which ideology can project its deficiencies, maneuvering around its limitations; the second is to re-declare its position and supremacy, not through coercion but through the subject’s desire for ideology’s supremacy. This dual strategy coalesces through the performance of the regeneration-through-violence scenario.

Regenerative violence manifests itself through various forms, ranging from the “fictional” world of Hollywood to the “real” world of politics and war and oscillating and blurring the line that demarcates the two. Ideology creates the ontological and epistemological frame in which the subject views and understands the world and his or her place in it, the way the subject perceives and understands reality. The narrativizing and theatricalization of a reality that conforms to the dictates of ideology shapes the subject’s cognition, creating the matrix of interpellation that constructs the subject.

As Louis Althusser argues, interpellating the subject begins prior to the subject’s birth and is ongoing through various institutionalized power relations called Ideological State Apparatuses or ISA, which include, but are not limited to, education, political,
communications, and cultural apparatuses (96). These ISA work together to reinforce dominant ideology as it continuously constructs the subject through the inclusion, exclusion, and formulation of material in promoting a singular and homogeneous worldview. The different ISA not only dictate how the subject views the material reality but also manages the subject’s expectations through existing scenarios. These scenarios can be found in the framing of events leading up to and during the early days of the War in Iraq, the pre-emptive extension of the War on Terror. The intersection between cultural imaginings and past performances, particularly the most powerful cultural ISA, Hollywood films, help construct the theatrical spectacles of war that reify an Imagined America and its ideological foundation. These mediatized narratives help emplot the material events of the real world into familiar and desired scenarios. These moments of theatricality not only take their cue from the past narratives but also reinforce the ontology of the American subject, creating the reality—or rather reality’s phenomenological reading, much like the ahistorical Fala and nostalgically derived framing of the War on Terror at the end of Voices from 9/11.

While there are numerous moments of theatricality in the Iraq war, this chapter will focus on the following three: former Secretary of State Colin Powell’s case at the United Nations against Iraq’s supposed weapons of mass destruction, Private Jessica Lynch’s captivity narrative, and President Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” landing on the USS Lincoln. The importance of these three moments lies in the power of theatricality’s creating reality. All three were self-consciously constructed and have proven to be false but their significance lies in creating the ideologically determined re-construction and understanding of a given constellation of events. While all three
moments were insistences of the regeneration-through-violence scenario, the actuality of events in Iraq—the Real of violence—have dis-articulated these desired narratives. Still, the power of ideology reasserts its subjugation, and this chapter concludes with another reiteration of regenerative violence through the ideological apparatus of Hollywood in its ongoing construction of the War on Terror.

This “Hollywood circuit” is far from impervious, as the epigraph at the opening of this chapter indicates. Ron Kovic’s bitter statement after the spinal cord injury that left him permanently paralyzed from the chest down during his second tour of duty in Vietnam reveals what is known as the “John Wayne Syndrome”: “… the soldier’s internalization of an ideal of superhuman military bravery, skill, and invulnerability to guilt and grief, which is identified at some point with ‘John Wayne’” (Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 519–520). When the ideological framing shatters (in this case through the Real of violence), John Wayne, once the *Imago* to live up to and give oneself to, becomes the object of resentment and anguish. As Kovic’s statement reveals, the ideological object goes beyond simple mimetic representations but takes on the metonymic equivalences where “the whole country” is “John Wayne” revealing the blending of the actual with the Imagined.

The syndrome is indicative of the ideological circulation of the symbolic American as represented in John Wayne—not the actual John Wayne, but the mythic John Wayne as characterized in his numerous westerns and war movies, especially the World War II movies. The mythic representation of John Wayne has been the focal point of many regeneration-through-violence reiterations. Slotkin’s description of the “John Wayne Syndrome” exemplifies how the ideologically driven representation interpellates
the subject: Wayne-as-myth becomes the Name-of-the-Father that dictates the Law. The
subject’s triangular relationship between the Symbolic Father and the Law is tied to the
threat of castration (ironically Kovic looses the functionality of his penis “for” John
Wayne). Through the Hollywood/cultural ISA and its theatrical representations, the
subject internalizes those Imagined traits of the Father in order to situate him/herself in
the Father position, what amounts to the ego-ideal; the desire to go to war and fight for
America (not necessarily for the United States, but America-as-Imagined) fulfills the
obligation to the subjection, becoming the defender of America. The end result,
however, is a rupturing of the Imaginary by the Real: Kovic did not undergo regeneration
through his violent experience of war, but rather suffered the trauma of the Real, the
shattering of his ideological frame and symbolic network as well as his own body.¹⁷

While the Kovic instance demonstrates how ideological framing of the
representation can be shattered, it also shows how potent that frame is in the subject
formation. The fantasy representation, theatricalized and embodied in the imagined
character of John Wayne, sublimates the subject into internalizing the Law—the mandate
of the American Narrative—producing an obligatory gesture (as opposed to a coercive
one). The fantasy representation identifies the lack and, through the function of desire,
moves the subject towards what Lacan calls the manqué-a-être, the want-to-be (Four

¹⁷ The investment in the regeneration-through-violence trope is pervasive within the
psyche of the American subject, as ironically shown in Oliver Stone’s biographical film
of Ron Kovic, Born on the 4th of July. Prior to his war injuries, Kovic (played by Tom
Cruise) is represented as little more than a conservative drone whose desire to fulfill his
patriotic duty leads him to Vietnam. Kovic’s awakening as a fully “independent”
individual who now opposes the war comes about because of the violence that he suffers.
His “awakening”—or regeneration—is a direct result of violence, thereby reiterating the
trope that, to some degree, the anti-war film is trying to intervene against.
While the celluloid body of John Wayne has become the iconic representation to the phantasmic America, it is what John Wayne signifies that is reiterated time and again in popular U.S. cinema: the constitution of the American Hero.

**Theatricalized Mediatizations:**

As important as the representative American hero is, the mode in which the representation is conveyed—its mediation, or rather, to borrow from Fredric Jameson and Philip Auslander, its mediatization is equally important. In *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, Philip Auslander argues that the ontology of performance is no longer based on its essential “liveness” but on its relationship to “mediatization.” Due to the media saturation of advanced capitalism, the subject, particularly the subject within the United States, undergoes his/her subjectivation through the televisual image. The conceptual field of reality—its authenticity—is determined by its inter-subjective relationship with the televisual. The televisual image (whether it be television, film, or the internet) now dominates the cultural circulation of representations as “the mediatized replaces the live within the cultural economy, the live itself incorporates the mediatized, both technologically and epistemologically” (39).

But the vector of mediatization also moves in the opposite direction, as was the case in the September 11\textsuperscript{th} attacks. The attacks on the Twin Towers was as clear an example as one can find in the last 25 years of the rupture of the Symbolic and the subsequent encounter of the Real. Not only was the event of the second plane crashing into the tower televised live (it would just be a short period of time before the surfacing of video tape that captured the first plane crashing), it was replayed over and over again.
By the time the towers fell, there were hundreds of video cameras in lower Manhattan taping terrified people desperately running away from the debris and bellowing dust, which was then replayed time and again in the coming hours and days after the attack. Throughout, the events were consistently put in a cinematic context, as something that might be seen in the movies. The images of that day did resemble many Hollywood films that featured apocalyptic visions of destruction, perhaps most notably *Independence Day*. Such invocations call attention to the death-wish fantasies, which are tied directly to Hollywood apocalyptic melodramas, where either New York or Los Angeles (or both) suffers from some cataclysmic event that atomizes the cityscape, destroying what happen to be the two largest markets of movie ticket sales. In the days and weeks that followed the attacks, it seemed that the only way to discuss the spectacle of the attacks were in the language of such past films. The abundance of the video that recorded the events, from the planes crashing into the buildings, people jumping out of windows, the Towers collapsing, and the walking wounded who were covered in white from the dust and resembled ghosts, lent themselves to being edited together from multiple camera angles into a coherent narrative that became in and of itself like a movie, one that we had “already seen… over and over again” (*Zizek, Desert of the Real* 17) in the numerous apocalyptic melodramatic summer blockbusters. Not only is the “authenticity” dictated through its own mediatization, but the Real is twice mediatized: first in the experiencing

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18 The intertextual referencing by the media reached its absurdist, and at the same time revealing, collision when the satiric fake newspaper *The Onion* ran a headline “American Life Turns Into Bad Jerry Bruckheimer Movie” when it began publishing its articles again on September 26, 2001 (http://www.theonion.com/content/node/28144).
of the event on television and, secondly, in trying to understand the event by using movie references.

The mediatized and spectacular encounter of the 9/11 attacks had burned itself onto the psyche of the American public, searing its imagery onto the collective conscious. For an audience raised with the spectacle of Hollywood and melodramatic narratives, the expected response to the attacks should be equally spectacular. I have discussed the impact of *Spider-man* and its cognitive relationship to the post-9/11 American Identity in chapter 1, but it is also important to point out the preceding summer’s blockbuster hit, *Pearl Harbor* (2001). There should be little to no surprise, given the nature of the attack, that there were numerous references to that day of 7 December 1941 by politicians and television news personas. But the identification between the events of 9/11 and Pearl Harbor goes beyond the “sneak attack” quality of hijacked commercial airliners. Prior to the 9/11 attacks, there had been a rise of nostalgia regarding the Second World War, which the film *Pearl Harbor* had capitalized on. The antecedents of *Pearl Harbor* in the nostalgic phase included Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* (1998), and HBO’s *Band of Brothers* (2001). Outside the world of cinema, the nostalgia of World War II was encapsulated in Tom Brokaw’s *The Greatest Generation*, which celebrated the generation of World War II veterans who not only fought the ultimate modern war between good and evil, but also survived the economic strife of the Great Depression. Seemingly unlike the current generation of self-indulgences and instant gratification, that earlier generation endured strife and sacrifice to make the world a better place—yet another reiteration of regeneration through violence. Several reiterations of World War II nostalgia narratives quickly followed the events of
9/11 (already in production at the time of the attacks), including John Woo’s *The Windtalkers* (2002) and Gregory Hoblit’s *Hart’s War* (2002). There were even re-treatments of the United States’ unpopular Vietnam War in Randall Wallace’s *We Were Soldiers* (2002), which followed the nostalgic feel of World War II movies (the “good” war), rather than other Vietnam films (the “bad” war) such as Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986) and *Born on the 4th of July* (1989), John Irvin’s *Hamburger Hill* (1987), Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979).

The World War II nostalgia in this new Vietnam film worked at exorcising the horrors and excess (read “failure”) of Vietnam; *We Were Soldiers* circumvents the popular view/narrative of Vietnam by wrapping the spirit of World War II around the geography of Southeast Asia. In its downplaying of the cultural impact of the first televised war, the film projects the war into the ideologically-determined Imagined, leaving the historical behind. As the spectre of Vietnam was overpowered by the monolithic image/spirit of World War II while the nation suffered the continuing trauma of 9/11, the American subject found itself well situated to enter the “War on Terror.”

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19 The rewriting of history by Hollywood and its role of the “ideological state apparatus” is not limited to the Vietnam War, but extends to World War II itself, moving the nostalgia into the blending of contemporary advance capitalism and the sublime, as Frank Rich notes from *Pearl Harbor*, “The vapid *Pearl Harbor* was an essential historical artifact anyway—not of its ostensible subject but of the tranquil American summer of 2001. The forty minute bombing sequence looked like a state-of-the-art video game, with even the bloodshed sanitized to preserve the financially desirable PG-13 rating. The flyboy fashions, complete with product placements for Ray-Ban, were as pristine as those in the Abercrombie & Fitch catalogue. The war itself was transformed into a content-free but vaguely uplifting exercise in team gamesmanship whose main purpose was to put randy pilots in proximity to bodacious nurses. America is invincible; any and every battle can be won without working up a sweat. Even medical miracles are effortlessly within reach: in one scene of high drama, FDR, trying to rally his Cabinet, miraculously rises from his wheelchair to stand on his own two feet, polio be damned” (9–10).
Putting the War on Terror in a theatrical performance context, the public-as-audience had developed a particular “horizon of expectation.” According to Susan Bennett, the “horizon of expectation” is the audience’s anticipation of any theatrical work based on past experiences and how the audience is socially (and ideologically) situated, which determines its interpretative strategies. The work is viewed as an object and compared to preceding works through intertextual cross-referencing based on structural and aesthetic criteria (48–50). In this case the works that determine the horizon are not limited to the actual events of 9/11, but include: the mediatization of the events, cinematic representations of the war (particularly the nostalgia of World War II), and melodramatic narratives (such as Spider-man) all circulating through the cultural economy. The news media, pundits, and the Bush administration developed and performed a narrative that followed a war movie/summer blockbuster three-act melodrama structure. The first act includes the instigating event of 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan as its rising action. The War on Terror’s second act is the lead up to and invasion of Iraq, filled with complications and downturns. And the final act culminates in the victory in Iraq and the climactic “Mission Accomplished” spectacle aboard the USS Lincoln.

The mediatized encounter of the attacks not only traumatized the nation; it also raised the nation’s horizon of expectations regarding the act to come in the narrative that emerged. These vectors fed into the horizon of expectations for the public as the War on Terror narrative began to develop, a war-narrative invested in the regeneration-through-violence scenario that is an essential element to the American Grand Narrative. Time and again the pundits and politicians argued that the world changed on that day in September,
that we are now living in a post-9/11 world, an epistemological shift that constituted post-
9/11 thinking, but as Terry Eagleton reminds us: “The term ‘post’, if it has any meaning
at all, means business as usual, only more so” (The Illusion of Postmodernism 381).

The Theatrics of War

If the American public’s horizon of expectation called for a mediatized spectacle
that matched the events of 9/11, then the first campaign in the War on Terror proved to be
wanting. The Afghanistan campaign was represented in the same manner as previous
wars in recent memory, the Persian Gulf War of the early 1990s and the NATO
intervention in the former Yugoslavia. In both conflicts, the images of the wars were
mostly confined to the cameras mounted on the “smart” missiles or on jet fighters that
accompanied the ordinance. Portrayed vividly through night-time lenses, the world
watched on the news as green-hued enemy targets were destroyed, enveloped by blinding
white light, or, in the more “interactive” mode, the target increased in size within the
frame of the mounted camera (and our televisions) before its decimation, as signified by
the static trace left behind on the monitor. Still haunted by the spectre of Vietnam (the
images of violence, the dead on both sides, and the subsequent failure to achieve victory),
the government limited the exposure of the news media and tightly controlled the
imagery coming out of the battle zones. As Vietnam proved, the general public may
support (and desire) war on a conceptual level, but become disenchanted when they view
the human cost of war, particularly images of dead U.S. soldiers. The first Bush
administration began the policy of prohibiting photographs of the flag-draped coffins of
U.S. soldiers as they arrived for burial. For the Persian Gulf and Yugoslavia wars, the
public was kept at a distance and lulled into a cognitive safety-zone where war can be fought without the price of human bodies (particularly U.S. bodies). Still the Afghanistan campaign proved to be something of a disappointment: not only did Osama bin Laden, along with his top lieutenants and Taliban leaders, escape “Infinite Justice” (later re-titled “Enduring Freedom” since only God’s justice can be infinite, although the original title does give insight to the Manichaean ontology of the war-as-narrativized); but the war failed to meet the public’s horizon of expectation, lacking the spectactority of the instigating event (the long distance camera shots of the bombing of the Tora Bora mountains did not carry the same visceral impact as the relatively close-up shots of the planes crashing into the WTC and its aftermath). But before the close of the first act in the War on Terror, the Bush administration was already beginning to set the stage for the second act.

On 29 January 2002, President Bush outlined his goal-oriented agenda in his State of the Union speech regarding the War on Terror. In the first part of his speech, President Bush discussed the current military campaign in Afghanistan and the pursuit of those directly responsible for the attacks on the World Trade Center, including the Taliban government that provided a base of operations, as well as the elimination of terrorist cells that posed a direct threat to the security of the United States. In the second part of his speech, the president outlined the larger scope of the War on Terror, which became Bush’s “pre-emptive strike” doctrine for nations the United States considered as potential threats due to their believed pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and supporting of terrorists. Below is an extended quote to demonstrate how the enemies are
situating with and against each other in order to contextualize their role in the War on Terror narrative:

Our second goal is to prevent regimes that sponsor terror from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction. Some of these regimes have been pretty quiet since September the 11th. But we know their true nature. North Korea is a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens.

Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom.

Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror. The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax, and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons for over a decade. This is a regime that has already used poison gas to murder thousands of its own citizens—leaving the bodies of mothers huddled over their dead children. This is a regime that agreed to international inspections—then kicked out the inspectors. This is a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world.

States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic.

In his speech Bush lays out three potential enemies for the United States: North Korea, Iran, and Iraq. But he makes clear which poses the greatest threat by the amount of time he spends speaking of the three different powers: North Korea and Iran are both given a single sentence each (17 words dedicated to the former and 19 words for the latter). But Bush uses four sentences consisting of 86 words to discuss Iraq, amounting to a short list of the Hussein regime’s atrocities. Not only is the regime duplicitous, containing a secret agenda, it has aggressively killed its own citizens. President Bush argues that North Korea is killing its own citizens through starvation, but is somewhat ambiguous with its claim: is North Korea starving its citizens due to its misplaced priorities of pursuing weapons or is the starvation a parallel act that is not causally connected to the weapons?
While President Bush most likely means the latter, he does not offer any clarification or expansion of thought, unlike his argument against Iraq. In discussing Iraq Bush also uses emotionally charged signifiers—mothers and children—that are both heroic and victimized: “leaving the bodies of mothers huddled over their dead children.” This picture of mothers sacrificing themselves for the safety of their defenseless children is a familiar scenario in melodrama; it enhances the sign-value of Hussein as villain. Not only does the mothers/children scenario situate the audience to view the Iraqi regime as a force of evil but it also silences those who may oppose a move towards war, a strategy the administration has invoked time and again (As Bush, his spokespeople, and pundits who supported the invasion of Iraq often put it, “Are you saying that the world is a better place with Saddam Hussein still running Iraq?”).

Bush makes another strategic move by linking the three nation-states as an “Axis of Evil.” While “Evil” may be the obvious melodramatic codified signifier, “Axis” also carries a history embedded with melodramatic content as it is part of the World War II nostalgia already in the cultural economy. The term invokes the memory of the Axis Powers that consisted of Fascist Italy, Imperial Japan, and Nazi Germany. In doing so Bush wraps the spirit of World War II around the current War on Terror through the linguistic association. This is a twofold move: first the move plays on the nation’s fear of another attack, but this time with weapons of mass destruction, articulating an apocalyptic melodrama (the smoking gun of Iraq’s weapons program could be a mushroom cloud); the second move does not only validates a war, but also valorizes it. Validation may view the action taken as something unwanted but needed, while valorization celebrates the act itself by imbuing it with increased cultural valuation. By
collapsing the War on Terror with World War II iconography, Bush connects the mythic Greatest Generation with today’s generation in the fight for the American ideal of freedom. Connecting Iraq with World War II is not necessarily a new strategy: George H.W. Bush called Hussein the “Hitler” of the Middle East when he was making his case for the first Gulf War (Kellner 41), comparing Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait with Hitler’s invasion of Poland after the annexation of Austria and parts of Czechoslovakia. For H.W. Bush, both Hitler and Hussein shared a desire for war of aggression that was insatiable. Collapsing the mythologized past with the present participates in the justification of future actions. As Hannah Arendt argues in her book *On Violence*, power—whether it be institutional or personal—rests its legitimacy on its past (52). And it uses that legitimacy to justify its position and arguments. Using the iconography of World War II, the Bush administration legitimizes its argument for war in Iraq, not only by drawing false parallels between the Axis Powers of Germany, Italy, and Japan and the artificially constituted Axis of Evil, which the U.S. identifies as Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, but speaks with a self-identified voice of moral eminence, an eminence that derives its power from its adherence to a nostalgic past.

Even after the second Iraq war began and grew unpopular, there have been further links to World War II and the amalgamated War on Terror: both President Bush and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld likened those war critics calling for troop redeployment to former English Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and other Nazi appeasers. Following the conflation rhetoric of World War II with the War on Terror, a term has gained momentum meant to embody the terrorists: Islamo-fascist (*fascist* being the key term). In line with the logic of melodrama where the hero is measured against his
villain, the United States elevates its moral standing by linking the terrorists with the prime signifier of evil, the Nazis.

This narrative with its invocation of Hitler’s ghost serves another function: it reconstitutes and reiterates the American identity, which was damaged during the 9/11 attacks. Here and in future usage, I am borrowing Marvin Carlson’s idea of ghosting, which he defines as the “process of using the memory of previous encounters to understand and interpret encounters with new and somewhat different but apparently similar phenomena…” (*The Haunted Stage* 6). Through invocation of the ghost the audience is able to understand, or make sense of, the present encounter. For Carlson, ghosting is an aspect distinct to theatre. I would expand his use of the term by projecting it onto theatrical events beyond the walls of the theatre-as-institution. In the theatrical event, it is possible to invoke the ghosts of the past to situate the audience into a particular position, determining its interpretive strategies. While not monolithic in interpretation, the ghosting directs the audience’s memory—not necessarily lived but always constructed, even through popular and mass culture—to interpret the event in a particular way. In addition, the constructed memory aids in the reconstitution and reiteration of the American Identity through the amalgamation of past and present. Invoking Hitler’s ghost not only determines the audience’s interpretive strategies but also situates them and their “role” in the current experience and narrative. As Murray Edelman notes in his *Constructing Political Spectacle*:

To support a war against a foreign aggressor who threatens national sovereignty and moral decencies is to construct oneself as a member of a nation of innocent heroes. To define the people one hurts as evil is to define oneself as virtuous. The narrative establishes the identities of enemy and victim-savior by defining the latter as emerging from an
innocent past and as destined to help bring about a brighter future world cleansed of the contamination the enemy embodies. (76)

The good-versus-evil binary structure of war narratives situates the subject to occupy the position of the hero against the identified evil enemy, thereby swaying public opinion for war. For those who desire war, the narrative valorizes the identity subject as the true, strong hero that, in the case of Iraq, would bring freedom and democracy to the people who are subjected to tyranny and violence, as well as eliminate the perceived threat of apocalyptic annihilation from the presumed weapons of mass destruction.

There were some critics who were wary of such an expansion, such as Richard Clarke, former chief advisor on terrorism for both the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations. For Clarke, there was a serious and profound disconnect between the events of 9/11 and the new push for war with Iraq: “…but Iraq had nothing to do with it…. Invading Iraq or bombing Iraq after we’re attacked by somebody else, you know, it’s akin to what if Franklin Roosevelt after Pearl Harbor, instead of going to war with Japan, said, let’s invade Mexico” (quoted in Rich 115). Clarke’s argument does follow the logic of causality (as well as draw on the World War II nostalgia), but the Bush administration did not label the conflict emerging from Ground Zero as a war on Al Qaeda or Osama bin Laden. The Bush administration labeled the new conflict a War on Terror. The United States, according to the administration’s logic, is at war with a concept, a state of being, not a nation-state. With no clear single Enemy, the War on Terror allows for the malleability of the Enemy to be whoever/whomever is identified and named as the Enemy. As discussed in Chapter 1, the American subject was ready to see Osama bin Laden in the mask of the Green Goblin as they maintained the singular
object position of the Enemy. In line with the logic of waging a war on a concept and a polymorphic Enemy, it would not take much to affix Hussein’s visage with the Enemy’s mask. Shifting focus away from bin Laden and onto Hussein provided a more spectacular engagement. In the same meeting where Clarke expressed his reservations concerning Iraq, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld argued that going to war against Iraq would be far more beneficial than a war in Afghanistan because “there are better targets in Iraq” (Rich 115).

Rumsfeld’s statement reveals the desire for spectacle in that the “better targets” are recognizable from the previous Iraq engagements, both in symbolic and material terms, leading to a more visually dramatic engagement. While Afghanistan was the base for Al Qaeda, as a nation-state it was unrecognizable to the United States general public. But Iraq’s re-signification as Enemy in the Greatest Generation/World War II narrative that had emerged over the last decade, along with industrialized targets, served as a “better” Enemy to engage. Iraq-as-signifier underwent a signification split: in the first part of the split, the nation-state served as an extension of Hussein where the supposed weapons of mass destruction became the metonymic device of Hussein; in the second part, Iraq served as a space for potential liberation, not only for the Iraqi people who suffered under the authoritarian dictatorship of Hussein, but also for the Middle East as a whole as Western-style democracy would engulf the region. The “better targets” also served the administration’s desire for theatricality, a photogenic war that would/could better serve the narrative and the public’s expectations, as evidence in the name of the initial phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom, “Shock and Awe.” The spectacle of the war event became the response to the spectacular 9/11 attacks and satisfied the public’s
horizon of expectations. The administration’s argument for its “preemptive strike” policy was that the “enemy” attacked us on 9/11 and wants to destroy us. The United States is responding to that attack, image for image. As the zero hour for war ticked downward, the media had video cameras set up around key targets throughout Baghdad, waiting for the moment of America’s power. As the bombs fell, both the world and the Enemy (real, potential, and Imagined) would be in a state of “awe” over the military might of the United States and frozen with “shock” by its ferocity. The ontology of the theatrical event of “shock and awe” presented itself when the media questioned the administration for the opening salvo that produced little shock or awe. President Bush explained that the attack was not part of the event, but was an opportunity for “decapitation.” It was believed that Hussein, his sons, and his top lieutenants were in one of Hussein’s many houses and the Bush administration felt that the opportunity of cutting off the head of the Iraqi military could not be ignored. The president, along with Donald Rumsfeld, told the media that when the war proper actually began, they would recognize “shock and awe.”

While the media may have been critical of the false start of “shock and awe,” there was little critical inquiry leading up to the war; it was stifled in part by the rhetoric and patriotic fervor of pundits and politicians that engulfed the airways. There have been recent publications that critique the media’s role towards the march to war, most notably Frank Rich’s *The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9/11 to Katrina*. Rich rightfully argues the complacency of the media regarding its failure to press the administration concerning Iraq and its supposed weapons of mass destruction. However, Rich approaches the media’s failure in black-and-white terms and dismisses the larger, more complex subjugation within the extended ideological narrative. Those
reporters are themselves subjects, interpellated within the ideologically determined ontology of America and, as subjects, suffered the trauma of 9/11. The void of Ground Zero reflected the void left behind through the rupturing of the Imagined by the violent encounter of the Real. There was a desire to overcome this void and, as indicated earlier regarding Terry Eagleton’s defining of “post,” there was a return to the same, only more so. In the desire to make sense of the insensible, there was a projection of a morally just universe onto the administration as embodied in the symbolic stand-in of the Father, President Bush. An example of this can be seen in Hugh Dougherty’s piece written for the Associated Press after Bush’s first visit to Ground Zero on 14 September 2001. As Bush stood with a retired firefighter who volunteered with the rescue and recovery efforts, he was met with cheers from the rescue workers who chanted “U.S.A.” and “Don’t let them get away.” The moment is perhaps most famous for Bush’s exclamation, “Well I can hear you. The whole world can hear you. And the people who knocked down these buildings will hear all of us soon” in response to some calls in the crowd claiming they could not hear the President. While these performative gestures are important, what is equally significant in terms of the subject’s interpellation within the American narrative is Dougherty’s description of the weather during Bush’s visit: “Mr. Bush had arrived in New York at almost the exact time that the heavy rain which had disrupted rescue efforts and made the area now known as ‘ground zero’ even more treacherous turned to sunshine.” Not only did the President bring words of comfort and retribution to Ground Zero, Dougherty’s narrative has him bring favorable weather. Of course it should not be taken literally, but the visual imagery of the clouds parting for Bush’s arrival, and the fact that Dougherty points it out, fits the melodramatic structure of the
hero’s arrival followed by the halo of the sun, which marked the return of a just universe.

As Dougherty goes on, the hero’s arrival scenario is coupled with the regeneration-through-violence scenario: “Initially looking gaunt and drawn, Mr. Bush came away from the tour visibly energised [sic] by his meeting with some of the thousands working in the effort to find survivors.” Dougherty makes note of the fatigued Bush’s transformation as he traversed the sublime space of Ground Zero—he walked on the dead, the victims of violence, and he met with the rescue workers, who themselves were revitalized (as performed through their cheers) in their meeting with the President. The solemnity of the dead gave way to the desire for retribution. Not only was the cheering crowd ontologically indicative of the moment—their role in the narrative that was performing itself—but so was the representation of the theatrical moment as scribed by Dougherty through both the content and the form: not just by what he noticed but also how he noticed it; the episteme through the ontological, simultaneously bearing witness and participating in the event. The moment reveals how entrenched the narrative is within the ideological unconscious and how it structures the way of thinking and seeing the world. It also directs our desires, determining the big Object of desire, the Enemy, which will eventually manifest itself as the Lacanian objet petit a,\(^{20}\) Saddam Hussein.

As Dougherty’s report performs, George W. Bush was imbued with a tremendous amount of symbolic authority, what the pundits called “political good will.” As the nation reeled from seeing the face of the Real in the 9/11 attacks, there was a desire for a leader, a “hero,” to lead the nation in the time of crisis, much like the cowboy hero that

\(^{20}\) For Lacan, the objet petit a is the corporeal manifestation of the Grand “Autre” or Other, the imagined, conceptually constructed entity of the subject’s desire (\textit{Four Fundamental 282}).
will save the town of Shinebone from the terror of Liberty Valance in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). And it may sound serendipitous that the president had spent his political life constructing such a “cowboy” persona. Although born in New Haven, Connecticut, Bush has long established his “true” home as Crawford, Texas. During his time in Texas, Bush had re-constructed his identity into that of the cowboy, performing his swaggering gait and his linguistic drawl. Bush performed his role of the Texas Ranger as he ran for governor in his adopted state and took that performance onto the national stage when he ran for president. After the 9/11 attacks, Bush continued his cowboy performance as seen in his handling of his “black hat” nemesis and invoking the mythic American west by calling for Osama bin Laden “dead or alive.”

Bush’s cowboy persona reflects the cowboy logic of foreign policy (the eradication of the savage Other to protect so-called true Americans or the U.S. Calvary idiom, “the only good Indian is a dead Indian”) and the call for preemptive strikes against those identified as terrorists or supporters of terror. Creating the conceptual War on Terror allowed for the conceptual Enemy to exist. The Enemy, not named, merely holds the subject position of Enemy, whose function allows for a transmutable referent, though not signified. Immediately following the 9/11 attacks, there were linguistic connections between Iraq and Al Qaeda. There were supposed direct connections as put forth by Vice President Dick Cheney (meetings between top officials from both Iraq and Al Qaeda in Prague, which were unfounded even though the Vice President continued the assertion) and there was guilt by linguistic association where Iraq (or Hussein) and Al Qaeda were used in the same sentence time and again. The audible linkage by the proximity of the two terms led many to believe that Hussein was directly involved in the attacks on New
York and the Pentagon, even though no hard evidence had been presented to prove a connection. But the consensus within the President’s circle was that the War on Terror would primarily take place in the Middle East, specifically Iraq. As the President had argued on numerous occasions, we are fighting the “terrorists over there, so we don’t have to fight them here.” The logic of fighting the terrorists “over there” establishes the frontier conceptual space that exists outside of the civilized conceptual space, protecting the civilized space from the Savage Enemy.

Bush’s re-creation of the mythic frontier positions Iraq within the epistemological frame of the war as it plays into the mythic American narrative and the bringing of civilization to the Wild West. The President has contended that the path to peace, to defeat radical Islam, is through the power of freedom and democracy. Once democracy is established in Iraq, it will spread throughout the rest of the Middle East, a global variation of the Manifest Destiny doctrine early in the nation’s life. But in a thinly veiled attempt to avoid colonial imperialism, the argument is in the form not of the military and political influence stemming from the United States, but of the Universal Truth of the Almighty: “Democracy is not the United States’ gift to the Middle East, but God’s gift to the world.” The United States merely delivers God’s gift at the barrel of the gun. This delivery follows the logic of the American Frontier mythos as settlers converted the “heathen Indian savage” to Christianity, either in this world or the next.

Despite how the call for war narrative was theatrically constructed, there was, in the early days, concern about a war in Iraq. Contra to the neo-conservative claims of U.S. soldiers being welcomed as liberators, ghosting the Allied advancements in Nazi occupied countries during the Second World War, the spectre of Vietnam hovered in the
The argument for the United States involvement in Vietnam followed the logic of the “Domino Effect”: if Vietnam fell to communism, so would the rest of Southeast Asia. The spread of communism would then move into the rest of Asia and the Pacific Rim, including South Korea and Japan. Likewise, according to neo-conservative logic, once Iraq “embraces” freedom and democracy, then the rest of the Middle East would also succumb to freedom and democracy. But the Bush administration, while embracing the re-imagined domino effect, had been very careful in controlling the narrative and downplaying the ghost of Vietnam. I agree with Karen Shimakawa’s argument that the Vietnam War “constitutes an abject history” that routinely disappears from the “national conscience and self-image” and is in need of being jettisoned when it emerges because it does not fit the desired identity (14). In order to exorcize the ghost, or at least keep it hidden, the Bush administration, along with the mainstream U.S. media, invoked other ghosts in its theatrical spectacles to distance the Iraqi war from a potential Vietnam. The neo-conservative “Democracy Domino Effect” would next be theatricalized and ghosted by one of the most critical moments of the cold war: the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Making his case before the United Nations Security Council on 5 February 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell presented the evidence, compiled by the CIA and British Intelligence, showing Iraq’s continuing research and development of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. Powell’s presentation channeled the ghost of the Cuban Missile Crisis and was a re-presentation of United Nations Ambassador Adlai Stevenson’s own performance before the U.N. Security Council on 25 October 1962. Stevenson needed to make the case before the U.N. and the court of public opinion worldwide that the Soviet Union had medium-range nuclear missiles in Cuba and were
aiming them at the United States according to U2 spy photographs. If the Soviets did not remove the missiles, then the United States would view those missiles as an act of aggression on the Soviet’s part. During an emotional and theatricalized series of questions, Stevenson managed to catch Soviet U.N. Ambassador Valerian Zorin in a contradiction and presented the spy photographs proving the missiles’ existence. While Stevenson’s presentation alone did not remove the missiles from Cuba, it did provide the United States the moral position to act if it decided to do so. Secretary Powell’s goal was very much the same as Stevenson’s and, in many respects, succeeded in its desired goal: achieving U.N. resolutions that gave the United States the “green light” to invade Iraq.

However, what was strikingly different between the two UN presentations was the evidence. While Stevenson provided satellite photographs clearly showing the missiles in Cuba, Powell’s satellite photographs were ambiguous. They showed buildings and bunkers, but the labels that identified weapon strongholds did not have any visual, physical evidence of weapons. The labels were based on assertions and assumptions. Powell produced other articles of evidence such as a vial filled with white powder, but while he spoke of how a tablespoon of anthrax had shut down Washington D.C., the vial he held did not contain anthrax, nor was it from Iraq. Instead it was a prop held for effect, which Powell linked to the terrorist attack after 9/11 where members of Senate

21 One of the most memorable moments of the exchange was Stevenson’s questioning of the Soviet ambassador. Quickly after Stevenson asked his questions regarding his knowledge of missiles in Cuba, Stevenson pressed him to answer, demanding that he not “wait for the interpretation,” as Zorin did not understand English and was wearing his headset for translation. Stevenson’s pressing Zorin not to wait for the translation was a theatricalized gesture on Stevenson’s part that the Soviet ambassador, and by extension the Soviet Union, was practicing deception—he knew that there were missiles and pretended not to, just as he understood what was being asked of him, although he “pretended” to need the translation to respond.
received anthrax-laden envelops. The vial was both a mimetic and a metonymic device for Iraq’s biological and chemical weapons. Powell’s performance follows the same strategies mentioned earlier through guilt by linguistic association: tying Iraq, and by extension Hussein, to the terrorist attacks.

The other evidence of note was pictures of the mobile chemical weapon labs. Instead of presenting photos of actual trucks, Powell presented artist renderings of trucks as mobile chemical weapon labs. While no photographs had be taken of these trucks, the administration argued that such trucks did indeed exist. The artifice of the “evidence” presented exposes the administration’s theatricality and its construction of reality. I believe it is necessary to point out that the artifice of the evidence, their prop-ness, does not imply that the argument made was insincere or untruthful, but rather that it was self-consciously constructed as theatre. There is a strong belief among many theatre artists that, through the constructed artifice of theatre, truth is revealed. But the efficacy of truth in theatre is not the same as the efficacy of reality through theatricality. The theatrical performance in the United Nations, reaching a worldwide audience, holds material consequences. Theatricality constructs reality—although not necessarily truth.

In a New York Times article named “Without a Doubt,” Ron Suskind relates an exchange with a top Bush aide. In the exchange the aide distinguished between the methodology of the “reality-based community” and the administration. The “reality-based community” are defined as “people who ‘believe that solutions emerge from [their] judicious study of discernible reality.’” According to the aide, “[t]hat’s not the way the world really works anymore” and the United States is “an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re [those identified as “reality based


community”] studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors… and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do” (Suskind). The aide’s comments reveal not only the self-consciousness of the administrations own theatricality, but also the effectiveness of theatricality in its creating of reality, following Joachim Fiebach’s argument on theatricality. Fiebach argues that the theatricality of media and power confers “a status of incontrovertible truth to what is being constructed. In a sense, those montages not only pass as major manifestations of contemporary reality, they virtually constitute the reality” (33). For the aide, the actor acting creates the reality—the particulars of the elements of the event, their “factual” worth, holds less importance than the performance of the event itself. It is not the truth of the argument, but the constructed reality that becomes the theatre-oriented text—the narrative that is constructed for the theatrical. The artificiality of Powell’s production was less important to the “truthfulness” of the theatrical event, as was evident in the Security Council’s passing of its resolution that allowed United States to invade Iraq. The effectiveness of Powell’s theatrical presentation before the Security Council went beyond the international law as dictated by the United Nations, but it also positioned the United States, in the mind of the American subject, on the moral high ground. While the apocalyptic imagery of nuclear holocaust and anthrax plagues played on the fear of many, these images were coupled with the heroic casting of America against the Terror Enemy. The United Nations resolution may have helped garner members into the “Coalition of the Willing,” but the true impact was positioning the United States into the subject of Hero in its own narrative.
The subject position of Hero became evident when those who were meant to witness the war became participants. The Bush administration agreed to allow major media outlets to embed their reporters with different military units as the ground war began and many of the outlets literally jumped into the fray. During the Vietnam War, the media traveled with military units and reported the violence on a daily basis. While the Johnson administration discussed its victories in Vietnam, the televisual images of violence constructed a different storyline, particularly after the 1968 Tet Offensive. While a military victory for the United States, Tet indicated the North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese guerillas’ resolve not to capitulate, despite heavy losses. With the violence of Tet, along with graphic images of U.S. soldiers dying outside of the offensive and reports of war atrocities committed by U.S. soldiers, public opinion turned against the war effort, particularly when Walter Cronkite announced that he believed that the United States could not achieve victory. Since then, the United States government had strictly controlled the media’s coverage of military conflicts. During the first Gulf War, the media’s access was severely restricted, basically becoming a funnel for the Pentagon and the first Bush administration. The media’s lack of independence at the hands of the administration led to criticism and independent reporting. For Operation Iraqi Freedom, the administration and the Pentagon allowed the media to ride with the units in order for the media to give what the administration considered a more accurate perspective of the events on the ground. Of course, as many reporters have indicated, it is difficult to give objective reports on the unit that they are covering. When the reporter’s life is in the hands of the soldiers s/he covers, it proves difficult to be critical of what s/he witnesses,
because of not only the reporter’s safety but also the emotional attachments that are created under these circumstances, becoming part of the band of brothers.

Beyond the familiar connections with the troops they were meant to cover, the embedded reporters became part of what they were meant to witness and convey. Ridge’s critique of the media’s war coverage is its violation of objective reporting by the embedded reporters. The premise of Rich’s black-and-white argument involving the media’s war coverage lies in the Enlightenment conceit that the modalities of objectivity and neutrality are achievable. Of course absolute objectivity is impossible and any reporting, regardless of the political slant, is always already subjective. The reporters’ subjectivity is a product of their being ideologically formed subjects. The difference between the reporting of this war and previous engagements is the de-threading of the illusionary veil of objectivity as the mainstream media embedded itself within the war narrative as it oscillated between the positions of audience and actor.

The level of the media’s involvement in the war narrative manifested itself in several ways: CNN called their mobile media vehicle “Warrior One”; Geraldo Rivera was removed from his embedded position after he performed his imagined military status by drawing battle plans in the sand to viewers on Fox News, and possible Hussein loyalists; and televised, grand funerals for news reporters who died in Iraq, such as NBC’s David Bloom, who died not from enemy fire but from complications derived from blood clotting (while it is administration policy not to photograph or televise flag-draped coffins of service people, Bloom’s funeral was a spectacle for one of the media’s own, grander than any service person who died in Iraq). The media did not simply participate
in the events on the ground but actively constructed a theatricalized and valorized narrative that was taken as objective reality.

Despite the embedded nature of the war reporting and the media’s involvement in theatricalizing the narrative, no story captured the American imagination nor symbolized the hero more than that of Private Jessica Lynch. News reports came in from Iraq, telling how Iraqi forces ambushed a group of U.S. soldiers. The emerging narrative shared that these soldiers were not regular combat troops, but proved themselves on the battlefield fighting against Iraqi forces. As the news reports trickled out from the Pentagon to the press, the narrative began to unfold, telling of a young blond woman fighting, the last person of her company still standing, until she was wounded and captured by the Iraqi forces. The soldier was identified as Private Lynch and on 2 April 2003, just a few days after her detainment, she was rescued by a group of special operation soldiers, who captured the extraction on video. The press, in showing the video time and again, invoked its own “ghosting” by dubbing the story “Saving Private Lynch” echoing Steven Spielberg’s popular World War II movie, Saving Private Ryan (1998). Borrowing from

22 The gendered scenario of the Jessica Lynch story goes back to early American narratives, particularly the captivity narratives, such as Mary Rowlandson’s The Soveraignty & Goodness of God... a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration (1682). The early American captivity narrative focuses on a female, especially a virgin, who is kidnapped by the “Savage” Indian with the intention of making the captive his wife. The rescue normally comes in two modes: either the female escapes through the carelessness or ignorance of her captor or the men of her community rescue her. The successful “rescue” is contingent on the captive woman maintaining her “untouched” state, and part of the pornographic thrill was the near violation of the white woman by the red man (Slotkin, 93–103). During the media’s coverage of Jessica Lynch’s story, there was speculation and concern that she would have been violated since she was a woman, an adjustment substituting the Arab for the Indian. The fact that an Iraqi doctor cared for her and was responsible for letting the United States military know of her location did not
cinema vérité, the mise-en-scène of the video captured the reality of the moment: shaky frames, the gritty picture quality, and the greenish glow of night vision, all signifiers of the real and authentic. The video showed the desired melodramatic formation of the American identity: the hero rescued from her villainous captors by a team of heroes, following the trope of leaving no one behind. The video and narrative were both disseminated to the press by the Pentagon for public consumption, functioning as a dramatic second act complication to the overall War on Terror three act dramatic structure. However, as with the Powell speech, the events on the ground conflicted with the Pentagon’s melodramatic narrative. There were other members of the company that survived and were taken prisoner (who were later released) and the reports identifying Jessica Lynch as the last soldier fighting were also incorrect. Jessica Lynch had fallen early in the attack and another soldier was identified, a male soldier who happened to be blond.

Driven by the fragmented evidence and compelling video, the Pentagon constructed the melodramatic narrative it desired, or wished it to be, instead of holding the story until it had a more complete picture, and released the rescue video to the press who were more than willing to tell this story of American heroism. The Pentagon’s fragmentary narrative follows Hayden White’s concept of “emplotment”: “the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle of components of specific kinds of plot structures” (83). White uses the term emplotment in reference to the construction of historical narratives, but the same idea applies to the writing of contemporary “facts.” The writing receive the same amount of attention reveals the racial/sexual undertones to the narrative that harkens back to the rescue trope.
of history functions in the same way as the writing of the now: mediated through language, which is embedded with tropes and structures, the chronological events are written into a sense-making discourse. These tropes and structures are ideologically formed by, and function in the formation of, ideology. The sense-making allows for the subject to “understand” the reality that surrounds her/him. There is an ideological investment in a particular type of “emplotment” for the subject’s ontology—an overdetermination of the narrative’s ending, in both its construction and outcome, before all of the facts are known. The ideological investment is profound, leading to the suppression or downplaying of conflicting or contrary facts for the sake of the desired narrative. Driven by ratings, the television press knew that the American public would be glued to their TVs to see one of their own, a young, attractive woman who stood up against the Iraqi forces alone before succumbing to her injuries and then being rescued by more American heroes. When the facts of what actually happened emerged, the press relinquished its responsibility, blaming the Pentagon for misinformation. The Pentagon admitted that they released the information prematurely and were working on correcting the problem to insure that it does not happen in the future.

The power of the rescue-video spectacle and the narrative, despite its inaccuracies, proves the ideological power of melodramatic theatricality in its reproduction through the emplotment that occurred. Even as the facts regarding the Jessica Lynch story began to emerge, different networks were competing against each other to make a television movie of her story. NBC’s statement, as quoted on CNN.com, regarding the then-impending movie deal stated: “Like the rest of America, we shared in the collective thrill of witnessing the heroic and dramatic rescue of Pfc. Jessica Lynch.
Her inspiring story is one that provides a message of hope despite great odds” (http://www.cnn.com/2003/SHOWBIZ/TV/04/11/lynch.movie.reut.). NBC’s statement reiterates the melodrama of the “real” story in its desire to make a movie, a story that talked to Americans about being American. Ironically NBC wanted to make a movie based on a largely fictionalized story whose name, dubbed by the press and embraced by the administration in its distortions comes from Saving Private Ryan—the actual events are disregarded for the made-for-television movie that imitates the major motion picture. What is paramount is not the actual, but the simulacra as provided by the mediatization. The desire for NBC to represent the Jessica Lynch story following the inaccuracies for the more compelling story that “provides a message of hope despite great odds” reveals the ideological state apparatus functioning through the reiteration of the regeneration-through-violence trope embedded within the American Narrative. Without the capture and rescue, Lynch would have been yet another nameless soldier within the war narrative; with it, she now “inspires.” It is the “collective thrill” of our “witnessing” that is paramount and drives the telling of the story, even as what the collective witnessed proved to be inaccurate.

The desire to tell the Jessica Lynch story follows the logic of the administration quoted earlier: instead of being reality-based, the act—or the theatrical re-presentation—will create the reality, despite itself. While the factual events surrounding the Jessica Lynch narrative proved to be contradictory and false, the framing of the original narrative and the desire for its reiteration, where certain events are highlighted and others are downplayed to resemble the original, creates the reality of the American subject and his/her ontological status. The “Saving Private Lynch” narrative that emerged reveals the
reciprocal effect of ideology: first, the reiteration of the narrative reinforces the ideologically formed subject; second, reality is perceived and then constructed to fit the ideologically derived paradigm. The reciprocity of ideology creates the feedback loop for the subject, and theatricality functions as a conduit for that loop, where the event and the audience are intertwined and dependent on each other for their existence. Even when the event’s construction is highly and self-knowingly controlled, its power is dependent on the audience’s desire for it to have power, as exemplified in the highest moment of theatricality regarding the Iraq War and the third act climax to the War on Terror melodrama: President Bush’s landing on the U.S.S. Lincoln.

Of course to call President Bush’s landing on the aircraft carrier the highest moment of theatricality or the climax to the War on Terror melodrama may be contestable. That same argument could be made regarding the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue in Fardus Square, but I believe that the power of the aircraft carrier landing signified the melodramatic “climax” of the performed Iraqi War narrative. On 1 May 2003 President Bush, according to the official (administration) report, piloted a

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23 Despite its appearance of spontaneity, the event was highly constructed. Because of the news cameras’ mise-en-scène, it appeared that all of Baghdad had come out to pull down the statue but wide angle shots revealed that the square was mostly empty, and it has been reported that the citizens who partook in the toppling were members of Ahmed Chalabi’s Free Iraqi Forces and were transported to the square by the U.S. forces (sf.indymedia.org/news/2003/04/1598451_comment.php). As the Iraqi “citizens” tried to hammer the statue down, U.S. forces moved in and pulled the statue down with one of the armored vehicles, but not before a controversial move by one of the soldiers who draped an American flag over the face of the statue. The soldier was ordered to remove the American flag and replace it with a pre-Hussein Iraqi flag. It was feared that the draping of the American flag would signify that the United States and its “Coalition of the Willing” would appear as conquerors and not liberators. Of course the blatant signifier of the American flag was intertwined with the clothing of one particular Iraqi man who was wearing a *Rocky* t-shirt, an iconic Hollywood signifier.
Navy S-3B Viking jet and landed on the deck of the aircraft carrier as it was returning to its homeport after a long deployment at sea. The President, dressed in a flight suit, descended from the jet fighter and walked into a crowd of sailors and pilots where he posed for pictures. After changing into his traditional Presidential attire (dark blue suit, white shirt, and red tie) and in front of a giant banner that read “Mission Accomplished,” Bush gave a short speech declaring that major combat in Iraq was over. The entire event, from the landing to the end of the speech, was televised live on the three cable news channels and replayed over and over again on the national and local news programs. The images of the President, either in his flight suit or before the “Mission Accomplished” banner graced the front page of nearly every major United States newspaper.

The theatricality of the event did not escape the attention of the press covering the event. In Carla Marinucci’s front page article of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, she notes: “The day’s carefully choreographed events allowed the President a picturesque—and powerful—opportunity to express the nation’s gratitude to the troops in the glow of sunset while the Lincoln plowed toward San Diego after more than nine months at sea.” Marinucci goes onto to say, “Despite months of tying the U.S. military effort in Iraq to Saddam Hussein’s possession of biological and chemical weapons, the President in Thursday’s speech to the nation linked the war directly to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. ‘The battle of Iraq is one victory in a war on terror that began on Sept. 11, 2001, and still goes on… With those attacks, the terrorists and their supporters declared war on the United States. And war is what they got’” (Marinucci). The Lincoln spectacle served as an “ending” to the War on Terror narrative that began with 9/11, equipped with the melodramatic western trope of sunset. Although President Bush is not riding into the
sunset on his horse, the sunset trope is connected to the western dénouement signifying the cowboy hero’s triumph over evil. The Lincoln spectacle serves as the clearest example of the melodramatic structure and the circulation of signifiers that frame the Bush administration’s theatricality. Bush casts himself as himself in the role of the warrior leader commander-in-chief—costumed in military garb—descending from his jet onto the military craft and reiterating that America was attacked, without warrant, by the villains and, although peaceful in nature, America fought back. Using Hussein as the metonymic device for the abstracted Enemy, Bush was able to declare victory against the forces of evil, equipped with the cowboy trope of the setting sun in the distance.

Bush’s self-casting as fighter ace is reminiscent of Shadi Bartsch’s analysis of Nero in her *Actors in the Audience: Theatricality and Doublespeak, From Nero to Hadrian*. In her investigation of the ancient Roman emperor’s endeavors as a tragic actor, Bartsch notes that Nero’s choice of roles, such as Oedipus and Orestes, mirrored his incestuous and murderous past, doubling the signification of the theatrical engagements that the audience witnessed (39). As Nero took the stage, the audience space had transformed into a performance space under the panoptic gaze of the Emperor from his stage/observation position, along with the emperor’s soldiers wandering through the audience, insuring the proper response. While I am not trying to liken Bush to Nero, there are several convergences of theatricality: the first lies in the choice of roles. Nero took on roles that replicated his previous crimes while Bush took on a role of the desired warrior-in-chief. Bush’s enactment on board the USS Lincoln does not re-perform his past military experiences, but is an example of Schechner’s aforementioned “restored behavior”. The piloting and landing of the fighter on the aircraft carrier takes on a
symbolic and performative gesture of rebecoming something that may never had been, but is desired to be since Bush himself never flew in combat during his time with the Texas National Guard. While Nero played the “villain” and Bush played the “hero” in their respective dramas, both elevated their social standing through myth. As Nero elevated his own history through his performances of mythological characters, so did Bush elevate his own present through the ego-ideal of the American cowboy hero/president mythos. I will go into greater detail about the heroic president in a moment, but for now suffice it to say that the theatricality and performances constructed the desired ideological reality.

Another convergence between Nero’s theatricalities and President Bush’s lies in the performance of the audience-as-audience. For Nero’s audience, their lives were contingent on their favorable performance as audience for Nero. Those who did not perform favorably risked punishment at the hands of Nero and his soldiers. On the USS Lincoln, the immediate audience consisted of the navy personnel witnessing the president’s landing. Their lives were not at risk for an unfavorable response to the president’s theatrical arrival but their response was overdetermined by the event they found themselves participating in. Not only were they coming home from an extended deployment but also the crew became the focus of worldwide attention as they watched their commander-in-chief make a spectacular entrance. However, their role as audience was transformed into actors as another audience entered the event: the audience watching at home on television. In front of the media’s cameras, the crew of the USS Lincoln performed their role as “audience” in the larger theatrical event, cheering and greeting their hero-president as he descended from the fighter and vying for a moment to pose
before their own personal cameras. After the initial moment of ecstasy and a quick change of costumes on the president’s part, the setting of the Lincoln was transformed as the president stood behind his podium, surrounded by the crew and officials, showing reverence during the now infamous “Mission Accomplished” speech. In both cases the crew functioned as an audience to the focal point of the primary performance, that of the President. The signification of their performance as audience celebrates the power of the President—both the symbolic office of the President and the real body of George W. Bush.

Just as Nero’s theatrical performances drew on the ghosts of his past, so did the theatricality of the USS Lincoln draw on its own ghosts. On its surface, the theatricality of Bush commanding a jet fighter draws on two opposing ghosts: the first is the President’s sometimes contested National Guard duty during the Vietnam war, where Bush’s own past “haunts” his present; the second is the invocation of Tom Cruise’s character, Maverick, from Tony Scott’s 1986 film *Top Gun*. While the former raises questions regarding the President’s past and his military duty, the latter is the glorified warrior ego-ideal who overcomes great personal difficulties as he proves himself through engaging the Enemy (who was, at the time, the Soviets). But there is a third (at least) séance performed: a conjuring of Roland Emmerich’s film *Independence Day*.

In this top-grossing melodramatic summer blockbuster of 1996, aliens come to earth and begin systematically to destroy cities and exterminate the human race. The aliens begin their conquest of earth with simultaneous attacks on Los Angeles, New York, and Washington D.C., before moving on to other cities in the United States and around the world. In a prototypical melodramatic “nick-of-time” escape, the film’s
President Thomas Whitmore (played by Bill Pullman) relocates to the fabled “Area 51” and, with the help of his former college friend, David Levinson (Jeff Goldblum), devises a plan to destroy the aliens and saves the earth. The film exemplifies the modality of melodrama and the regeneration-through-violence trope. Not only does the film contain the Manichaean universe where the humans are innocent in the face of the evil aliens who exterminate global populations before expunging planets of their own life-force, but also nearly all of the characters “find” themselves and are reborn and regenerated through their violent engagement with the aliens, particularly President Whitmore.

Prior to the aliens’ arrival, the film begins with the plight of an ineffectual president. We find the president watching The McLaughlin Group where the pundits (who are being played by the real members of The McLaughlin Group) criticize the president’s ability to govern successfully, despite his prior war-hero record in the first Gulf War (the American people who wanted a “warrior” got a “wimp”). After hearing from his advisor the further criticism in the print media, President Whitmore expresses how it was easier being a fighter pilot due to the simplicity of the mission, and that politics and compromise renders his presidency impotent. After the aliens attack, President Whitmore is beset by different opinions and voices from his surviving cabinet members and is in a state of emotional conflict between what needs to be done and its consequences (such as launching a nuclear attack on the aliens within the United States). When the final plan is devised, President Whitmore re-engages his former—and effective—identity as the fighter pilot who leads the air assault on the aliens as Levinson and Captain Steven Hiller (Will Smith) embark on their covert mission on the alien “mother ship” that will disable the aliens’ force fields. In the initial launch, the human
missiles fail to penetrate the aliens’ force fields and an abort order is issued, but President Whitmore decides to try one more attack based on a “gut” instinct. As to be expected in melodramatic narratives, the second salvo proves effective and the American military contingent eventually destroys the alien ship. President Whitmore then orders his command center to relate the instructions to the waiting global military forces so they can destroy the other alien ships. Within the battle any hesitancy on Whitmore’s part vanishes and the assertive and confident President emerges, leading his troops in combat as they destroy the alien menace.

After descending from his jet fighter, President Whitmore, wearing his fighter-pilot jumpsuit, is surrounded by military and civilian personnel as they offer him their congratulations. This particular moment in the film is of special note because it seems to presage President Bush’s own descent from his fighter jet, both in the mise-en-scène and its symbolic value. President Bush’s disembarking from his fighter jet and being surrounded by military personnel, offering their own congratulations (whether for his piloting his aircraft, the “victory” in Iraq, or both) echoed Whitmore’s own traveling through the ranks of his troops. The visuals in the film and the visuals of Bush’s interaction with the sailors and pilots on the deck of the Lincoln bear an uncanny resemblance. It is as though Emmerich had directed Bush’s landing himself.

*Independence Day* as a theatrical framing resonates beyond the theatricality of Bush’s landing on the Lincoln. After the events of 9/11 many people described the falling of the Twin Towers as if it were a scene out of *Independence Day*, a point of common reference within the collective psyche of the American public. The film is a common reference-point due to its popularity, part of which in the United States comes from its
reiteration of the American identity, an idealized, heroic, and melodramatic identity. Independence Day showed the ideologically-based conception of what constitutes the idealized American trope of violence: even though aliens attack the world, the American President—as well as a nation—fights only in defense, as a final measure. But when America fights, American ingenuity, strength, courage, and providence prevail. The violence gives a re-birth to the nation and the world, as cinematic event takes place on the anniversary of America’s birth. President Bush’s landing on the Lincoln emulates the commander-in-chief symbolically coming home after leading his troops into battle and ghosts the American trope of regeneration through violence that is valorized in Independence Day.

The film, as part of the interpellation process, reiterates the desired American identity, which is spoken again on the flight deck of the Lincoln. Not only is military might showcased in both events, but also the desired American hegemony. Prior to the successful attack on the alien ship, President Willmore orders his military to send messages around the world to ready all surviving military forces for battle. The first of these foreign scenes takes place in the Iraqi desert and the film cuts between Iraqi and Israeli forces before cutting to a British soldier being briefed on what are the surviving forces in the Middle East. An Iraqi soldier, speaking in Arabic to signify his terrestrial otherness, interrupts the meeting, announcing that there is a message from the Americans regarding a plan of attack against the aliens, to which the British soldier responds, “It’s about bloody time. What do they want us to do?” The film then cuts to other regions of the world, culturally encoded (through music and visual imagery) to distinguish who the different foreign forces are, before cutting back to the U.S. military command, refocusing
the global community behind the American spearhead. The hegemonic narrative conveys the inability of the other world forces to do anything against the alien menace. The verbal exchange by the British soldier (“about bloody time”) semiotically indicates the rest of the world is ill-equipped to deal with the Enemy and is waiting to be led by the Americans. The non-American impotency idea is furthered in the visual signifiers of the other foreign forces who, for the most part, are sitting down when they receive the word from the American military (this is shown, for example, in the cut to the Russians that shows them smoking cigarettes as they wait, as if on a work-break).

The hegemonic narrative is furthered in Whitmore’s speech to his troops (and us in the audience as he speaks into the camera) as he draws on the symbolic importance of the day in which the Americans will lead the attack against the alien Enemy, July 4th. The day of American independence will now, according to President Whitmore, become the day of world independence, “not from tyranny, but from annihilation.” The freedom celebrated in the United States will now engulf, like American power, the world as a whole. This escalating global freedom will, supposedly, solve the “petty” conflicts between the members of humanity, such as the tensions in the Middle East between the Israelis and its Arabic neighbors (the Israeli and Iraqi forces in the desert will unite against a common—and radically Other—enemy). And it is America that brings this new dawn to mankind. Independence Day’s narrative brings to mind the Bush administration’s neo-conservative mantra, as articulated in Bush’s 2003 State of the Union speech: “The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world, it is God's gift to humanity.” Be that as it may, it will be the Americans who will be the conduit of God’s Will by being the agents of that spreading of democracy.
The invocation of Independence Day’s ghost that surrounds President Bush’s landing on the Lincoln calls to mind Joseph Roach’s concept of “effigies fashioned from the flesh”:

Beyond ostensibly inanimate effigies fashioned from wood or cloth, there are more elusive but more powerful effigies fashioned from flesh. Such effigies are made by performances. They consist of a set of actions that hold open a place in memory into which many different people may step according to circumstances and occasions. (Cities of the Dead 36)

Bill Pullman’s characterization of President Whitmore constitutes this “effigy fashioned from flesh” through his performance. While Pullman’s Whitmore characterization is fashioned and encoded by other effigies that preceded his performance, the popularity of Independence Day—both in the film’s initial release and its popularity in video sales and rentals—circulates within the cultural economy of the American psyche, whether conscious or subconscious. The actions of the actual President call forth the memory, or its trace, stepping into the role, with its imagined history of the fictional President, what Joseph Roach calls the production of memory through surrogation (Cities of the Dead 36). President Bush as warrior-in-chief invokes the memory of President Whitmore, along with other “action-hero” presidents, from the ideologically derived histories of George Washington and Theodore Roosevelt to the ideologically derived fictions of Hollywood such as Wolfgang Petersen’s 1997 Air Force One (with Harrison Ford as President James Marshall, carrying the ghosts of Hans Solo and Indian Jones along with him). Along with the memory comes the desired narrative that surrounds the event, filled with nostalgia from the fictional world as provided by the ideological state apparatus. And like the World War II nostalgia that fueled the films of the 1990s mentioned above, it is the nostalgia for, and of, the film that circulate through the theatricality aboard the
USS Lincoln. The power of the symbolic gesture on the aircraft came from the ideologically formed imagined world, becoming the third act “climax” of the melodramatic narrative that “began” on 9/11. The visuals in the film and the visuals of Bush’s interaction with the sailors and pilots on the deck of the Lincoln bear an uncanny resemblance—so much so that the authenticity of the Lincoln’s theatricality, its “realness,” is contingent on the symbolic interaction with its cinematic predecessor.

I mentioned above how the media transformed the events of 9/11 into a cinematic experience through the editing of video footage as a way of narrativizing the confrontation of the Real. As the nation faced the impossibility of the Real, the delving into the Imaginary was the way for the nation to make sense, by referring the events to cinematic texts. The psychosocial méconnaissance of contextualizing the Real of 9/11 through the fictionalized narrative of Independence Day signifies the desire to finish the narrative in the same, mediatized way, equipped with letterbox formatting. The investment in the known, and desired, narrative overdetermines what is to be expected in the end: that through violent engagement with an unrelenting Enemy, a greater America will emerge.

In The Illusion of Power, Stephen Orgel investigates the efficacy of the English Renaissance court masques, serving as a celebration of the aristocratic community, an affirmation in the belief of the hierarchy and the idealization of power. Orgel argues that the English masques served a dual function: first, they presented spectacles of moral quality that the audience aspired to; second, the masques presented idealizations that “justified the power they celebrate” (40). Orgel’s argument is applicable to the theatrical event on the USS Lincoln. The theatrical display on the USS Lincoln takes on the
ideological attributes of a twenty-first century version of the Early Modern court masque. The event reiterated the images of honor and strength that Americans may ascend to through its melodramatic ending of the warrior-in-chief coming home after leading his troops in an honorable war. Standing before the American subject is the ego ideal that s/he can aspire to become. The theatricality of the moment idealizes both the office of the presidency and the Imagined America. The climatic “outcome” serves as a justification for the power of the warrior-in-chief and the ideology of the Imagined America, reinscribing the power as it is being celebrated. Of course, that re-inscription of power takes place on the vessel of violence, and while power is justified and celebrated, the economy of that celebration and justification circulates through the idealization and valorization of violence. In the modern “masque” aboard the USS Lincoln the signifier of the President is split in the single body of the President, for Bush-the-President now plays President-as-warrior. Bush’s body is doubled through his act of surrogation within the vortices of the aircraft carrier’s theatricality. This doubling occupies the actuality of the president’s body as president and the imaginary of president-as-warrior, heightening the “reality” that is being theatrically created.

The efficacy of such reality-through-theatricality is, however, contingent on the narrative’s monolithic circulation through the symbolic economy. But when the narrative is contested, then the reality-through-theatricality event becomes part of the anti-theatrical discourse of falsity and, in the case of political theatricality, propaganda. The continuing and escalating violence in Iraq, along with the lack of weapons of mass destruction, has unveiled the stagecraft of both the Powell performance at the United Nations and Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” on the USS Lincoln, just as the emerging
“reality-based” facts surrounding the Jessica Lynch story revealed the “hero-captivity” narrative that was constructed and consumed by the media and the general public. But while emerging events contradict the constructed narrative leading up to the Iraqi war, they do not diminish the power of the ideology that surrounded and gave it shape.

At the beginning of this chapter, I examined Lavonne Mueller’s *Voices from September 11th* and its participation in re-articulating the national identity in the wake of 9/11. Using it as an example, I explored *Voices’s* intermixing the iconography of Americana and the tropic regeneration-through-violence, accumulating in the play’s final monologue, “War Dogs,” where the spirit of FDR’s beloved Fala frames 9/11 and the War on Terror. Collapsing history, culture, and popular imagination, the character of Fala not only demonstrates using the mythos of World War II as an interpretative strategy to make sense of 9/11, but also gestures towards a prescribed performance for future action. Fala, then, is not the spirit of FDR’s terrier but the manifestation of a collective desire to reprise the role of the Greatest Generation by going to war. However, for the Bush administration and the public at large, al Qaeda, the Taliban, and Afghanistan would prove inadequate to fulfill the war-fantasy as a way of restoring a national identity. The desire to reclaim a national identity is contingent on the efficacy of restoring of behavior, which is best facilitated through the familiar. Iraq was an already known entity and enemy that better fit the World War II-derived mythopoeia. But as the cultural memory of World War II and national identity are significantly informed by the theatrical spectacles of cinema and over determine our horizons of expectations, it would follow that the efficacy of our restoration would be contingent on the war-performance being equally theatrical and spectacular.
Chapter 4

Flags in Our Image

People on the street corners looked at that picture and took hope.

I don’t know why, think it’s a crappy picture myself, can’t even see your faces.

Bud Gurber, U.S. Treasury Department

From the screenplay Flags of Our Fathers

A Tale of Two Photos

Amidst the thousands of images, both still and video, that emerged from Ground Zero immediately before, during, and after the 9/11 attacks, one photograph began to take on greater cultural currency and circulation than any other single image. Unlike the images of destruction, terror, and death, a photograph by Thomas E. Franklin captured a moment of defiance and hope in the American cultural imagination. Dubbed simply the Flag Photo, Franklin’s image depicts two firefighters on 9/11 raising an American flag amongst the ruins of the Twin Towers with a third firefighter watching. All three are covered in ash from the Towers’ collapse as their eyes look upward and they raise the flag on a leaning pole. The flag itself is relatively clean, its red, white, and blue colors

24 Soon after the image’s appearance in the media, narratives began to be constructed concerning the origin of the flag, most notably that it was found in the wreckage by the firefighters and was literally rising from the ashes, however that turned out not to be true. Dan McWilliams, one of the three firefighters photographed, was walking past the North Cove marina and saw the flag on the stern of an anchored yacht. As David Friend chronicles in his Watching the World Change, McWilliams informed a police officer standing near the boat that he was going to take the flag, and then proceeded to help “himself to the banner, aluminum pole and all, wrapping it into a tight cylinder and
vibrant against the grayish background of dust, concrete, and steel as the image captures its ascension into the air. Unlike the other images that circulated in the media, including photos that captured the reactionary horror on the faces of its subjects or the pain of the violence inflicted, Franklin’s picture expresses a quiet calm and agency. The photograph’s subjects are themselves semiotically charged objects. The firefighters, in their less than perfect physiques but weathered complexion, embody quotidian heteronormative masculinity, a masculinity that is heightened by the fact that they are firefighters. And the centerpiece of the image, the American flag, which carries the symbolic power of the nation, though a little dirty, is unscathed by the ruins that surrounds it as it is being hoisted up above the wreckage, which contributes to the photo’s visually upward composition. The low angle shot situates the viewer to look up, both literally and figuratively, at the firefighters. Our vision joins theirs as the scopic trajectory moves upward, following the flag into the sky. Not only do we bear witness to the actions of the firefighters but we are also part of the moment. The third firefighter becomes our proxy as he witnesses the moment, ready to step in if needed.

The theatricality of the image presents something of a “Mousetrap” moment from *Hamlet*. In Shakespeare’s play, we the audience experience a metatheatrical moment where we watch the court of Denmark watch a play. While the spoken text of *Hamlet* focuses on Hamlet’s “Mousetrap,” the live audience’s attention focuses on what is not being said: on the nearly silent reactions and interactions between the members of the heading in the direction of the downed towers, careful not to let the flag scrape the dust-caked street” (317). In any other situation or circumstance, the act of stealing would have gotten the firefighter arrested and the police officer would have been charged as an accessory and/or fired for failing to perform his duty.
court, most importantly Hamlet and Claudius. Our attention is drawn to watching Hamlet watch Claudius watching and reacting to the play before him: we watch watchers watch just as we are watching what the watchers are watching, a triangulation of the gaze that creates the intersubjective connection between the characters, objects, and audience. This triangulation allows for both the potential for critical distancing through theatricality, as we become self-aware of our watching, and the audience’s absorption in the moment as we lose ourselves in the intersubjective collapse, emphatically connecting with both the watching character and the emotional resonance of the moment. A similar intersubjective evanescence in *Hamlet* also takes place in the Flag Photo. As we reverentially watch the third fireman watch the hoisting of the flag out of the rubble of Ground Zero, we collectively lose ourselves within the matrix of the image. We project onto the firefighter a readiness to step in if necessary to guarantee the flag’s ascension as it simultaneously prescribes our own readiness to act and insure the nation’s symbolic and material ascension from the ruins. It is in this triangulation of watching watchers watch and the dictates performed in the image that we continue our ideological subjection. And our subjection is determined by the regenerative violence scenario performed mere hours into the violence and trauma of 9/11: from the ashes of Ground Zero, America has already risen. The resonating defiance of the image against the terrorist attacks already situates the narrative of the moment.

Because of the semiotic and ideological value of the image, its dissemination, reproduction, and reimagining, the photograph became a touchstone for the regeneration of the American character and mythology. As David Friend notes in his book *Watching the World Change*:
People tore it from newspapers. They downloaded it from Web sites. They posted it in the windows of homes and schools, government and office buildings, buses and cars. They embossed it on medals and blew it up on billboards. Artists reinterpreted it, adding vibrant colors or new details in the background: a bald eagle, a crucifix, the towers miraculously upright. (311)

The image’s performative circulation is twofold: first the performances of the firefighters within the image, both as actors and audience; second, what those outside the photograph did with the image. The act of displaying the image itself became a gesture of defiance and renewal as the unmitigated terror is re-narrativized into one of regenerative violence.

The mass reproduction of the image through both print and digital media brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In his seminal work, Benjamin argues that the mass reproduction of the art-object is stripped of its “aura,” its presence (Illuminations 229). This stripping of the aura eliminates authenticity claims, not the existence of the art-object, privileging the original with a sense of authority (Illuminations 221). The traditional exchange between original/authentic art-object and its audience, an exchange based on ritualistic reverence, which Benjamin calls the “cult of beauty,” is replaced with another exchange relationship:

[F]or the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the “authentic” print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics. (Illuminations 224)
For Benjamin, the ritual-reverence relationship between the art-object and the viewing audience is obliterated since the uniqueness of the art-object is invalidated through its mass reproduction. The art object moves from the singular to the multiple transforming the performative distribution and exchange between the object and the audience. While the original’s aura is stripped, its presence erased, a new performing presence takes its place, one that allows for interplay between the reproduction and the audience. The interplay does not always mean the celebrated slippage between signifiers and their significations, but can be beholden to the dominant (and dominating) ideological phenomenology, a phenomenology that is taken as an essence, an ontological being. The people project overdetermined values and meanings onto the reproduced image, and its value is contingent on the image’s reproduction and repetition, whether the image is reproduced as is or re-imagined and re-configured while still recognizable, creating a feedback loop that validates the subject’s sense of self and the object’s meaning. And in conjunction with the projection of overdetermined ideological meaning, the audience/actors moved beyond simply consuming the image to (re)producing it through their reimagining and displaying, an act of agency for an audience who felt it had none on the morning of September 11th.

For a shattered public psyche recoiling from the Real of 9/11, the reproduced Flag Photo became an effigy for the wounded-but-regenerating national identity, a symbol onto which the public was able to project its desire for strength, resilience, and defiance—an initial step towards rescuing and resurrecting its sense of self. As Joseph Roach argues, the “effigy is a contrivance that enables the processes regulating performance—kinesthetic imagination, vortices of behavior, and displaced
transmission—to produce memory through surrogation” (Cities of the Dead 36). Even in
the midst of trauma’s immediacy, there is a performative re-membering of the event into
a narrative, theatricalized through the raising of the flag with actors and audience, which
affirms a national identity by lifting the symbolic American body from the ashes, reborn
as it takes its proper place on top of the makeshift flagpole. This image of regeneration
stands in stark contrast to the other images, both still and video, that circulated through
the televisual and print media: the replay of the second plane crashing into Tower Two
(and later the first plane once that video emerged); the falling bodies from the buildings;
first responders carrying the dead away, such as Father Mychal Judge, the FDNY
chaplain who died while administering last rites; the towers themselves descending into
the ground, their downward implosions causing thunderhead-like clouds of ash to engulf
thousands of people as they desperately flee for safety. There were notable images of
strength in the flood of terror: Rudy Giuliani becoming “America’s Mayor” as he walked
the streets, though visibly shaken, projecting a sense of calm and determination; the
numerous first responders, police, port authority, firefighters, and paramedics running
towards the destruction; and the civilian populace extending aid to their fellow citizens.
But the Flag Photo draws together all of the elements, both the destructive and the heroic,
into a single frame that already projects the resurrection of a nation, with its aesthetic eye
moving upwards in diametric opposition to the sky literally and figuratively falling all
around us.

The Flag Photo theatrically performs, through its projection and presentation, the
desired national identity as it suffers an existential crisis of self. Unlike the usage by
politicians advocating Manichaean wars, this existential crisis of self is one based on the
destruction of the American Character’s invulnerability; its ontological and
epistemological self rather than its physical self. But this sense of invulnerability is
based not on material reality but rather on its own Image and its articulation of the
Imaginary. The reproduced Flag Photo-as-effigy fills “by means of surrogation a
vacancy created by the absence of an original” providing “communities with the method
of perpetuating themselves through specifically nominated mediums or surrogates”
(Cities of the Dead 36). The “original” Roach describes need not be something
materially real but an idea that the surrogate embodies (and of course should not be
confused with the idea of the material original of the image discussed above with regards
to Benjamin). The singular image of the three firefighters and the flag connotes an
American character, wounded but still standing, a picture of strength and resilience in the
midst of destruction. The reimagining of the image, semiotically intertwined with bald
eagles, crucifixes, or the standing Twin Towers, affirm a Christian identity, rapt with its
own sense of resurrection. The image’s representation of strength, defiance, and hope
exemplifies the mythic American character. The photo’s performance efficacy rests in its
permeation within the already supersaturated circulation of images, becoming the “most
widely reproduced news picture of the new century” (Friend 312).

The power and impact of the image traveled across the world and itself had a
direct and violent presence in Afghanistan and Iraq. As Friend observes:

The use of the photo as a tool of battlefield propaganda helped it serve as a
visual rebuke. Hurling the picture [painted on the sides of dropped
bombs] back at the Taliban and al-Qaeda implied: Take this, along with
America’s firepower. What’s more, the image of men in uniform, hoisting
a flag, would bridge the conceptual gap between the bravest and the brave
GI. To many of those looking for potent symbols—as grist in the
argument for expanding the fight against terror, to Iraq and elsewhere—
the photo provided a pictorial validation that firefighter and terror fighter were kindred combatants in a single, seamless war. (323-4)

Friend’s remark notes the collapse of individualized identities into an inclusive identity that encompasses both the rescuer and the warrior. The rescuer/warrior amalgamation has long constituted the American heroic ideal. The warrior did not simply engage in battle for the sake of engagement but in an act of rescue, whether that in need of rescue is an individual, a collective, or an idea. And the act of painting the image on a bomb to be dropped on America’s enemies notes a “bringing the war to them” engagement as the composite American meets the enemy head on. The image, with its depiction of the Ground Zero and the remnants of the Twin Towers, painted on the side of weapons, performatively transferred the frontline in the War on Terror away from streets of New York to the military targets in the Afghanistan and Iraq.

The image’s potency and cultural currency does not simply lie in the image itself, or in its multiple re-imaginings and its varying performances, but with its perceived genealogy. The Flag Photo has been associated with Joe Rosenthal’s iconic World War II photograph, “Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima.” Soon after Franklin electronically transmitted his digital images to his newspaper, New Jersey’s Bergen Record, fellow photographers Danielle Richards and Chris Pedota recognized the image’s resemblance. According to David Friend’s telling in Watching the World Change, Richards called Rich Gigli, the Record’s photo chief, and several others over to look at the image stating, “You guys, you have to see this picture. This is Iwo Jima.” Richards’s phrasing is telling. She does not compare the image to Iwo Jima, as in the form of a simile, but equates the two as the same thing. And in doing so, she conflates the history and cultural semiotic value
of the Iwo Jima photograph with the 9/11 image, transferring the signified of Iwo Jima into the Flag Photo signifier. The significance of the image is not lost on Richards as she succinctly appraises the Flag Photo: “That’s not a picture. It’s a fucking icon” (321).25

The conflation of Franklin’s photograph with Rosenthal’s should not come as a surprise. As I have discussed in previous chapters, the Greatest Generation narrative was already in wide distribution within the American cultural matrix, with Spielberg’s Saving Private Ryan being the most efficacious Greatest Generation representation, so images of World War II would already be floating towards the surface of the communal psyche. With the encounter with the Real brought about by the attacks of 9/11, the need to return not simply to the familiar but to the heroic called for a mythopoetic, or myth-making act, of Franklin’s image through the actual and mythological history of the Second World War. Richard Slotkin identifies the process of transforming real world events into mythology as the “mythopoetic mode of consciousness” that is present in both the myth-making artist and the artist’s audience, “The mythopoetic mode of consciousness comprehends the world through a process of thought- and perception-association, a process of reasoning-by-metaphor in which direct statement and logical analysis are replaced by figurative or poetic statement…,” rendering an objective reality into a non-logical perception and expression subjective reality (Regeneration 7). This act of

25 The value of the photo extended beyond the cultural-sign value and into the material. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the different news agencies eased their news-sharing restrictions both as a professional courtesy and as part of the sense of community that developed, if only briefly, after the attacks. But The Record, recognizing the commercial value of Franklin’s photo, delayed the image’s submission to the news wire, guaranteeing the paper’s exclusive publication of the photo. While the image was reproduced in the following morning editions across the western half of the nation, The Record was the only paper to carry the photo in the highly competitive east coast market, scooping The New York Times, The Washington Post, and USA Today.
mythopoeia is both a psychological and social activity as the “myth is articulated by individual artists and has its effect on the mind of each individual participant, but its function is to reconcile and unite these individualities into a collective identity” (Regeneration 8). The mythology embedded in the Iwo Jima photograph and its cultural currency is projected onto the Flag Photo as the material reality of the Flag Photo is subsumed into the metaphor of World War II.

The Iwo Jima and Flag Photo images do have several common aesthetic elements that elicit comparisons, from the action of raising the flag by men to the angle of the flagpole and its placement within the frame. Beyond that, the two images have very little in common, particularly regarding circumstance, locality, and the intentionality of the action performed in both. But those common aesthetic elements simply anchor the perfunctory connection between the two images, allowing for the narratological transfusion to take place. The cultural history of the Iwo Jima photo can be superimposed onto the Flag Photo, where the 9/11 image becomes the surrogate of the World War II image because of their cursory resemblance. This act of surrogation allows for a mirroring effect where a desired identity is projected onto the subject, allowing the subject to assume the image as its own. By collapsing the material reality of the photo, both in its interiority of the image and the exteriority of its given circumstances, the projected image reflects the subject’s own desires. Such a collapse is indicative of Richards’s earlier statement, “This is Iwo Jima.” Of course it isn’t. Nor should her statement be read as a way of reconstructing material reality. But it does reveal a desire for the reconstitution of the Imaginary via the Iwo Jima/Flag Photo amalgamation and the nostalgia for the heroic and as Roach argues, the process of surrogation “may provoke
many unbidden emotions,” (Cities of the Dead 2) which include in this instance patriotic avidity and nationalistic identification.

This play of signifiers and signifieds through surrogation and desired identities calls to mind Lacan’s famous “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function” discussed above. In his paper, Lacan argues the importance of the Mirror Stage in a child’s development as he becomes cognizant of his own sense of self. By recognizing his own separateness from those around him by identifying his own image as distinct in the mirror, the child begins to simultaneously articulate and disarticulate his identity. As Lacan discusses, the significance of the Mirror Stage is the transformative identification the subject assumes with the image and, most importantly, the Imago, what Lacan terms the “ideal-I,” which “situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject’s becoming, no matter how successful the dialectical synthesis by which he must resolve, as I, his discordance with his own reality” (Écrits 95). This formulation is vital to establishing the importance and power of the ego in (in)forming the subject’s sense of self even as the ego itself is (in)formed by the superego. The ego’s agency is recognized as it constructs the “I,” even as that same “I” formation is incongruent with the subject’s material reality.

For a destabilized identity brought on by the Real of 9/11, the national viewing subject gazes at the Flag Photo image as if it were looking into a mirror. The reflection, however, is not a reflection of the viewer; rather the mirror becomes the reflector of the viewer’s projected desires. And in the case of the Flag Photo, the projected desire
reflected back was the conviction, strength, and determination of the Greatest Generation, traits now bestowed on the 9/11 Generation.

The conflation of the World War II narrative that surrounded the Flag Photo did not stop at the image’s frame. As we have discussed earlier, the Bush administration’s ambiguous War on Terror not only adopted the narrative structure and scenarios of World War II, such as the Pearl Harbor-like attack of 9/11, but freely borrowed terminology from the Second World War, Axis of Evil and the neologism Islamo-fascism for example, with the intention of creating semiotic links between the two. The semiotic-linking strategy was an attempt to capitalize on the World War II cultural currency, legitimizing its actions by suggesting historical precedence in spirit, if not in action. The current War on Terror should be viewed not as its own entity or occurrence but rather through the myopic gaze of World War II. In this way, the War on Terror’s conceptual ostentation—along with its material world manifestations, Afghanistan and Iraq—avoids and resists the ambiguities and complications of past wars, such as Korea and, most importantly, Vietnam.

If the cultural currency of the Iwo Jima photograph overdetermines the mythopoeia of the Flag Photo, then what of the Iwo Jima photo itself? What of its own myth-making? When Joseph Rosenthal’s image was first published on 25 February 1945 in newspapers nationwide, it symbolized the U.S. war effort and the hard fought victories during World War II, particularly in the Pacific theater. The raising of the flag signified the victory on the volcanic island of Iwo Jima. More than simply a strategic necessity with its airstrips and proximity to key military targets, Iwo Jima was considered Japanese soil and its capture by U.S. forces came to represent the beginning of the end of war with
the perpetrators of Pearl Harbor. For a nation embroiled in war for over four years and weary of its ongoing sacrifice of both blood and treasure, the Iwo Jima image revitalized the country’s resolve and commitment to the war. For the public the photograph captured the essence of the nation, as it depicts six men with stretched and strenuous bodies working in unison for a common goal, the raising of the American flag. Frozen in mid-step, the seeming difficulty of the act and determination of the actors involved in the photograph point towards a sense of urgency in the moment, a perception of liveness and authenticity. The impact of the photograph was due in part to the obscurity of the six soldiers’ faces. With no clear recognition, the soldiers could embody all of the military men fighting in the war and, by extension, all of the civilians who had love ones fighting “over there,” along with their own contributions to the war effort.

However, the material reality and the cognitive rendering of Rosenthal’s photograph are at odds. The raising of the flag did not signify the victory of Iwo Jima or the taking of the island. It did represent the taking of Mount Suribachi, the highest point on the island and of strategic importance. The battle for Iwo Jima would rage for another 30 days after securing Suribachi with heavy causalities on both sides. The raising of the flag itself is not what it appeared to be. Rosenthal’s flag was the second raised on the mount. In his book, Flags of Our Fathers, James Bradley recounts how the Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, upon seeing the first, smaller flag being raised on Mount Suribachi recognized its historical significance and symbolic value and wanted it as a souvenir. Colonel Chandler Johnson, upon hearing the order, resentfully tasked his lieutenant, Ted Tuttle, to carry it out with the additional assignment of finding a replacement flag to take its place and to make sure that the second flag was a “bigger
one” (207). Photographer Rosenthal, along with film cameraman Bill Genaust, followed the marines up Suribachi, recognizing the chance for a good photograph. Despite the rumors that emerged after the publication (originating with Rosenthal’s misunderstanding of a question asked him by a reporter) the raising of the second flag was not staged for the photographers but rather Rosenthal and Genaust seized an opportunity.

While the raising of the second flag passed with little fanfare on Iwo Jima (it was never officially noted in military records, only the first flag raising) the photograph’s impact was surely felt at home, becoming one of the most widely published images of the Second World War and winning the Pulitzer Prize that same year. President Franklin D. Roosevelt recognized the immediate and visceral response to the photograph by the general public and sought to capitalize on the patriotic wave for the upcoming war bond drive, dubbed “The Mighty 7th,” and ordered the surviving pictured marines home to participate (Bradley 268). Although Roosevelt would die before the bond tour began, his successor, President Harry S. Truman, would carry out Roosevelt’s plan. With a goal to raise $14 billion, the surviving marines, Ira Hayes, Rene Gagnon, and seaman John Bradley, went on tour across the country, theatrically reenacting the photograph in various degrees, from simply raising a flag up a flagpole to participating in newspaper

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26 When the first flag descended the mount, Colonel Johnson put the first flag in the battalion safe, believing the flag did not belong to the Secretary of Navy but rather to the Marines, and believed that it was too valuable to be left unprotected (Bradley; 207, 211). It is ironical that both men were wrong about the first flag’s significance in that the viewing public bestows symbolic power on another object. The public did not see that first flag and the mythological rendering of the second flag would overshadow the first. The image/representation, whether that be the second, larger flag or the picture of the second flag, became the symbolic treasure to cultural history while the first became the obscure palimpsest.
mogul’s William Randolph Hearst’s spectacle at Soldier Field in Chicago, equipped with a miniature Suribachi for the soldiers to take and plant the American flag on in front of tens of thousands of cheering spectators (Bradley 289). The Mighty 7th was more successful than any of the organizers could have imagined, raising $26.3 billion, the most successful war bond drive for the entire war.

The fiscal success of the bond tour was due to the propagation of the cultural reading and reproduction of the Iwo Jima photograph. As the soldiers travelled across the nation raising money by the tour, newspaper reporters who wanted them to recount the harrowing and life-threatening ordeal to raise the flag amidst enemy fire pursued them. Accompanying the marines on tour was the bond poster, itself a painted representation of the photograph (itself a representation of the moment on top of Suribachi, which could also be seen as a representation of the first flag raising). Unlike the photograph that ran in the newspapers of 1945, confined to black and white, the Mighty 7th bond poster was in full and vibrant color, the red, white, and blue standing out against the marines green fatigue colors. On the bottom of the poster ran the bond drive’s slogan: “7th WAR LOAN. NOW...ALL TOGETHER,” playing on the semiotic reading of the soldiers all working towards a single task and inviting the audience to participate in the action by buying war bonds.

Paralleling the Iwo Jima photo, the 9/11 Flag Photo was also deployed in raising money through federal commemoration. As part of the bond raising strategy of the Mighty 7th, the Iwo Jima photograph was used to create a commemorative 3-cent stamp; the Flag Photo was also turned into a stamp, but instead of raising money for the war effort in Afghanistan the stamp raised funds for the Federal Emergency Management
Agency relief efforts at Ground Zero. At its ceremonial unveiling at the White House, President Bush posed with the firefighters in the Flag Photo before an oversized stamp poster of the 9/11 image, a portrait that is very reminiscent of President Truman standing with the Hayes, Gagnon, and Bradley before a smaller version of the Iwo Jima inspired Mighty 7th War bond poster.

While the U.S. government exploited and perpetuated the mythological readings of both Flag Photo and the Iwo Jima image in order to fund important causes for their respective historical moments, it is important to emphasize that the government did not directly create or dictate the initial reading, but rather took advantage of what was already being performed. The American public, as ideologically formed subjects, invested value and narratological substance into the photographs. Of course the U.S. government is perhaps the single most influential—but by no means the only—agent in shaping the nationalistic ideological matrix even as it itself is shaped by that same matrix. But the power of the images came from the matrix itself as articulated by the people, creating an illusory life for the images, illusory in that the images each had a life of its own, an agency that took over the populace. The images had become, in short, fetishes to the public who bestowed upon them power through their mythological reading.

It is problematic to discuss the fetishized images and their illusory power through truth- or falsehood-claims. While there is a disconnect between the material reality and the ideological readings of the images, both the Flag Photo and Iwo Jima photograph, claiming that they are fictitious or false would deny the actuality of the audience-image relationships and their respective cultural significances and resonances. Just because a fetish is a fetish does not mean that its relational impact with the subject is diminished.
Nevertheless calling attention to the relational exchange between the image and the subject, the act of mythopoeia itself, challenges the fetishized power of the illusory and deconstructs the myth and myth-making process.

**Clint Eastwood’s Flag**

The 2006 film, *Flags of Our Fathers* (based on Bradley’s book of the same name adapted for the screen by William Broyles, Jr. and Paul Haggis), which focuses on the battle for Iwo Jima, the raising of the flag, the Mighty 7th War Bond, and its aftermath, serves as the third part of Steven Spielberg’s World War II/Greatest Generation trilogy. Starting with his 1998 *Saving Private Ryan*, which he both produced and directed, Spielberg extended the cultural significance of the World War II/Greatest Generation narrative already circulating at the end of the 20th century to be followed by the 2001 HBO miniseries, *Band of Brothers*, where he served as executive producer (along with Tom Hanks, star of *Private Ryan*). Garnering high anticipation due to its aggressive marketing campaign that linked the mini-series to the highly successful *Saving Private Ryan*, *Band of Brothers* had already gained cultural traction prior to its 9 September 2001 premiere, two days before the 9/11 attacks. After the attacks and the subsequent conflation between the War on Terror and the Second World War, *Brothers* functioned as a theatricalized primer for the nation on how to act in time of war, a televisual performative citation based on the Greatest Generation. Unlike its predecessor, the more than ten-hour miniseries ventures beyond the celebratory regeneration-through-violence narrative, delving into the trauma of war, recognizing the sacrifice of soldiers as it sympathetically examines the conflict beyond the moral certitude traditionally associated.
with World War II tellings. But for a nation reeling from terror, nuanced readings of World War II give way to ideologically sustaining and identity-affirming heroic tropes.27

While *Ryan* drew from the nostalgic vein of the late ‘90s and *Brothers* satisfied a nationalistic affirmation need in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, director Clint Eastwood created *Flags of Our Fathers* during the contested and unpopular phase of the War on Terror. Three years after President Bush’s celebratory “Mission Accomplished” speech on the U.S.S. Lincoln, the United States and the ever-shrinking coalition forces were suffering more and more casualties in Iraq. Instead of being greeted as liberators, as promised by Vice-President Dick Cheney and other Bush officials and spokespeople, echoing the liberation of France and other Nazi-occupied territories, U.S. forces suffered daily attacks at the hands of insurgents, both foreign and Iraqi, as the liberating force was now being viewed as an occupying force. And in Afghanistan the hunt for Osama bin Laden became a lower priority as he and other Al Qaeda commanders disappeared into the mountains along the Afghanistan/Pakistan border, and that theatre became known as the “forgotten war.” Unlike nationalistic and jingoistic films that emerged immediately after 9/11, films of this period directly and indirectly questioned our involvement, politically and militarily, in the Middle East: Steven Gaghan’s 2005 *Syriana*, Sam Mendes’s 2005 *Jarhead*, Peter Berg’s 2007 *The Kingdom*, and Kimberly Peirce’s 2008

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27 The impact of *Band of Brothers* on the cultural conscience continues to resonate as demonstrated on MSNBC’s program *Morning Joe*, which aired on 5 March 2010. During an interview with Tom Brokaw (who coined the term “Greatest Generation”) and actor/producer Tom Hanks, hosts Jim Scarborough, Mika Brzezinski, and Willie Geist all discussed how *Brothers* helped them get through 9/11. Hanks was promoting the premiere of *The Pacific*, the HBO miniseries that focuses on World War II’s Pacific Theatre and *Time Magazine*’s 6 March 2010 article calling Hanks “America’s Historian in Chief.”
Stop Loss. While these films peeled away at the narratives that gave support to official U.S. policies, all were based on contemporary or near-contemporary events, positing a critical eye on celebratory violence and the rhetoric of war. Eastwood’s Flags explores a more nuanced tract that deconstructs the act of mythopoeia itself by venturing into the sacrosanct mythology of World War II. Unlike conventional World War II narratives, Flags of Our Fathers does not take the linear track of following a group of soldiers heading into the battle or partaking in a mission that then emerge victorious at the end despite and because of the group’s individual and communal sacrifices—a hallmark of regenerative violence—but rather explores through its fragmentary structure the disconnect between the trauma of battle and the constitution of the heroic Imago such conventional narratives reify.

The film opens in a nightmare/flashback sequence as a young John “Doc” Bradley runs across the ashen Iwo Jima landscape, devoid of life but hearing the echoes of artillery fire and unseen soldiers yelling, his eyes darting to and fro, searching for something. As the camera closes in on Doc’s eyes, it begins to lose its focus, blurring Doc’s face and shadow-covered eyes. There is a jump-cut jolt as an off-camera voice screams “Corpsman,” and we see an elderly Bradley wake from his dream. In the next scene we see the elderly Bradley walking among the empty coffins of his funeral home, suddenly overcome by a panic attack as he collapses on a spiral staircase and asking the question over and over again, “Where is he?” We do not know for whom specifically he is searching but we are positioned to link this contemporary moment with the nightmare/flashback. An employee comes to Bradley’s aid as we transition to Doc Bradley’s son, James, running through a hospital entrance and then down a corridor,
presumably to his father’s side. I say presumably because the next shot we see is James
Bradley interviewing retired Captain Dave Severance, John Bradley’s commanding
officer on Iwo Jima, whose voice-over accompanies the transition:

Every jackass thinks he knows what war is. Especially those who’ve
never been in one. We like it nice and simple: good versus evil, heroes
and villains. And there are always plenty of both. But more often than
not, they just aren’t who we think they are. Most guys I knew would
never talk about what happened over there. Probably because they’re still
trying to forget about it. They certainly didn’t think of themselves as
heroes. The heroes your dad and I knew are all dead. They died without
glory, when the cameras weren’t rolling… with only their buddies
witnessing their bravery. I’d tell their parents they died for their country.
But to be honest, I’ve never been sure that was true. I know what kept us
going. Our buddies. That’s all that really mattered; the man in front and
the man beside you. (Broyles and Haggis 1–3)

Flags’s opening sequence lays out the fragmented, incomplete narrative structure as well
as the audiences’ expectations against what the film seems to promise. Severance
discusses the patriotic Manichaean tropes that frame war narratives, touching on both the
misplacement of character traits and inaccuracies of what happen on the battlefield,
particularly by those who have not fought in war. For those non-combatants, the crafting
of the war story is based not on experience but rather on horizons of expectations that are
dictated by desired imaginings of danger, violence, valor, and sacrifice—a reiteration of
past, familiar stories. Just as Flags quickly disrupts the conventional World War II
narrative, so does it rupture World War II thematic sum and substance.

With the traditional World War II narrative now in question, the film becomes a
detective tale of sorts. The film’s meta-story follows James Bradley’s quest to discover
the truth of his father’s past. Just as Severance suggested, the elder Bradley never
discussed his service in general or his participation in the historic Iwo Jima photo in
particular with his family. In an attempt to fill that lacuna of his father’s biography, James interviews his father’s wartime comrades, as well as those whose paths actively intersected with the Iwo Jima photo, an attempt to discover his father’s own “Rosebud.” *Flags* cinematically ghosts Orson Welles’ 1941 seminal *Citizen Kane* in its narrative and visual treatment of this meta-story. Much like the Reporter who interviews Kane’s past associates to uncover the meaning of Kane’s final utterance, “Rosebud,” James Bradley searches for the “him” that his father refers to in his panic attack, with the hopes of unlocking that piece of the puzzle that will shed light onto a past his father has deliberately kept hidden. The visual resemblance between the two are striking, as both *Kane’s* Reporter and James Bradley are mostly filmed as shadowed figures, which serves a dual purpose. Firstly the shadowed listener loses his individual identity, his face, allowing him to act as the audience’s proxy. The audience connects with his subject position rather than the subject as a sympathetic character. Secondly, and linked to the first purpose, it keeps the camera’s focus on the speaking subject in the film, concentrating on what is being said rather than reactions and responses based on visible facial or body cues. We witness what he witnesses but our interpretations of the testimonials are our own. In both films, the interviewer is so nebulous that the macro-story of an investigator questioning individuals disappears, giving way to the micro-narratives of the individual testimonials.

But the most important similarity between the two films is that overall narrative for both pieces is told through flashbacks. However, *Flags’s* treatment of the flashbacks differs from *Kane’s* in that Eastwood often uses flashbacks-within-flashbacks. The weaving of flashbacks-within-flashbacks in such an intricate manner places the audience
in a position of uncertainty regarding what they are seeing, a state the film consciously fosters. As Severance continues to discuss the impact of the Iwo Jima photo on the general public, the film cuts to the soldiers in their fatigues climbing up a hill amid the rocket flares and explosions overhead. The camera first positions itself in a high angle shot, giving the audience a top-of-the-mountain perspective, looking down at the soldiers as they make their way to the top. The camera then cuts to a reverse shot, a low-angle position following the soldiers up the hill. From behind, we watch the flares and explosions overhead as the soldiers make their way to the hill’s summit and raise the flag. As the camera rises from low-angle to eye-level with the characters, it allows us to see what they see: the men have climbed a facsimile of Mount Suribachi located in the middle of Soldier Field in Chicago, the whole event being part of William Randolph Hearst’s theatrical reenactment of the Iwo Jima photo during the Mighty 7th Bond Tour. Due to the costuming, sound and visual effects, and the frame of the camera restricting the audience’s point of view, what appeared to be the battlefield is actually a stage (playing on the notion of “theatre of war”). Just as we the audience re-situate ourselves into accepting that what is before us is not Iwo Jima but a football field, we hear an off-camera voice calling out for a corpsman. As the cries get louder, Doc looks over his shoulder, directly at the camera as it zooms in on his face, staring at us as we stare at him before cutting to the ashen sands of the real Iwo Jima as Doc experiences his own flashback, transporting him—and us—out of the Midwest to the Pacific.

In this secondary flashback, we quickly discover the “he” that the elder Doc Bradley searched for at the film’s opening. During the battle for the Pacific island, Doc Bradley occupies a foxhole with his comrade Ralph “Iggy” Ignatowski as the two take
cover from heavy enemy fire (whose flares look nearly identical to the fireworks at Soldier Field). In the distance the two hear the cries of a wounded soldier. Doc tells Iggy to stay in the hole while he tends to the wounded soldier, promising his frightened comrade that he will be right back. As Doc makes his way to the wounded soldier and administers aid, a charging Japanese soldier attacks him. Doc manages to avoid the enemy’s bayonet and kills the Japanese soldier with his knife. After administering aid to the wounded soldier, Doc makes his way back to Iggy, only to find his comrade gone. During the course of the few minutes tending to the wounded, Iggy has disappeared. As Doc frantically calls out for his missing comrade we are transported again back to Soldier Field, at the top of the faux Mount Suribachi.

This self-conscious act of misdirection of locations and situations is more than just simple cinematic sleight of hand. By playing on the audience’s experiences and expectations of war movies, particularly World War II narratives, Flags presents before us signifiers of war, but then figuratively pulls the camera back to reveal the larger context, calling into question our role in articulating the signifiers into a signifying chain of meaning. What we are seeing is not “war” the referent but its representation—actually we are watching the representation of the representation of war: a movie about a theatrical recreation of what we expected and imagined to have happened at Iwo Jima. This theatrical representation is then juxtaposed against the trauma experienced on the island of Iwo Jima. The self-referential act interrupts the audience’s absorption into the narrative as the film reveals its own act of manipulating the audience. And in its revelation, the film situates the audience to—potentially—acknowledge their complicity and participation in their own manipulation, calling into question the audience’s
assumptions and expectations with regard to war and war narratives, particularly World War II narratives. The audience’s assumptions and expectations are derived from two interconnected factors. First, the audience’s history of watching war films in general and World War II films in particular, such as *Saving Private Ryan*. Audiences have developed the techniques of understanding visual and aural cues to make sense of what they are watching and put it into a comprehensible narrative. Secondly and tied into the comprehensible narrative, audiences are ideologically formed subjects. And as such, their subjectivity informs the significations of the signifiers before them. It is critical to remember that film directly contributes to the ideological apparatus of subjection, a performative that shapes audiences, fashioning their over-determined expectations, responses, desires, and meaning. This performative reiterates and reinforces the subject’s ideological sense of self through familiarization and reification and resists complications.

The subject’s desire for reinforcement of an uncomplicated sense of self is punctuated in Severance’s voiceover during the flashbacks, describing the want for simple stories of good and evil. But Severance drives the point home when he begins to discuss the famous Iwo Jima photo saying, “There were plenty of other photos taken that day, but none anybody wanted to see. What we do in war, what we witness, the cruelty is almost incomprehensible. But somehow we need to make sense of it. To do that, we need a simple, understandable truth. And the fewer words the better” (Broyles and Haggis, 5). The notion of “the fewer words the better” prevents complicating the audience’s projected meaning onto the image, allowing the image potentially to become a Rorschach. The truth is not a truth based on material reality empirically evaluated but a subjective truth that affirms the viewer’s personal values through visceral comprehension.
rather than intellectual verification (what comedian and fake-pundit Stephen Colbert has coined as “truthiness”).

The staged flag raising at Soldier Field versus the actual event at Mt. Suribachi is explored again towards the middle section of the film. As in the beginning, Eastwood jump cuts between the event and the Mighty 7th Tour theatrical representations. The moment begins with the raising of the first flag. As the marines make their way up Suribachi after a lull in the fighting, Ira Hayes and Harlon Block watch their comrades make their way up the side of the mountain, fearful for their fellow marines’ safety, and Block states, “Thank God that’s not us.” As the marines get to Suribachi’s summit, surprised that they weren’t fired upon by the Japanese since the battle was far from over, they unfurl their flag and raise it up a make-shift pole. After completing their task and overcoming a deadly Japanese attack, photographer Staff Sergeant Louis Lowery sets up his camera and says, “Okay, guys. Who wants to be famous?” as he photographs soldiers securing the pole and defending their position. Of course Lowery’s statement is ironic since the first flag-raising photograph did not make those in the picture famous. Though the photograph was widely published, it did not capture the public imagination the way that Rosenthal’s image did. Also, the two marines who were thanking God that they weren’t taking such a tremendous risk, Block and Hayes, would later replicate the act of climbing the mount and participate in the famous second photograph, with Block later killed in action.

This scene quickly moves to Soldier Field, hours prior to the theatrical performance. As the camera oversees the huge Suribachi papier-mâché mountain, we are greeted with Bradley’s response, “You gotta be kidding me.” Bud Gurber, of the U.S.
Treasury Department in charge of the Mighty 7th Bond tour, assures Hayes, Bradley, and Gagnon, “Took a lot of talented folks a long time to make that. Wait till tonight when it’s lit and there are thousands of cheering people in the stands, it’s gonna look a lot better.” After getting a less than desirable reaction from the soldiers, Gurber goes on and directs the soldiers-turned-actors, “So, the stadium lights go down, spotlight comes up, you get your cue and you charge up this thing with the flag, plant it at the top, smile, wave, you know the routine.” Hayes, finding it hard to reconcile his real-life experiences on Iwo Jima, including his role in raising the flag in the iconic photo, and his new role in the performance he is to give in the evening asks, “You want us to plant the flag in a pile of papier-mâché?” To which Gurber responds with a smile, “That’s show-biz” (Broyles and Haggis 80–1).

The implication of Gurber’s remark, “That’s show-biz” is telling. Both Bradley and Hayes’s responses to the papier-mâché Suribachi demonstrate a level of disbelief at its lack of fidelity to their experiences, a disconnect between Iwo Jima and its theatrical representation. While they may feel a level of discomfort toward their upcoming performance as representative of their experiences on the island, especially Hayes, Gurber sees no incongruities or disconnection since he does not link the papier-mâché Suribachi with the ashen mount in the Pacific. Although he endeavors to replicate the physical gesture on Soldier Field, he makes no effort, nor shows any real desire, for high mimesis. Gurber is not trying to capture the moment of the men making their way up the mountain, taking down the first flag, and then mundanely—despite the seemingly tense and strenuous bodies in the photograph—raising the flag. Under his direction, Gurber endeavors to capture the feeling the public had when it saw the image, an uplifting
sensation of accomplishment, tenacity, perseverance, and patriotism; Gurber’s obligation to fidelity is not towards Iwo Jima and the horror of war but to the image and the uplifting patriotism the photograph inspired.

Gurber’s direction of planting the flag, followed by the waving and smiling surrounded by fireworks and flares, demonstrates the aesthetic and anesthetic rendition of war that the public imagines, heroes under the spectacle of enemy fire and danger emerge victorious in their task, unscathed and whole, smiling in their triumph. There are no mutilated and wounded bodies, nor are there corpses and traumatized survivors, simply paragons of America, victorious and regenerated through violence. While the purpose of theatre-as-art may be to affect the audience by disrupting its sense of placidity and comfort, in the business of show, it is about giving the audience what they want. Indeed, as Gurber notes, part of the theatrical spectacle is the cheering audience who has the dual role of spectator and participant. The audience members are not only watching the theatrical performance but also participating in the aesthetic presentation, themselves actors playing the role of the cheering citizens, completing an ideological circuit, a feedback loop that valorizes the events on stage and validates the audience’s patriotic sense of self.

Gurber’s commercial theatre narrative comes from the audience’s reading of and inter-subjective relation with the iconic photograph, a reading that consists of its desired self-image as a nation projected onto the image. The audience’s imagined narrative supersedes the material reality of the soldiers depicted. And it is the imagined that informs the mythopoetic construal of reality. By jumping back and forth between the Mighty 7th Bond tour and the battle on Iwo Jima, Eastwood’s film explores the difficulty
of the survivors in reconciling their personal and traumatic histories with the
mythological one perpetrated by both the government and the populace, a myth in which
they participate by performing their roles, however reluctantly, as heroes. Even when
they try to give an accurate portrayal of both the flag raising moment and their
participation, the mythic narrative—and its telling—overshadows the material reality:

REPORTER #1: How’s it feel to be heroes?
DOC: *(With humor)* You’ve got the wrong guys, we just carried a pole.
REPROTER #2: Ira! How many Japs were shooting at you when you
raised the flag?
IRA: None
REPORTER #2: Come on, don’t be modest.
IRA: We’re not. *(44)*

For the reporters the image has already determined the story; that is the story has been
projected on the image by, as Severance described earlier, people who had never been to
war. Reporter #2 is not searching for the actuality of the flag raising but rather
confirmation of the reality already formed, told, and re-told, a reality that affirms the
heroism as desired, not intermixing the mundaneness and the trauma of war. In short, the
reporter desires validation for the valorization that has already been determined.

While the film investigates and analyzes the disconnect between the material
reality surrounding the production of the image and the imagined narrative projected onto
the image, *Flags* does so through a sympathetic lens. The film recognizes the importance
of mythopoeia in terms of national solidarity in times of crisis and doubt. In their initial
meeting concerning the war bond tour and the disconnect between the myth and the
material reality of the image, Hayes calls the entire situation a farce, particularly
regarding the misidentification of one of the marines, an error the government makes no
effort to rectify. Now that the image has taken on its own life, any attempt to correct its
narrative risks deflating the image’s value, as Gruber notes, “… if we admit we made a mistake, that’s all anyone will talk about, and that will be that” (Broyles and Haggis 37).

And the semiotic value is tied to the material cost of the war, as Gruber discusses:

You know what they’re calling this bond drive? *(points to the poster)* The Mighty Seventh. That’s your picture there. They might have called it the ‘We’re Flat Fucking Broke And Can’t Even Afford Bullets, So We’re Begging For Your Pennies’ bond drive, but it didn’t quite have the ring. They could have called it that because the last four bond drives come so short that we just printed money instead. Ask some smart boys on Wall Street, they’ll tell you our dollar is next to worthless, we borrowed so much. And nobody is lending any more. […] And don’t be surprised if your plane doesn’t make it off the runway, because the fuel dumps are empty and our good friends the Arabs are only taking bullion. If we don’t raise fourteen billion dollars, and that’s million [sic] with a B, this war is over by the end of the month; we make a deal with the Japanese, give them whatever they want and we come home, ‘cause you’ve seen them fight, they sure as shit aren’t giving up. Fourteen billion. The last three drives didn’t make that much all together. (36)

The nation’s economic reality is in dire straights, threatening the success of the war effort. The cost of the war has exceeded the government’s expenditures and is beholden to the nations of the Middle East to fuel the war machine. Gruber’s calling attention to Arab oil not only displaces the audience out of the film by disrupting the ideological trope of self-reliance that is implicitly evoked in traditional World War II narratives (all American supplies are supplies produced by the Americans) but we are also reminded of our continuing dependence on foreign oil and our current state of economic dependence on China as our primary lender, which drives the value of the U.S. dollar down. In the more than 60 years that have passed, we share similar economic standing with the Greatest Generation. This revelation of the material reality of war participates in demystifying the nostalgic past.
But even though Gruber’s insight complicates the nostalgic structure by engaging the war’s economic base, he also reveals the initial construction of the ideal and its importance in acting as a suture to mend a wounded populace:

People on the street corners looked at that picture and took hope. I don’t know why, think it’s a crappy picture myself, can’t even see your faces. But it said we can win this war, are winning this war; we just need you to dig a little deeper. They want to give us that money; no, they want to give it to you. (37)

While Gruber fully recognizes the nation’s material crisis, he sees what the photograph does for the populace as an image and its link to the Imaginary. Gruber’s reasoning for his dislike of the image as an aesthetic photograph, the inability of the viewer to see the soldiers’ faces is, in part, the reason for its semiotic power. For the populace, the lack of individual recognition allows the viewers to project themselves and their personal histories and connections onto the photograph. Recalling Severance’s earlier statement, the efficacy of truth lies in its restricted use of language, the fewer words the better. The lack of faces, specifics and details of the image, allows the ideological subject to project meaning onto the image, a sense of agency and empowerment in the formulation of meaning; they are not being dictated to but rather are dictating. And as discussed above, the facelessness of the soldiers—although named in the photograph’s caption and acknowledged by the populace—allows for that soldier to be the viewer’s father, brother, son, cousin, or friend. It also allows the viewer to symbolically project him or herself into the mythic narrative, if not the material narrative. It is that connection to the image that motivates the donating public to give—to “dig a little deeper,” sacrifice a little more to win the war. But they are not giving and sacrificing to an abstracted bureaucratic
apparatus like the government, but to the soldiers themselves whom they have linked to themselves. They are giving to themselves and by doing so, giving to the nation.

Hayes, however, is unable to reconcile the ideological importance and the political necessity of the image to his personal experience, both as a marine who fought at Iwo Jima and as a Native American living in the United States during the 1940s. Hayes-as-marine sees the perpetuation of the myth as a perpetuation of lies. By not correcting the misidentification of Harlon Block, Gruber erases Block’s existence. And for Hayes, that erasure constitutes an act of perpetual violence against his friend who had already lost his life on the battlefield. When the soldiers are asked what it feels like to be heroes, their repeated response is that they don’t see themselves as heroes; that the real heroes are those men that died on Iwo Jima. The three survivors of the flag raising see themselves as that, survivors. While all three, to various degrees, struggle with their heroic status, Hayes is most troubled with his status, suffering what can be described as survivor’s guilt. Hayes does not see his experiences on the battlefield being equivalent to the sacrifices his friends and comrades made. Hayes lives with the trauma of the war, shameful of the terror he suffered, horrors he witnessed and participated in, and the praise he is now receiving. As Hayes confeses about his participation in the Mighty 7th Tour and the necessity to raise money for the war effort, “I know it’s a good thing, raising the money and that, ‘cause we need it. But I can’t take them calling me a hero. All I did was try not to get shot. Some of the stuff I saw done, things I did… They weren’t things to be proud of, you know?” (97–98). In Hayes’s mind those dead soldiers, now missing from existence, deserve to be recognized as heroes, yet someone else is being recognized for their valor. Block is twice erased, first in his death and then, as Hayes sees it, for not
being named and misrecognized, both in body (the absent body of the dead and the present representation in the image that is reproduced on posters big and small) and valor in his place. Block has become a spectral palimpsest, much like the firefighters in *The Guys*, whose trace is actively being written over on a continual basis. However, as Block’s presence in the picture is being erased by the misrecognition, it is Hayes that is writing on Block’s absence, bestowing on Block the heroic status that Hayes denies for himself even as he struggles against his own palimpsest state, since his identity is being erased and re-written by others. But the difference between Hayes and Block is that Hayes is present and his physical trace is clearly visible even if his voice is quieted for the good of the Mighty 7th Bond tour and war effort. Block’s missing body in death but photographic trace delineates his spectral palimpsest status. Hayes wrestles with both, if not differing, palimpsests and his feelings are punctuated when he sees the Gold Star Mothers associated with the Mighty 7th Tour and thinks about Block’s missing mother. After the war the film shows Hayes’s pilgrimage to Block’s home where he tells his mother the truth about her son, a gesture of recognition that was denied to Block and his family during the tour.

As Hayes tries to reconcile his feelings of survivor’s guilt and the perpetual symbolic violence against his friend through erasure, he also confronts the contradiction between his image-as-hero and the material reality of racism. Unable to come to terms with his feelings of guilt, Hayes turns to alcohol to deaden the emotional pain he suffers, which eventually leads to his death. During the tour the film depicts Hayes getting drunk in order to perform his role as hero. Just prior to the celebrated event on Soldier Field, Hayes, already drunk, makes his way to a bar but is denied entry because he is Indian.
Hayes lashes out and the police are called in. Doc Bradley enters the scene to find Hayes standing in the middle of the intersection just outside of the bar, fighting off the police with a chair. Trying to bring the confrontation to a peaceful conclusion Doc points at a hanging Mighty 7th Bond Tour poster saying to the police, “You see that poster on the wall there? That’s him,” meaning Hayes. Wanting no further trouble, the police sergeant asks Doc to take Hayes away. Doc inquires into the reason for the violent exchange and Hayes replies, indicating the onlooking bartender, “Asshole wouldn’t serve me.” To which the bartender responds, “I don’t make the rules, we don’t serve Indians” (87–88). While the pictorial representation of Hayes is valued—which hangs next to the entrance of the bar—Hayes the person is viewed as something either lacking or debased in value. Like the 9/11 Flag Photo, the bar’s hanging of the Mighty 7th Bond Tour poster is a performative gesture, a sign of patriotic solidarity to the Imagined America of freedom and equality, even as a secondary performance of racialized bodies simultaneously takes place that contradicts the first.

The film’s acknowledgement of the nation’s segregated and racist past does not simply live in that moment of the film outside of the bar. Throughout the film, Hayes is referred to by numerous racially motivated nick-names, such as “Chief,” “Geronimo,” and “Redskin,” and there are references to Sitting Bull, squaws, and wigwams directed at him. At an elegant reception in honor of the soldiers and as part of the Mighty 7th Tour, an unnamed Senator greets Doc Bradley, complimenting him for the sacrifices he has made in the war and current efforts in trying to raise funds. Upon meeting Ira Hayes, the Senator greets him in a condescending manner, saying, “I hear you used a tomahawk on those Japs, that true, Chief?” When Hayes tells him that wasn’t true, the Senator returns
with “Well, tell them you did, it makes a better story” (68). And when the racially offensive narrative is disproved, the Senator desires to promote and propagate the myth rather than tell the truth. Where Bradley is spoken to as an adult with respect for all he has and continues to do, Hayes—who has done and continues to do all that Bradley performs—is spoken to in a patronizing manner, and his existence is reduced to the novelty of telling “a better story.”

The film’s accentuating of the permeations of racism within the social fabric, from segregation to the casual belittlement relegating an individual to a racial stereotype, serves as a corrective to the trap of nostalgia. As we have discussed in previous chapters, restorative nostalgia calls for a return to “national symbols and myths” in its longing for an imagined community and home (Boym 41) that is free from guilt. In the aftermath of 9/11 the cognitive associations between the terrorist attacks and Pearl Harbor were numerous. World War II served as a national symbol and myth to which the nation could re-identify in the form of a historical citation that determines present actions. But the innocence and heroic perfection of the mythologized World War II erased the horror, trauma, and guilt. In short, the World War II myth celebrates violence as a regenerative force of valorization while denying the threads of shame. The World War II mythic narrative and its theatrical re-tellings serve as a collective effigy, an act of surrogation that constructs an imagined past, constitutes an imagined community, and reifies an imagined character. And it is this imagined effigy that embodies regenerative violence that permeated the cultural conscious in the aftermath of 9/11. And it was through the World War II myth that the Bush Administration legitimized its argument for war in Iraq, not only by drawing false parallels between the treaty-bound Axis Powers and the
artificially constituted Axis of Evil, but also by speaking with a self-identified voice of
moral eminence, an eminence that derives its power from its adherence to myth. But as
the War on Terror that began with the Pearl Harbor-like attack on the World Trade
Center and the Pentagon focused on Iraq, the scenarios of the heroic liberation of a
people from an evil despot, based on and fueled by World War II nostalgia and myth,
were found wanting. The events on the ground in the Middle East did not fit the narrative
prescribed and desired. And by 2006 there was a swelling reevaluation by the American
people of the nation’s involvement in Iraq drawing more comparisons to Vietnam and
less to World War II. 28 The cultural reevaluation settled not simply on the War on Terror
but on the mythology of World War II itself.

Eastwood’s Flags of Our Fathers complicates the mythopoeia of World War II by
drawing attention to the traits of the war and its historical moment that normally do not
gain popular attention, whether it be racism or the trauma that haunts the survivors
decades after the event. As we have discussed above, the film opens with the elderly Doc
Bradley suffering a flashback where he searches for his friend and company mascot,
Ralph “Iggy” Ignatowski, who disappeared while Doc was aiding another wounded
soldier. As the film progresses, we discover that Iggy was dragged down a rabbit hole,
dug by the Japanese soldiers who had numerous underground tunnels throughout Iwo

28 The sentiment shift played itself out in the United States Congress where the
Republican Party lost its control over both houses in the 2006-midterm elections. During
that campaign season, the Republican party followed the same campaign strategy of the
2002 and 2004 election cycles, emphasizing their perceived national security credentials
while painting their Democratic opponents as appeasers. But what proved successful to
the Republicans in 2002 and 2004 proved devastating in 2006, prompting President Bush
to fire Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, who, along with Vice President Dick Cheney, had
come to embody the Iraq War.
As the island slowly fell under U.S. control, the marines discovered these tunnels and caverns, littered with Japanese soldiers who had committed ritual suicide by holding their grenades close to their stomachs. In one such tunnel the marines found Iggy’s body. As corpsman, it was Doc Bradley’s responsibility to medically determine Iggy’s cause of death. The film situates the camera already inside the tunnel, facing the opening as Doc appears at the threshold. Doc slowly enters the cavernous space, his primary lighting coming from behind through the entrance, casting a halo outline of his body. The camera stays for several moments on Doc’s heavily shadowed face, his facial expressions obscured as he looks at his dead friend’s body. The camera never turns to focus its gaze onto the Iggy, thus not allowing us to see what Doc sees.

The camera’s not revealing Iggy acknowledges the Real of war and its ensuing trauma, the impossibility of direct representation. The film makes no effort to present a facsimile of Iggy, to produce a dummy dressed with makeup and gore as an attempt to represent the material corpse that died a horrific death on Iwo Jima. The film concedes that what Doc Bradley experienced can never be replicated, that no level of mimesis can convey the traumatic experience. Of course, with today’s level of technical expertise and proficiencies, the film could have created a highly realistic corpse. Following the conscious strategies of audience immersion in the celluloid battlefield in Spielberg’s much celebrated opening sequence of Saving Private Ryan (surround audio allowing for the sound of bullets to travel across the theatre, the handheld jerkiness of the camera that replicates a moving soldier’s perspective, the randomness of soldiers dying, the fluctuations between the brutality and the coldness of performing violence, and the graphically realistic bodily violations through the weapons of war, be it bullets, bombs, or
fire) and the subsequent war films borrowing its cinematic syntax, audiences have come to expect graphic renderings. But *Flags* recognizes the representational limitations of film specifically and art in general, and its inability to produce the traumatic event, the presence of the Real. It can be argued that not showing the body is a cinematic and artistic choice, allowing the audience’s imagination to create an image that is denied them by the camera and I agree with that aesthetic strategy. However *Flags*’s refusal to attempt to directly visually represent Iggy demonstrates a congruent strategy in line with the overall dialectic of the film as it oscillates between the popular World War II mythopoeia as theatricalized by the Mighty 7th Bond Tour and the realities of Iwo Jima. *Flags of Our Fathers* demonstrates the disconnect between the mythology of war and the actuality of war. And while the myth of war is a communal performance and experience, war’s actuality is atomized to the personal, an experience that is ultimately unrepresentable.

By acknowledging that the actualities of war—the violence, carnage, and horror—exists within the traumatized subject and is beyond the intimate understanding of those “jackasses” who create valorized narratives, the film situates the audience to recognize the disconnect between the two. It is not the heroic journey through regenerative violence as embodied in previous World War II films, including *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) starring the cinematic *Imago* of American Heroism, John Wayne (where the real life Ira Hayes, Rene Gagnon, and John Bradley “reprised” their roles as flag raisers) but the event that produces traumatized subjects: subjects who do not see their time in war as heroic but filled with fear, horror, and acts of violence that are deployed for survival, not as a performative act of regeneration.
As noted earlier, Bud Gurber describes the American public’s reaction to the Iwo Jima photo in *Flags*, “People on the street corners looked at that picture and took hope […] it said we can win this war, are winning this war…” Because of his position within the Department of Treasury, Gruber recognizes the disconnect between the material reality of the war and the ideological reading of the image that has come to represent the war. A similar disconnect between the material reality and the ideological rendering took place with the 9/11 Flag Photo. When the Flag Photo was published in newspapers across the nation, the traumatized American public projected an idealized national identity onto the pictured firefighters and a regenerative scenario onto their actions. The Flag Photo symbolized the undying American spirit that rose from the rubble of the World Trade Center. However, the performative scenario forecloses the trauma of the event. The prescribed performance demonstrates the desire to move past the trauma, without reconciling the national subject’s traumatic experience. In both photos in their historical moments, the act of myth-making became an act of sense-making as the ideological value became the symbolic reality, if not the material reality. The Iwo Jima photo was stripped of its material context and represented the heroic soldier, a role the surviving pictured soldiers struggled to perform. The 9/11 Flag Photo, due in part to its similarities to the Iwo Jima photo, was also stripped of its material context and imbued with symbolic power and an imagined narrative promoting an idealized American character. That idealized character was regenerated by the violence of 9/11 while ignoring the trauma suffered as a nation marched to a self-justified act of pre-emptive war.
Eastwood’s *Flags of Our Fathers* serves as an intervention in the cultural discourse of violence mythopoeia, particularly regarding war. The film’s setting and its investigation between the trauma of war and its mythologizing, deconstructs what had been viewed as sacrosanct, commenting on its historical moment as it enters into the polyphonic discourse of the Iraq War. There have been other movies that comment on their own time through World War II narrative, most notably Robert Aldrich’s *The Dirty Dozen* as a comment on the Vietnam War. Unlike its antecedent, *Flags* does not serve as an ironically iconoclastic reimagining of World War II but rather takes the more complicated examination of its subject matter. While *Flags* unveils the apparatus of mythopoeia as a way of sense-making and reveals its political implications, it does not overtly condemn the application even as it subverts its invisibility. The film does follow Hayes’s descent into poverty and alcoholism and his lamentable death along with Rene Gagnon’s inability to benefit materially from his short-lived fame, despite various businessmen’s pledges of fortune after the war. But along with the unfortunate developments of those who were made objects of heroism, the film’s sympathetic exploration of the historical moment situates the audience to draw its own conclusions,

29 Released in 1967 and starring Lee Marvin, Ernest Borgnine, Telly Savalas, Jim Brown, and Charles Bronson, *The Dirty Dozen* tells the story of a covert mission to eliminate German officials on the eve of the D-Day invasion of Normandy. Viewed as a suicide mission, the U.S. Army enlists twelve Americans convicted of capital crimes and, therefore, expendable. Unlike the heroic characters that selflessly gave up their lives fulfill the mission in previous films, *The Dirty Dozen* characters are immoral and disobedient miscreants—several of who are psychotic—who engage in sadistic acts of murder, including immolation. The familiar setting of the mythic setting of World War II as a good war to fight tyranny is erased in Aldrich’s anti-establishment film and replaced with a nightmarish celebration of violence for its own sake.
based not on visceral reactions but rather on investigating how the American Identity is constituted.
Chapter 5

Terror, Torture, and the Death of the American Dream

Our enemies are innovative and resourceful, and so are we. They never stop thinking about new ways to harm our country and our people, and neither do we.


In October of 2001, the United States Congress passed and President George W. Bush signed into law H.R. 3162. Better known by its contrived acronym, the USA PATRIOT Act (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001), the bill’s name functions as a performative gesture of nationalist affirmation, responding to the trauma and existential crisis of national identity following the 9/11 attacks. The bill rests within the irreconcilable contradiction between the signifying chain of America as the “land of the free” and the law’s function and purpose: curtailing and violating that very freedom through enhanced government surveillance and unrestricted detainment. The government could—and did—put its citizens under surveillance by tapping phone lines, tracking Internet usage, and monitoring email traffic as well as detaining individuals it found threatening without a court order or due process. In short, the law circumvents the proposed freedoms it seeks to protect.

This line of reasoning with its inherent contradictions is not new to American ontology. From the construction of the Constitution that secured the rights and freedoms of the individual while simultaneously ensuring the right to own individuals as slaves, to
the logic behind the destruction of Vietnamese village of Ben Tre—“It became necessary
to destroy the village in order to save it” (Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation 535)—the American
color has been the site of conflict, in Lacanian terminology, between the American
Image and the American Real. The reconciliation between these two seemingly
incompatible forces rests in the construction of the American Myth. As Richard Slotkin
argues in his seminal work, Regeneration Through Violence, the will-to-myth—reading
violent experiences mythically through the framework of victimization and regenerative
violence—reconciles differences by relocating internal contradictions externally via a
savage Other (Regeneration 6–9). By relocating internal contradictions that threaten the
cohesiveness of a national character onto a savage Other who is seen as a threat, the
ideological subject erases incongruities, thereby creating and maintaining the illusion of a
singular and consistent identity. It was in this atmosphere of fear and insecurity that the
Bush administration and the U.S. Congress were able to pass H.R. 3162 with little debate
and flaccid resistance. Those few voices that questioned the law were accused of naïve
pre-9/11 thinking and were positioned by those on the right as tacitly capitulating to bin
Laden and Al Qaeda by being “against” the nation. In the months and years that
followed, the administration used a combination of fear and nationalism to garner more
political power. It passed more laws and issued executive orders that went by and large
unchallenged. In the 2002 midterm election, the Republican Party, campaigning on the
conflation of nationalism and fear, gained the majority in both houses of Congress, giving
President Bush unparalleled power. The mainstream media in the United States became
the echo chamber for jingoism and unrepentant nationalism (e.g., “freedom fries”) as
America mobilized for war against Iraq in order to prevent its nightmare imagining of nuclear Armageddon.

A dark farce, Sam Shepard’s play *God of Hell* bitingly attacks the Bush administration and its “War on Terror,” serving as a theatrical response to what Shepard viewed as “Republican fascism” (Brantley). But, as this chapter will discuss, the play goes beyond partisanship, functioning as a rejoinder to the oscillating practices of appealing to empty nostalgia and deploying fear and torture to fortify state power, thus coercing conformity. In doing so, the play critically challenges the American mythos and interrogates the vitality of the American Dream. Indeed the freedom that the state offers to protect is not the freedom of self-determination, expression, thought, or dissent but the freedom to consume. Serving as a comic corrective, *God of Hell* critically examines the state’s use of terror and violence to protect the nation against terror and violence, challenging the regeneration-through-violence trope that has helped shape the American mythos and define the American national identity.

Shepard’s play focuses on Emma and Frank, a Midwestern couple who raise cows on their small Wisconsin farm. On the surface, the farm embodies an idyllic America, with its frosty windows, snowbound pastures, and rustic black cast-iron school bell hanging from the porch ceiling. But a closer examination reveals the farmhouse’s withering age with its faded linoleum floors and “unusual kitchen appliances, cupboards, and sink—all dating from the fifties” (Shepard 3). The linoleum floor and kitchen appliances signify both the promise of modernity and the desire to return to a past when that promise had efficacy. They also signify the farmhouse’s inability to keep pace with the contemporary consumption-driven world. Apart from the characters, the only signs
of life—or rather, attempts at life—come from the plants that Emma always threatens to kill through overwatering and whose constant “drip-drip” sound-echo functions as water-torture on the audience’s collective psyche. Even the “replacement heifers” offstage are void of life. Their function is to produce offspring that will replace the “retired cows,” but they are waiting for spring to mate (40).

At the start of the play, we learn that the couple is helping Frank’s old friend, Haynes, a former government agent on the run, by hiding him in the basement. Why Haynes is on the run is unclear but it seems to have something to do with his work involving plutonium at a place called Rocky Buttes. In his cryptic conversation with Frank, Haynes discusses the dangers of plutonium—named after Pluto, the Roman “god of hell”—on organic substances, particularly reproductive cells such as eggs and sperm, causing mutations and penetrating the food chain and “bio-accumulate thousands of times over, lasting generation after generation” (42). As a consequence of his work, Haynes suffers from an unusual side effect: every time he touches or is touched by someone, he emits an electric shock, producing a blue flash from his fingers (30-2).

This government project involving a carcinogenic substance that is tasteless, odorless, and invisible, threatening life with its toxicity and concentrically spreading from a single point and potentially overcoming and surrounding the populace unaware elicits the toxicity of New York’s Ground Zero, both physically and psychically. While the play does not explicitly elicit such connections between itself and the site, the pervasiveness of the invisible radioactive carcinogen serves as an apt allusion to the toxicity of fear and nationalism “originating” from Ground Zero, a term originally used to indicate the point of nuclear detonation in an attempt to quantify the bomb’s destructive
effectiveness. Though the term Ground Zero has undergone a cultural re-signification, it still carries the trace of its atomic heritage. Just as the physical elements of Shepard’s mise-en-scène, with its linoleum floor and antiquated appliances, link the contemporary world to the nostalgia of the 1950s both in the play and in American life, so does the loaded signifier of the atomic bomb, summoning the paranoia of the Cold War, with imagined enemies hiding within our midst, calling forth the spectres of McCarthyism and HUAC, the House on Un-American Activities Committee (unfortunately, not as clever an acronym as the USA PATRIOT Act).

Despite Frank and Emma’s efforts, the mysterious government agent named Welch finds Haynes. Welch is first introduced as an aggressive purveyor of nationalistic baubles, including cookies (an issue I will address below) who lets himself into the farmhouse, moving about with a disconcerting level of familiarity as he aggressively questions Emma. We soon discover that Welch had the house under surveillance for days before invading its interiority. Welch reveals himself as a government agent and threatens to flush Haynes out of the house with gas and smoke, forcing Haynes’s surrender. Welch relates to Haynes how he was able to track him down: “You left a very luminous trail, Mr. Haynes. Technology’s a marvelous thing, though. Night vision. Infra-ray. It’s extraordinary how blind the naked eye is. No wonder people have so much trouble accepting the truth these days” (67). While Haynes’s luminosity ties together the dazzling effect of his blue electric shocks and his work with the radioactive plutonium, Welch relies on the technological advances in surveillance for his panoptic power. And for Welch it is the all-seeing electronic eye that supersedes the natural eye in recognizing the “truth,” that America’s enemies are not just without but are within, a
privileged perspective that is only owned by the state with its cybernetic gaze. Such actions resonate beyond the fictional narrative of the play as they echo the government, particularly the National Security Agency, tapping into various communications networks, mining information as it looks for the Enemy (Risen and Lichtblau).

During the course of Welch and Haynes’s initial conversation, Welch prepares the farmhouse for cleansing. Welch pulls out a long string of American flags from his case and begins stapling the string to the surrounding walls with a large, chrome staple gun. As he discusses the need for decontamination and the purifying effects of fire, Welch’s speech is punctuated with shots from the staple gun:

We can do whatever we want, buddy-boy. That should be clear now. We’re in the driver’s seat. Haven’t you noticed? There’s no more of that nonsense of checks and balances. All that red tape. All that hanging around in limbo, waiting for decisions from committees and tired-out lobbies. We’re in absolute command now. We don’t have to answer to a soul, least of all a couple of Wisconsin dairy farmers. (Shepard 70)

The ominous sounds from the staple gun, together with his speech concerning unregulated power, thicken the atmosphere on stage, inducing terror with the threat of impending physical violence. The constant and steady stream of the piercing and penetrating sounds of the staples echo the drip-drip torture of the over-watered plants. Indeed the violence of the staples on the farmhouse’s interior serves as a synecdochical representation of the violence inflicted on “a couple of Wisconsin dairy farmers” who are themselves *pars pro toto* of United States citizenry.

The violence perpetrated by the government moves away from the symbolic violation of the most intimate of domestic spaces to embodied violence (although still symbolic, this is art after all) and the violation of the most intimate of bodily places, the
genitals. At the top of the third and final scene of the play, we see Emma taking down the string of flags Welch had put up in the previous scene. As she is working, Frank enters, now dressed and carrying an attaché case just like Welch, but there is a distinctive manner in which Frank walks, bowlegged and sore indicating that he has suffered through some form of physical trauma. We discover that Frank has sold his livelihood, the heifers, to Welch and is now marching—though painfully—behind the government agent, arguing that Welch “knows the big picture” and “who the Enemy is” (80). Frank zealously thrashes about as he rails against the infiltration and contamination of their home by the Enemy. When Emma tries to reach out and calm her husband, she is physically shocked in the same manner as when she touched Haynes, a shock that emits a blinding blue light. Frank blames Haynes for his current condition, saying that he was sent to contaminate the farmhouse (82).

However, Haynes being the source of contamination is questionable. At the end of the previous scene, Welch reminds Haynes of the “procedure” and “training” that Haynes underwent. In a reflexive move anticipating further pain Haynes grabs his crotch in a protective gesture. But in so doing Haynes ends up shocking himself, emitting a blue flash from his groin, immobilizing him as he comically and painfully stares out into the audience (73). Frank’s new distorted gait, along with his paranoiac rhetoric and newfound electrical abilities, indicate that he has undergone the same “procedure” and “training” Haynes had. It is not the radioactivity of plutonium that causes the shock, but rather the radioactivity of blind nationalistic subjectivity, a subjectivity produced through bodily violations. This mapping is furthered by Welch’s re-indoctrination of Haynes back into the PATRIOTic fold.
Before we can learn more about what has happened to Frank, screams from the basement disrupt the couple’s exchange. The space that once served as refuge and sanctuary for Haynes while on the run from the government now has become the space of terror and torture. Welch emerges from the subterranean enclosure pulling on a long black electrical cord that is apparently tied to something at the bottom of the stairs. Fearing the worst Emma confronts Welch and asks if he is torturing Haynes to which he replies, “Torturing? Torturing! We’re not in a Third World nation here, Emma. This isn’t some dark corner of the Congo” (87). Welch’s response reveals the cognitive disconnect between the actions performed and the perception of that actuality. The act of knowingly inflicting pain on another in order to force the sufferer to do or say something is the very definition of torture. But for Welch, his acts do not constitute torture—not because of the act performed, but because of who is performing the act. For Welch, “torture” can only be perpetrated by the racialized, economically disadvantaged Other of the Third World. But when that act is committed in the United States by a government agent, it is not torture because the United States does not engage in such tactics. This is not simply a tautological argument. Torture is an act that is perpetrated on a victim by an aggressor. However, following Slotkin’s analysis of the regeneration-through-violence trope, Welch’s violence is viewed through a victimized gaze and as an act of defense against the savage Other, or, as in Hayes’s case, the Other’s agent. For the “victim,” violence is a defensive act and does not constitute torture. This syllogistic reasoning eliminates the internal contradiction between image and action by relocating the originating source of violence onto the Enemy/Other, allowing for the cognitive disconnect as the victimized narrative circulates through the cultural matrix.
Following the events of 9/11, the national narrative perpetrated by the institutions of power positioned the United States as the perpetual victim of terrorism, enabling violent acts to undergo re-signification that allowed the maintenance of moral authority even while performing immoral acts. This process is best exemplified by the “ticking time bomb” scenario, which became a staple in American pop culture after 9/11. In this melodramatic narrative, there is a bomb that threatens a population. In custody is a terrorist who is aware of the bomb’s location and expected detonation, but refuses to divulge the information. The agent who has sworn to protect the innocent now faces a dilemma posed by the terrorist: either stay within the bounds of the law and do nothing, thus allowing the bomb to kill the innocent and unaware population; or take extraordinary measures to secure the information before it is too late. Even in custody, the power remains with the terrorist and not the official agent who holds the terrorist captive. In effect, the captive terrorist holds the agent “hostage.” The ethics in this given scenario are meant to be quite clear: the lives of the innocent population outweigh the moral rights of a single terrorist, or even a group of terrorists. The agent is forced to do whatever violent and coercive acts he performs, a victim of the terrorist’s desire to inflict violence. The agent does not enjoy the actions he must undertake and is internally conflicted between morality and the material circumstances. But in the end the agent takes a utilitarian position, coming to the conclusion that the practicality of the situation is the morally correct action, and resorts to inflicting violence (either physical or psychological) on the captive terrorist to procure the information, allowing the agent to diffuse the bomb, rescuing the innocent population in the proverbial nick-of-time. The popular post-9/11
television franchise 24 is built on this recurring narrative premise and is often used as a fictionalized example by pundits, justifying such tactics.

This narrative premise assumes a great deal: first that there is indeed a bomb that threatens an innocent populace; second that the person being held is indeed a terrorist; and thirdly, that the terrorist being held is privy to the terror schema in question, having in his possession the intimate details that would allow the agent to disrupt the intended outcome of murder and terror. In film and television, this popular narrative is diegetically supported as events unfold before the audience. But beyond the world of fiction, in the real of everyday life, such truth claims are far more precarious since information is intentionally withheld from the public in the name of national security. What we are told is that there are enemies who wish to destroy America and, as such, there is always a “ticking time bomb” situation. We are told to trust those in authority and power to accept such a scenario because they have access to intelligence reports that state as much. And as such, extraordinary means must be employed in order to protect the populace. However, the veracity of the situation is unclear. Is there an actual “ticking time bomb,” some event that will take the lives of innocents? Or is there just the belief that a “ticking time bomb” situation exists, a threat that is always on the periphery, just outside of the empirical? Is the legal system and code of conduct that has been traditionally used sufficient when properly employed or are extraordinary means, such as physical violence, necessary? And if the belief in a “ticking time bomb” situations determines actions, then any person designated as a terrorist in custody may have information that will both quantifiably prove its existence and simultaneously provide the means of disrupting the event. With adherence to the “ticking time bomb” situation, the
agents of power are in a perpetual state of victimhood, reacting against threats as a
defensive measure, justifying actions before it is too late. The agent charged with
protecting the innocent civilian population adheres to his task, ensuring security by any
and all means at his disposal, but does so from a subjugated position under the yoke of
terrorism.

It is important to recognize that Welch never mentions 9/11 specifically, but he
does connect his jingoistic, xenophobic sense of nationalism with the victimized position
within the regeneration-through-violence narrative as he attempts to historicize the
cultural milieu that surrounds and penetrates the world of the play (as well as the world of
the audience). Welch is critical of those who fail to remember the violence suffered at
the hands of the ever-present enemy, saying “There’s no memory anymore. That’s the
problem. No memory at all. Pearl Harbor. The Alamo. The Bataan Death March. All
gone. Vanished like they never even happened” (72). Pearl Harbor, the Alamo, and the
Bataan Death March have entered into the cultural matrix as moments where the United
States suffered at the hands of the racialized Other, victims to the Other’s violence. But
his historicization of the moment rhetorically de-historicizes the moment by eternalizing
the narrative form. In each of the incidents mentioned, particularly Pearl Harbor and the
Alamo, a performative battle cry was fashioned (“Remember Pearl Harbor,” “Remember
the Alamo”) that demanded the ideologically-formed subject to engage in the act of
remembering, and in remembering to engage in the act of war. While the particular
incidents differed, the scenario persists. The face of the Enemy may vary, ranging from
the Alamo to Pearl Harbor to 9/11, but the mythos of the Enemy remains the same: a
racialized, foreign Other who threatens American sovereignty and security (we are not
asked to remember Oklahoma City or Columbine, in part, because perpetrators were white Americans). Welch’s demand to remember history plays on the popular aphorism of history: those who fail to remember history are doomed to repeat it. We are always seconds away from the ticking time bomb exploding, attacked by the Enemy who hides in the shadows. Welch’s gesture of historicization masks the eternalizing of the form of regenerative violence and the victimized gaze.

But as the “ticking time bomb” narrative inspissates the national psyche as justification for extreme measures, we recognize the dissonance between Welch’s invocation of the narrative and his performed actions. The episteme of torture lies in recognizing the delimitation of power designating torturer and tortured. From the beginning Welch performs his power, from entering the farmhouse without being invited in to his acts of violence, either symbolic violence on the house or physical violence to the occupants. His actions are divorced from the victimized position he asserts against the Enemy. The disconnection between power and victimization is highlighted as Welch presses the button attached to the electrical chord, causing Haynes to scream at the other end, down in the basement. And in a Pavlovian response, every time Welch presses the button causing Haynes to scream, Frank protectively grabs his own crotch (sans the electrical discharge Haynes suffered earlier) eliminating any residual questions concerning Frank’s own newly formed sense of jingoistic nationalism. Welch sees himself in the victim position against an external threat but the audience recognizes that the true victims are Haynes, Frank, and Emma, who are subjugated to Welch’s acts of violence.
Believing that Haynes is ready to talk after suffering through torture, Welch yanks on the chord, hauling Haynes out of the basement. We see that the end of the electrical chord leads into Haynes’s pants, attached to his genitals. But as disturbing an image as that is, the most striking visual of Haynes when he emerges from the basement is the black hood he wears on his head. The black hood has taken on a semiotic life that ruptures the closed circuit theatre experience between audience and stage, while simultaneously punctuating Shepard’s didacticism. The image of the black hood transports the audience out of the play by invoking the photographic imagery that emerged from Guantanamo Bay, Cuba and, in particular, Abu Ghraib in Iraq. Perhaps one of the most notorious images that emerged from Abu Ghraib was that of the single hooded man standing on a crate with wires connected to his fingers and under his ragged garment, presumably to his genitals. This distinct image has emerged as the iconic representation of abusive power and torture in the United States’ “War on Terror,” particularly the Iraq War. The play does not offer up Haynes as an equivalent victim of torture or violation of human rights—equating the violence committed against those considered “Enemy Combatants” with U.S. citizens who have endured the scare tactics of the Bush administration. Nor does it suggest an equivalency between the United States and Iraq. But the invocation of the image does collapse the exteriority of violence perpetrated in the name of United States and Freedom on the foreign Other onto the interiority of the violence and terror inflicted on America’s image of Self with material world ramifications, revealing the dangerous toxicity of nationalism which leaves its subjects isolated, unable to make contact because to do so would lead to shocking pain.
One of the immediate consequences of the 9/11 attacks was the purification of the American identity as performed by the institutions of power and perceived by the American general public. Throughout the televisual and print media and from its privileged position of victimhood, administration representatives shaped the “War on Terror” narrative, dictating the war’s constitution and the identity of the enemy. The legitimacy of the re-structuring rested on the Bush administration’s power position within the socio-political field. It alone claimed privileged authority—both as the executive branch of power and as the owner of the victimized gaze—over the narrative, claiming that counter-narratives constituted naïve or pre-9/11 thinking. It alone could see the “big picture,” which demanded new methods of engagement. While not absolute or total, the critical inquiries into American actions and responsibilities are quieted. Those few disparaging voices were publically marginalized for not echoing the popularly accepted narrative, which included a renewed sense of American infallibility as the conceptual territory of War underwent re-signification.

In the past, acts of terror were viewed as criminal acts of violence, adhering to national and international laws of conduct. But the episteme of judicial prudence proved undesirable as it was viewed as a reactive form of engagement, waiting for the terrorist to perform the criminal act, always already proving “too late” in the melodramatic narrative. The fear of being “too late” was furthered by popular belief in the protracted nature of the legal system, as diligence became synonymous with being sedate and sluggish in the face of the heteronormative privileging speed and action. In the Manichaean universe of terror, good and evil are clearly demarcated and immediate action is the only recourse whereas judicial prudence performs the quandaries of imprecision and moral relativism.
The certainty of the situation demanded the certainty of the actors within the narrative, but already established signifying matrices that constituted the Enemy would prove undesirable for the emerging narrative. Terrorism was now viewed as an act of war. But this war was not the familiar conflict of nation-states with recognized and recognizable armies, but a new war with asymmetrical engagements against nebulous combatants on amorphous battlefields. Stripped of the historical renderings of warfare, the indeterminate Adversary, now labeled Enemy Combatant, was devoid of a national identity and existed outside of already-established means and rules of engagement. Enemy Combatant identification rested less on the Combatant’s actions and more on U.S. agencies’ naming the Combatants as such. The Enemy Combatant, bereft of national identity, formal allegiances to signatories of the Geneva Convention, and enacted self-determination, exists outside of the pre-existing legal definitions and rights. In a sense, the Enemy became a non-entity, a no one, and in doing so could be anyone, leaving everyone—both home and abroad—suspect. The logical course in this narrative with the pervasive and elusory Enemy is to take a proactive stance, attacking before being attacked. It is the logic of the “pre-emptive war”: to go to war in order to prevent war, a fallacy that is reminiscent of the earlier referenced Vietnam logic, that in order to save the city, we must destroy it.

This fluid rendition of the Enemy and the War on Terror’s opaque codification problematizes the truth-values of both the Enemy and the War on Terror—its recognition and evaluation—by the American populace. How are we to know the Enemy? How does one wage war on a concept such as Terror? Isn’t any act of violence an act of terror? Is there an end point, a V-Day, or is this a war of perpetuity? When can we properly
display the victory banner stating “Mission Accomplished”? In Shepard’s *Hell*, Welch, who as Frank noted earlier, “knows the big picture” and “knows who the Enemy is,” holds the answers to these questions. It is Welch and the government, the very entities that re-imagined the Real, that are the only ones qualified and authorized to decipher the truth-values. The newly converted Frank tells Emma that everything will be revealed by government agents in due time, including their contribution to national security—their cows. Frank says, “You’ll see. It’s all going to be revealed at the meeting. You’re going to be very proud of those heifers, Emma. I guarantee you” (84). What the public, represented by Emma, needs to do is to give everything over to Welch. It is Welch’s responsibility and duty to protect the public, a public that enjoys its freedom without consequence. But as Welch points out to Emma, there must be a reckoning:

Well, don’t act so surprised, Emma. What did you expect? You didn’t think you were going to get a free ride on the back of Democracy forever, did you? Well, did you? What have you done to deserve such rampant freedom? Such total lack of responsibility. Just lolling about here in the Wisconsin wilderness with your useless lumberjack of a husband, scraping the cream off the countryside. Sooner or later, the price has to be paid. (97–8)

Welch’s question to Emma, “What have you done to deserve such rampant freedom?” indicates that Emma has not lived up to Welch’s standards of proper actions entitling one to freedom. As a representative of the government, which represents the people, Welch “knows the big picture,” including correct behavior. But that knowledge is not information received but rather information dictated. Welch’s position as a representative of the people who demands the collective’s conformation to his will invokes Pierre Bourdieu’s “oracle effect.” As Bourdieu argues, the spokesperson of a group speaks in the group’s name, granting the individual the group’s authority. The
spokesperson becomes the representative of the group, embodying the group’s truth and identity. It is within this field of exchange that the spokesperson, by the group’s authority, can mandate the truth to the collective (211–2). So long as the members of the collective continue to identify themselves within the group they “really have no choice but to obey” allowing the oracle to “exercise recognized constraint, symbolic violence, on each of the isolated members of the group” (212, italics in the original). However this capitulation to symbolic violence leads to actual violence as coercion ensures conformity, the price of freedom.

The deployment of these violent tactics, we are told, defends freedom. But exactly what freedom is being defended? As Welch demands conformity by those he seeks to protect, the freedoms of self-determination and belief are no longer denotations of freedom. The only freedom left is the one that was dictated in the days and weeks that followed 9/11: the freedom to consume. When we are first introduced to Welch, he offers Emma cookies, decorated with the American Flag, boasting that it is “oat and raisin” and totally “organic—even the frosting” (10). The cookie represents the apex of American consumption: a foodstuff that lacks substance, will rot teeth, and will make the consumer obese while offering itself as something good for the body by presenting itself as “organic,” code for healthy. Failing to get Emma to consume the cookie, Welch attempts to sell nationalistic baubles: items that have no use value save for serving as performative gestures of patriotism, performative in the acts of both buying and displaying. Welch takes notice and comments to Emma on the lack of nationalistic displays beginning with the flagpole outside the home: “It’s empty. Barren. Just the raw wind slapping the naked ropes around. Sickening sound… You’d think there would be a
flag up or something to that effect. Some sign. Some indication of loyalty and pride” (19). According to Welch the lack of the flag indicates some disease as he comments on the sickening sound of the naked ropes, as if the ropes would not make the same sound if there were a flag flying overhead. The same lack that is displayed outside the home is on display inside as well, “Nothing in here either. Not even one small token in the home. No miniature Mount Rushmore, Statue of Liberty, no weeping bald eagles clutching arrows. Nothing like that. We could be anywhere” (20). The lack of display indicates the lack of a clear national performative, but it does not indicate a lack of a performative entirely. As Welch indicates that we could be “anywhere,” what is being performed is the identity of the potential Other, the possible non-American. Being “anywhere” can include the United States, but it is ambiguous, and in its ambiguity, is suspect. But the notion of being anywhere simultaneously indicates a lack of locality, in a sense we run the risk of being no-where, an absence, nothingness. Simply being a citizen within its borders is no longer enough to be an American, and the national image’s invisibility not only disrupts identity but also the space in which that identity is performed. Welch attempts to rectify the situation, to stabilize the performative national identity slippage, by offering Emma a “wide variety of patriotic paraphernalia” to purchase and display, an act that will “brighten” the place up (21). The purchase and displaying of said paraphernalia will illuminate the darkness, the void, and the lack in the home. It will turn the anywhere/no-where to somewhere; the paraphernalia will indicate America and the stabilization of locality, securing her national identity. Like the flag-decorated cookies, it will be good for her.
Welch’s persistence in trying to sell Emma patriotic baubles and his logic concerning the importance of performing patriotism is reminiscent of President Bush’s imperative immediately following 9/11 to demonstrate the nation’s resiliency through shopping. To be an American is to be a consumer, and the act of consumption is a blow against the Enemy who, we are told by seemingly countless neo-conservatives, “hates our freedom.” The call for consumption masks an unsettling reality concerning freedom and contemporary global capitalism: the death of the American Dream. In 1931, historian James Truslow Adams coined the term in his book *The Epic of America*, describing it as a “land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.” For Adams, the Dream is not relegated to simple materialism but demands recognition of each individual’s worth, regardless of birth or position (404). The American Heartland had long stood as the iconic representation of ability and achievement through work and cultivation, a pure act of self-determination free of social and economic hierarchies (management/labor), the image of the American Dream.

Frank and Emma’s farm is more than simply the setting for the action of the play. As noted earlier the mise-en-scène invokes the nostalgia of the fifties and the efficacy of modernity. But the totality of the farm—the farmhouse, the cows, even Frank riding on the tractor—functions as a key cultural signifier in the mythos of America, which Welch identifies as “authentic.” The determining criterion of authenticity rests in Frank’s Anglo ethnicity, “[Frank] looks pretty American, doesn’t he? […] I mean—descent—hereditary-wise. Authentic! He looks authentic, is what I’m driving at” (Shepard, 10–11). Connecting earlier to the episteme of the Enemy, a racialized Other, the faithful
subject is one that is viewed as not-Other, the normative expectation of Midwestern
Americana. In short, Frank fits the role of the Caucasian subject in a Norman Rockwell
painting gathered with his family around the bountiful Thanksgiving meal. But as Emma
admits to Welch the institution of the family farm has become an emptied signifier of that
Dream since nearly all of the families have left, unable to compete with the multinational
corporate agribusinesses (14–15). The individual families are unable to compete with the
financial resources of the multinationals, suffering from the position they are in and
lacking the opportunities to succeed. The farmhouses left behind no longer contain or
produce life but are simply the rotting carcasses of the American Dream.

This absence of life replaced with death is evident in the non-reproducing
replacement heifers mentioned earlier and the over-watered plants. The intimation is
furthered during an exchange between Haynes and Emma after Haynes accidentally spills
coffee. Emma says, “Oh, don’t worry about that. It’s beyond ruin. It’s seen way worse
than coffee spills. Premature calves. Afterbirth. Blood all over the place. You can’t
wreck it” (48). The farmhouse is riddled with past births, including Emma’s: “I was born
in this house, as a matter of fact. Right in this room. Right on the spot you’re standing,
actually” (49). The farmhouse was once the site of new life, including Emma’s, but is
now just an empty vessel. There is no indication that new life will embody the home
(Frank and Emma have no children) and the area surrounding the farmhouse is becoming
more and more isolated. The few remaining neighbors are spread out and unseen,
sequestered during the winter for the warmth and in the summer for the air conditioning
(54–55). Despite the trouble Haynes’s being there invites, Emma is happy to have him,
“No, please—please—it’s so nice to have company for a change. We never see anyone
out here. Me and Frank. The mailman now and then. The propane delivery truck. The driver. They wave to us from the road. We wave back. But we never talk to anyone” (54). The little contact Emma and Frank have with the mailman and the propane delivery driver are out of necessity rather than choice.

Shepard’s dialectic juxtaposition of the deceased Dream with nationalistic consumption, along with the deployment of terror and torture to protect the American people from terror and torture highlights the incongruities and contradictions inherent in the Bush administration’s “War on Terror,” performing what Kenneth Burke describes as a “comic corrective.” For Burke, the comic experience need not be laughingly funny but rather positions the audience to recognize the incongruities set before them, incongruities that would normally be hidden, or rather, accepted as normative thereby disappearing in plain sight. Once recognized, the incongruities can thereby be corrected. By situating the audience in the role of an active, critically engaged participant instead of a passive consumer, Burke argues that the audience members would be “observers of themselves” allowing each to “transcend’ himself by noting his [sic] own foibles” (264. Italics in the original). Shepard’s God of Hell presents a theatrical dichotomy. On the one hand, the play’s mise-en-scène, characters, and structure follow what has become widely accepted as realistic, or highly mimetic representations. On the other hand the play’s actions and situations exist in the farcical extremes that are difficult to label as realistic (to my knowledge, there has been no reported cases of blue flashes erupting from anyone’s fingers). The juxtaposition of the realistic with the fantastic throws both styles into relief. Each acts as a foil to the other, situating the audience to recognize both in a critical manner.
As the absurdity of the situation rises to the level of comedic farce, the revelation of Haynes wearing the semiotically loaded black hood ruptures the play’s comedic convention and audience’s expectations. Acts of torture and Welch’s farcical jingoism once viewed as terrible but funny are now simply viewed as terrible. And it is not the violence committed by the Other that is terrible, but the violence committed on the Other, committed in our name, the violence perpetrated by the “Self.” The play situates the audience to recognize the violence beyond the stage even as they are watching the violence on stage. But for Shepard, it is not enough to recognize the violence performed both on and off stage. Following Burke’s notion of recognizing one’s own foibles, it is important to recognize the logic that surrounds the violence. As discussed above, the play’s use of radioactivity is a metaphor for blind patriotism. The instigating event that prompts the play’s action is Haynes’s escape from Rocky Butte and the plutonium experiments. During their initial confrontation, Haynes describes to Welch the horrors he experienced, “The ground caught on fire for thirty days! Not trees, not brush, but the raw earth!” To which Welch replies:

Fires have a way of burning themselves out, buddy-boy. It’s nature’s Band-Aid. Been going on for centuries. Chronically. Spontaneous combustion. The Romans had it. … It cleans things up, Haynes. Everything springs back to life in due time. We’re doing nature a favor, as a matter of fact. We’re provoking rebirth! (69)

Welch does not dispute the violence of the experiments, the raging fire that burned for thirty days. But while Haynes recoils from the image, Welch celebrates it, explicitly invoking the violence’s regenerative quality as the government agency Welch works for provokes “rebirth.” For Welch, the radioactive fire that burns earth acts as a purifying agent as it “cleans things up,” destroying nature in order to ultimately save it through its
regeneration, a contemporary version of Ben Tre logic, destroying the village in order to save it.

The play reveals the negative consequences in the ideological investment of regenerative violence and the purification via victimization. Welch’s character is not burdened with moral ambiguities or ethical dilemmas, but functions with clarity and providential calling as he relates to Haynes, “We’re suddenly stung by our duty to a higher purpose. Our natural loyalties fall in line and we’re amazed how simple it is to honor our one true heritage. Don’t you find that to be the case now, Haynes?” (73). So absolutely invested in the “one true heritage,” Welch’s actions—and those of the Bush administration—are absolutely justified. For *God of Hell*, the audience is not simply asked to recognize the violence of elected officials and government agents. The audience is situated to examine critically the very act of subject formation in which they are implicated. The play explores the investment into a particular rendition of the American subject, a rendition that is free of inner conflict or contradictions. Free of internal contradictions and conflict, nationalistic jingoism justifies its violent acts as a defensive measure and for the greater good, unwilling or unable to recognize the collateral damage left in its wake. Like Bertolt Brecht before him, Shepard’s goal is to inform and activate a public into political action, to call for an end to actions that are done to the populace (at home and abroad) and in their name, connecting their own actions and responsibilities of enablement. Shepard’s plays have a long history of deconstructing the intertwining of violence and American subjectivity, examining the myth as reality, from the amalgamation of the Western gunslinger and rock-and-roll music in *Tooth of the Crime* to American masculinity in *A Lie of the Mind*. But *God of Hell*’s exploration of how
easily the infallibility of American ideology slips into fascistic authoritarianism reveals how the state can exploit the regeneration-through-violence narrative to justify its use of violent coercion.
Conclusion

The Hard Kernel of the Real

Blood on the streets
Yeah blood flowin' down
I hear the blood of my blood
Cryin' from the ground
Empty sky, empty sky
I woke up this morning to an empty sky

“Empty Sky” by Bruce Springsteen from *The Rising*, 2002

In a way I begin this conclusion by returning to the dissertation’s beginning: Spider-man. But instead of discussing the web-slinger’s performative nature in film, I am going to examine his performance in the medium of his birth, the comic book. Comic books have undergone a significant change over the last several decades, maturing in content and form, developing into its *nom de légitimité*, the graphic novel. While still dominated by hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine superheroes and villains, comic books and graphic novels have expanded their illustrated subject matter, including representations of the Holocaust, re-imaginings of popular fairy tales in a distinctive adult perspective, and metaphysical explorations of existence with an aardvark. In the aftermath of 9/11, comic book writers and artists participated in the sense-making endeavor as well as raised money for the victims’ families. Wanting to make sure that as many people as possible knew the findings of the 9/11 Commission, comic book writer
Sid Jacobson and illustrator Ernie Colon rendered a graphic adaptation of the detailed and dense 9/11 Commission Report in August 2006 for the mass market (complete with a celebratory forward from the commission’s chair, Thomas H. Kean, and vice-chair, Lee H. Hamilton). Through its own language, comic books participated in the performances of national identity and trauma by culturally framing the event.

However, comic books were more diverse in contextualizing the event, unlike other forms of American popular entertainment such as television and film that tended to have a homogenized world-view. That is not to say that many graphic stories did not participate in what LaCapra characterizes as “acting out” the trauma of 9/11, as a fair number of them did. These stories tend to see a failure in preventing the event from happening, performing the melodramatic trope of being too late. There is also a notable level of diversity in content and form as many other graphic stories attempt to “work through” the trauma and come to no sense of a resolution or regeneration through the violent encounter of the Real. Sometimes these stories deploy a superhero as their protagonist, but often the central character was a non-powered everyman-type, who navigates through his or her personal and national traumas.

This conclusion examines two different types of graphic performances. The analysis of these two graphic novels not only provides a synthesis of my investigation in the use of regeneration through violence as a performative act in the endeavor to make sense of 9/11, but also provides an alternative working through the trauma. Many of the works I have discussed in my dissertation, such as Nelson’s The Guys, Stone’s World Trade Center, Greengrass’s United 93, and the Iraq War, demonstrate the structuring metaphor’s deployment through various performances and mediums. I have also
discussed several works that critically engage and deconstruct the regeneration through violence trope, such as Eastwood’s *Flags of Our Fathers* and Shepard’s *God of Hell*. While the latter intervening works are part of the larger 9/11 discourse, they do not attempt to directly represent the terrorist attack and the ensuing encounter of the Real. The two graphic novels both engage directly with the originary traumatic event, but in radically different ways.

The first example, the commemorative issue of *Amazing Spider-man* (Dec 2001), follows the regeneration through violence modality of representation even as it aesthetically acknowledges the impossibility of representing the Real. The single issue of *Spider-man* follows a meandering and fragmentary structure, oftentimes moving laterally, reflecting—and reflecting on—the shock felt in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. However, towards the end of the issue the style shifts as it becomes incredibly focused and straightforward, finishing with the regeneration through violence mythopoeia as a heroic emergence out of the Ground Zero.

The second example is Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel, *In the Shadow of No Towers*. Like the *Spider-man* issue, *In the Shadow* follows a fragmented structure, but is also circular in that every episode begins at the same point: the Twin Towers post-attack. Unlike the dominant regeneration through violence scenarios that contextualized the dark Tuesday by leaving it behind, *In the Shadow* depicts Spiegelman’s own negotiations with 9/11 and the trauma’s perpetual return in the form of the burning Towers. Spiegelman takes on an everyman role in his narrative as he critically engages his—and the nation’s—reactions to the terrorist attacks and the resulting collapse of the Twin Towers, which marks a counter to the American hero myth and histrionics. Drawing on his
medium’s history and playing with its form in his oversized graphic novel, Spiegelman situates his reader into an ontological state of freefall and collapses temporality, suggesting that the American public is still at the mercy of 9/11’s gravitational pull.

**Rolling Thunder**

As I discuss in the introduction, the 2002 film *Spider-man* functions as a fantasy machine that allows the audience to project their collective desires for a vibrant and strong national Imago and complete a narrative of Manichean justice onto the screen, something denied in reality, even as the *Imago* prescribes those same attributes to the audience. Writer J. Michael Straczynski and illustrator John Romita, Jr.’s commemorative comic book of *Amazing Spider-man* follows a different tack, as it performs a metaphysical journey through both Ground Zero and the trauma of 9/11. While the film *Spider-man* performs a tangential representation of 9/11 through its praiseful additions and was viewed by critics and audiences as a fantastical structuring metaphor, it makes no direct attempt at representing the event and the ensuing trauma of that horrific day. The comic book, on the other hand, is a conscious effort to directly address the terrorist attack and the ensuing tear in the national psyche.

*Amazing Spider-man*’s structure follows what culture and media scholar E. Ann Kaplan identifies as a trauma aesthetic, “narration without narrativity.” Kaplan describes this narrative structure as “without the ordered sequence leading to a determined end” normally associated with popular, linear narratives, although these narrations without narrativity often offer a sense of closure (*Trauma Culture* 65). The comic book does not conform to the normative linear narrative of sequential events leading towards a
determined ending although, following Kaplan’s description, this Spider-man story has an ending of sorts, a “closure” that I will discuss later. The graphic narrative is fragmented, internalized, and loaded with emotionally charged signifiers. The comic book does not seek to represent the event as much as it attempts to translate it while recognizing the novel’s own inherent failure at representing the Real. The comic book’s cover is all black with the exception of the title and issue number. When the book is opened, the first page repeats the monochromatic visual with the simple and non-ostentatious text echoing a news report, “We interrupt our regularly scheduled program to bring you the following Special Bulletin” and the bottom right corner listing New York’s coordinates (Straczynski and Romita 1). The only other diagnostic text is a caption that states, “Follow the sounds of sirens.” The donning of black can be taken as a performative act, one that indicates a presence of the mourner mourning. However, the repetition of black in this case does not constitute a presence but rather indicates an absence, a near complete erasure—not only of the Twin Towers, but of a cogent, stable, and whole subject: both within the comic book in terms of fictitious characters and within the reader, comic book in hand. Not only does the black represent an absence, but it also gestures towards the impossibility of representation itself, the inability to mimetically illustrate the Lacanian Real of 9/11. Will Eisner, one of the first comic book artists to critically and theoretically examine the form of his medium in his *Comics and Sequential Art*, describes comic books as “sequential art” and “graphic storytelling” indicating the importance of the visual: “It is the ‘visual’ that functions as the purest form of sequential
The comic book’s initial image of blackness expresses what Lacan identified as béance, the hole, the tear that rends the Imaginary, exposing the Real. After Spider-man’s self-reflexive gesture, acknowledging its own inability to represent the unrepresentable, the comic book nevertheless ventures forward, satisfying the requirements of the medium through illustration. I need to acknowledge the storytelling efficacy in the repetition of the black as it creates anticipation for the reader with the first image. However, that anticipation could not be seen as a joyous revelation but rather fosters the anxiety of revisiting the trauma, an attempt at translating the Real.

In a traditional Western comic book or graphic novel, when the reader opens the book, the text is broken into two pages, where the panel progression begins on the upper left hand corner laterally moves right along the page and then moves down to the next panel line before finally progressing to the next page on the right, similar to reading written text. Sometimes the graphic narrative deploys a two-page spread where the left and right pages that are meant to be seen by the reader as a single image, usually to make pictorial impact. The two-page spread provides the largest canvas in a conventional comic book and is normally used for an illustration that semiotically and narratologically cannot be contained in a single, small panel. Such is the case in the opening illustration of Spider-man. In the two-page spread image, the reader bears witness to an act of witnessing. The image positions the reader just outside the wreckage that comprises Ground Zero, looking down on the literal hole in the ground to discover Spider-man off

30 Eisner puts visual in quotes as a way of complicating the normative demarcation of terms such as image, word, illustration, and writing when it comes to comics. Eisner argues throughout Comics and Sequential Art the porous nature of terms as well as the job responsibilities between writer, artist, and even letterer as they, like theatre artists, collaborate to create the art object.
to the left, reacting to the horror before him. The reader is not privy to his face, but does witness his somatic reaction, his body tense with his arms to his head, blocking his ears and possibly his eyes, attempting to limit his exposure to the traumatic sensory onslaught (Straczynski and Romita 2–3). The image situates the reader to share Spider-man’s subjectivity, his subject position, while simultaneously maintaining the reader’s separateness. This doubling allows for the reader to bear witness through his—and the reader’s—trauma. In doing so, *The Amazing Spider-man* performs Joseph Roach’s performative act of surrogation, as the reader becomes Spider-man in his travels through the violence of 9/11.

However, even in its two-page splash, the comic once again concedes its impossible task. As Eisner discusses in *Comics and Sequential Art*, the panel in comics functions as a “medium of control,” guiding the reader to follow the illustrated action sequentially, indicating “time and flow” through the “panel-by-panel progression” (40). The panel also acts as a medium of control for the image itself, containing the visual within the panel walls. But as Eisner recognizes, there are actually two panels—the illustrated panel and the page itself that serves as a “metapanel” (65). In the two-page spread, the panels are cognitively obliterated as the image exceeds the confines of the page, what is technically referred to as a bleed. The totality of 9/11 defies containment, literally exceeding the confines of the medium: the toxic smoke billowing from the ruins of the Towers, traveling down the streets below, moving past our viewing as if going on forever. The bleed of the image beyond the paper transgresses the normative form of the medium. As comic book artist and theorist Scott McCloud observes in his *Understanding Comics* about the efficacy of the bleed’s *affect*, “When ‘bleeds’ are
used—i.e., when a panel runs off the edge of the page... time is no longer contained by the familiar icon of the closed panel but instead hemorrhages and escapes into timeless space. Such images set the mood or a sense of place for whole scenes through their lingering timeless presence” (103). “Timeless” implies the eternal but also indicates the rupturing of time’s perception. On the two-page spread, sans any other panels that indicate a flow of time, a before and after (in the sequential aspect of medium), there is no before or after, only the eternal now—a now that overwhelms the viewer, as it does the subject/object within the frameless illustration, Spider-man, who utters a single word that is itself a negotiation with the Real, “God.” Beyond the utterance lies the failure of language, of representation itself, as the comic book’s captions recognizes, “Some things are beyond words. Beyond comprehension. Beyond forgiveness” (Straczynski and Romita 2–3).

The comic continues with its “narrative without narrativity” as Spider-man enters the smoke, disappearing into the acrid cloud as he ventures on his metaphysical journey through Ground Zero. As he witnesses the horror around him, the comic book deploys the same bleed strategy in depicting the destruction, as if the comic book page itself is a viewfinder that can only gaze upon snippets of the destruction (6). Straczynski and Romita return to the normative use of panels (though not the first time deployed in the comic book) displaying several iconic Marvel Universe villains standing amongst the rubble: The Juggernaut, The Kingpin, Doctor Octopus, Magneto, and Doctor Doom.

Like a film camera, the panel progression controls the reader’s attention by zooming in on Doctor Doom, the malevolent monarch of Latveria, who in the 40 years since his first appearance has come to signify evil in the Marvel cosmology, his very visage and dress
inspired by the imaginings of Death itself. As the panel progression zooms in on Doom, the comic book focuses the reader’s attention on the monarch’s eyes and the glistening tears in the dark recesses of his mask (12). As noted earlier, the trauma aesthetic resists linearity but resonates with emotionally charged signifiers and significations. However it is not the representation of Ground Zero that is emotionally charged, it is Doom’s tears. So horrific, so inhuman was the terrorist attack that the man named Doom—whose very name invokes death and destruction—is brought to tears, and that is what graphic narrative positions the reader to witness.

Other instances of emotionally loaded iconography resonate throughout the book, from acts of bravery, great and small, to moments of sorrow as embodied by the young boy who sees his first responder father being pulled from the rubble. Screaming “Daddyyyy!” as tears begin to stream down his face, the boy reaches out to his fallen father only to be held back by Spider-man. Spider-man’s holding the boy back to prevent further injury is an empty act as the trauma of the moment has already struck (19–20). Spider-man is too-late three times: first he fails to prevent the terrorist from flying into the Twin Towers; second he fails to save the life of the fallen first responder; and finally, he fails to protect the boy from the horror of seeing his dead father being carried away. The utter failure of the heroic protecting the innocent overwhelms Spider-man as he collapses to his knees with his head drooped low, while the first responders walk away, one firefighter’s tear visibly streaming down his face as he walks away to continue the search for survivors. The single tear on the firefighter’s face signifies the suppression of personal sorrow for the betterment of the larger social body. This illustration, coupled with the images of the screaming child and the crestfallen hero, is joined with the
captions that gesture to the totality of the moment: “There are no words. The death of innocents and the death of innocence. Rage compounded upon rage. Rage enough to blot out the sun” (20).

The comic book seeks to restore the behavior of action but in this emotional low point, there is only stillness and momentary reflection. Spider-man happens upon Captain American, the embodied national *Imago*, amid the rubble. Standing nearly frozen, Captain America stares at the destruction as the panel progression moves towards his clenched fist (24). Captain America’s clenched fist signifies a large part of the superhero’s mythology and *raison d’être*, to strike against the enemy.\(^{31}\) But the momentary thoughts of violence are redirected to the lost innocence of children, serving as an intervention against racial violence as the panel progression moves away from Captain America and zeroes in on a little girl looking up to him, accompanied with the captioned text:

> What do we tell the children? Do we tell them evil is a foreign face? No. The evil is the thought behind the face, and it can look just like yours. Do we tell them evil is tangible, with defined borders and names and geometries and destinies? No. They will have nightmares enough. Perhaps we tell them that we are sorry. Sorry that we were not able to deliver unto them the world we wished them to have. That our eagerness to shout is not the equal of our willingness to listen. That the burdens of distant people are the responsibility of all men and women of conscience, or their burdens will one day become our tragedy. (25)

\(^{31}\) There is an intertextual connection between Captain America’s quivering fist of inaction? and the historical iconography of the character. Captain America debuted in the first issue of *Captain American Comics* (March 1941). The cover of that comic book depicted Captain America punching Adolf Hitler in the face, eight months before formal declarations of war between the United States and the Axis Powers and when the nation was officially neutral in the European conflict. The 1941 cover has taken on iconic status within comic book history and studies.
Like other 9/11 narratives I have discussed in my dissertation, the terrorist attack functions in a zero-sum world, as the text totalizes the innocence of the nation, if sometimes self-absorbed, as the caption suggests, “That the burdens of distant people are the responsibility of all men and women of conscience, or their burdens will one day become our tragedy.” The text—along with the gradual close-up on a little blond, blue-eyed girl—de-historicizes the event by erasing the knotty geo-political forces that intersected and collided on 9/11, which included the United States’ own international policies and interventions by simply saying that “their burdens” have become “our tragedy.”

It is at this point in the comic that the “narrative without narrativity” begins to shift from lateral movements to a focused and forward-moving story, motioning towards a resolution of regeneration and rebirth. From the ashes of Ground Zero a vision of an imagined future takes form as a new building is seen taking shape, rebuilding. In the shadow of the reconstruction, Spider-man’s thoughts move away from the horror and absence of morality in the attack to the presence of American subjectivity as a cohesive and virtuous singularity, echoing the mythic American Melting Pot. Drawing on the iconography of America as a nation of immigrants, the reader sees in the two-page spread a coalition of dominating signifiers: lit candles in Brooklyn overlooking the river and the smoldering Ground Zero; the determination of the square-jawed hard-hat workers’ eyes as they stare at the reader; the silhouette of the Statue of Liberty, whose torch burns in the night; a ship carrying people from far-off lands; and the multiplicity of identities—racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse—standing together and staring at the reader in unity with limitless numbers that trail off the page towards infinity (30–31).
The shift in the comic’s deployment of the bleed, away from signifying the horror of the Real towards the presence of the Imaginary, makes its second and final appearance on the last page of the comic. In this final image, the fictional superheroes stand behind those elevated to new heights: firefighters, police, Emergency Medical Services, paramedics, FBI, FEMA, construction workers (who aided in the recovery), and Mayor Giuliani, along with traditional American paragons, members of the armed services. Together the fictional superheroes and representations of the material world’s first responders and military personnel comprise the new pantheon of gods, all equal in their greatness. What now bleeds beyond the page in its timelessness is the American flag, signifying nationalistic strength and power as it mingles with popular signifiers of might (32).

Of course the hero whose subject position the readers have been sharing takes his place along with the other superheroes, no longer separate and fragmented but joined and whole. And as the everyman superhero that has been the reader’s proxy in this metaphysical journey, the reader is allowed to project him/herself among the pantheon, providing a sense of closure through the process of surrogation. In doing so the comic book guides the reader to again act out the trauma, much as the film did. While the narrative without narrativity offers an ending of sorts, the mythopoetic rendering of regeneration through violence frames the polemic as the story moves towards its ending. In the two-page spread containing the images of the Statue of Liberty, the multiplicity of identities, and the grim determination, the captions read:

In recent years we as a people have been tribalized and factionalized by a thousand casual unkindnesses. But in this we are one. Flags sprout in uncommon places, the ground made fertile by tears and shared resolve.
We have become one in our grief. We are now one in our determination. One as we recover. One as we rebuild. You wanted to send a message, and in so doing you awakened us from our self-involvement. Message received. Look for your reply in the thunder. (30)

The text is critical of American culture prior to 9/11, admitting our tribalization, factionalization, unkindness, and our self-involvement, all traits of childishness. From the violence we emerge as a single whole that is now one in our collective determination. The text also comments on the once infertile ground, now made fertile by our tears and resolution. The ground’s infertility lacked life, but from the violence of terrorism, new life emerges as flags “sprout” from the metaphorical ground of uncommon places. The imagery of regeneration due to violence, instead of in spite of it, affirms the American identity mythos.

Both the film and the commemorative comic book end with the hero before the American flag, equating the two icons as a singular idea and ideal. The national identity is a heroic one that calls for action. The intermixing of fictional super-heroes with the first-responders and armed service people (along with “America’s Mayor” Rudy Giuliani) prescribes the course of action for the national identity: action in the form of “thunder.” And it is through thunder that the nation reclaims its strength. Captain America’s trembling fist is a symbol not only of inaction, but also of impotence whose cure will come in the virility of bombs. The response to violence is further, greater acts of violence and as great as a force of nature. It is through violence—both received violence and violence that will be inflicted in the future—that the desired national identity becomes not only whole but also greater as we have emerged from our infantile
state of self-absorption. While there is no picture of Spider-man punching Osama bin Laden in the face, the fantasized punch is coming.

The performative loop of restored behavior also constitutes a theatricality as we watch Spider-man watch. The theatricality triangulation of our viewing Spider-man as he watches the actors in the scene closes as the quotidian characters occupying Ground Zero symbolically represent the people in the material world, the non-super hero. The conclusion of the comic book does not denote an ending but rather a beginning as the image of the hero is recovered and symbolically looks forward to the future in the final page’s image. The power of the heroic image at the end of the comic comes out of Spider-man’s (and the reader’s) gaze into the abyss of Ground Zero and drawing strength from the first-responders and survivors of the terrorist attacks. The heroic performances in the face of violence by the American people that both physically and conceptually inhabit Ground Zero inform Spider-man’s own heroism.

Spider-man’s regeneration through violence (and the reader’s through surrogation) demonstrates the heroism-from-tragedy reading of 9/11 as the story ends with an eye to the future after sifting through the rubble of Ground Zero. By the story’s end the traumatic event is erased by the utopic fantasy of America as the home of multiculturalism. The images of the Statue of Liberty and poly-ethnic visages take the place of the death and destruction of Ground Zero. In doing so the comic performs the fantasy of filling the traumatic event, the open wound marked by absence, with a positive presence, thereby evading the originary violence and the open wound itself. The desire to make sense of the trauma is enacted by transforming it into a cognitive palimpsest equipped with a pre-constructed as well as prescribing narrative that already makes sense.
By evading the event, the American subject relegates it to the past with the hope that the trauma never returns.

**The Sky is Falling**

Trauma is never successfully relegated to the past as it is always returning and the hard kernel of the Real keeps the wound open. It is the return of the trauma through citational representation of the event that consumes Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers*. Written over a period of nearly two years, from September 2001 to August 2003, Spiegelman’s work recalls some of the graphic narrative strategies deployed in *Amazing Spider-man*, particularly its cover. The black-on-black cover depicts the outline of the Twin Towers, which both invokes the Western tradition of mourning and also acknowledges the inherent failure of representing the traumatic encounter of the Real. The opaque shapes of the Towers are (the) shadows of the buildings that have been erased, a visual representation of marking their presence through absence, and vice versa. The only color comes in the form of a small panel that cuts the center of the cover, where a goat that resembles Osama bin Laden kicks the roughly dozen characters from the graphic novel’s interior off the tiny planet, leaving most of them airborne and in freefall. The panel is relatively small in comparison to the size of the cover and the many of the portrayed bodies are only half visible. The black-on-black rendering is repeated on the back cover as dozens of silhouettes are frozen in freefall. Similar to the front cover, the only color comes from the same bin Laden-goat figure on the bottom left corner who finds his footing by standing on the bar-coded stock-keeping unit (SKU) box. The repeated goat image gestures to a partial understanding surrounding the events of 9/11.
but recognizes the futility of any reduction of the phenomenon as a way of total understanding.

As in the case of the *Amazing Spider-man* commemorative issue, structurally *In the Shadow* follows the narrative without narrativity aesthetic. Spiegelman’s graphic novel is broken into ten separate vignettes that engage in different aspects of 9/11, such as the direct impact of the terrorist attack and the subsequent jingoistic response. The various episodes as well as the occasional non-sequitur panel progression comprise the fractured nature of *In The Shadows*. There is, however, a circularity to the overall narrative as each episode either begins with, or is literally framed by, the Towers post-attack. With the turn of every page the burning Towers visually dominate the optics of the story, marking a return to the traumatic event—a return that simultaneously suggests that we never left.

The idea of the return (or never left) manifests itself in various ways, among them a recollection of the comic medium’s own past. *In the Shadows* heavily employs characters’ likenesses from newspaper comic strips from the early twentieth century in its narrative, such as George McManus’s *Bringing Up Father*, Rudolph Dirks’s *Katzenjammer Kids*, George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat*, Winsor McCay’s *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, Richard Outcault’s *Hogan’s Alley* featuring the “Yellow Kid,” and Frederick Burr Opper’s *Happy Hooligan*, intermixing them with comic renditions of Art Spiegelman and his family. The pastiche use of these characters within *In the Shadow* defamiliarizes the historic characters, which epitomize comics as a medium, and the trauma of 9/11 thus fostering critical distancing through their intertextual play. The two Katzenjammer kids originally celebrated the American Melting Pot narrative of
immigration behind their innocent hijinks, which date back to the beginning of the twentieth century, but take on an ironic life in *In the Shadow*. While mostly retaining their original look, Spiegelman transforms the Katzenjammer brothers into the Tower Twins and fixes a single Tower to each of the boy’s head, connecting the naivety of early-twentieth-century thinking to the economic and cultural aura surrounding the buildings. By physically linking the two images—the kids and the towers—Spiegelman draws attention to the nationalistic ontology and episteme that surround 9/11.

In the episode entitled, “Ostrich Party,” Spiegelman highlights the misplaced modernistic attitudes in the postmodern world. The graphic narrative begins with the Tower Twins running into the scene with their fixed head-buildings on fire. A cartoonish Uncle Sam pours a barrel of oil on the Tower Twins to put out the fire, causing the kids’ entire bodies to burst into flame. As the Twins’ flesh are burned away to reveal their skeletons and their towers reduced to rubble, Uncle Sam turns his attention to a hornet’s nest, spraying the insects with pesticide. In his bloodlust to destroy the hornets, Uncle Sam engulfs the subsequent panels with pesticide before turning his attention to a roach with Saddam Hussein’s head. In the next panel, a swarm of hornets overtake Uncle Sam and the animated skeleton bodies of the Tower Twins, forcing the trio to run for cover. In the last panel, Uncle Sam finds safety in his house but the Twins are forced to continue to flee from the swarm. Spiegelman connects the terrorist attack to the consumption of foreign oil through Uncle Sam pouring it onto the already-burning Twins: to Uncle Sam oil is the solution to the burning bodies, not the cause. And instead of seeing the effects of his pouring oil on the burning Twins, he immediately turns his attention to waging war with the “hornets,” believing that the pest problem will be cured if he simply kills all of
them before turning his attention to Saddam Hussein, only to be overrun by the multiplying hornets. War and oil are not the solution but rather are the problems in the narrative as Spiegelman depicts the jingoistic behavior of the United States government, which escalates violence while the public suffers.

By utilizing the Katzenjammer kids, Uncle Sam, and even the old-fashioned plunger-operated pesticide dispenser, Spiegelman ironically wraps the twenty-first-century terrorist attacks in early-twentieth-century signifiers to articulate the regressive responses to 9/11. Spiegelman recalls in the graphic novel that during the height of World War I jingoism in the Hearst newspapers, the Germanic Katzenjammer Kids were retooled and renamed for a short time as the Shenanigan Kids and foreshadowed the “recent American vindictive euphemism that brought us ‘Freedom Fries’” (24). Spiegelman’s usage of these characters and their attitudes in his graphic narrative are citational as they are referencing previous behaviors and performances from nearly a century earlier.

Of course not everyone would recognize the characters and motifs as they have slipped away from the popular vernacular. To acquaint the uninitiated, the second half of In the Shadow reprints several of the classic comics, supplying the referent, just as it offers up its citations. Oftentimes the reprints have some kind of conceptual connection to the events of 9/11, such as the reprint of Bringing up Father, where the titular character, while vacationing in Pisa, fears the fall of the iconic Leaning Tower and decides to build a propping structure to hold it up (Plate VII). While silly and naïve when originally printed in 1921, in the aftermath of 9/11 the comic carries new ironic signification as it points toward the post-9/11 reductive solutions that only carry the
illusion of problem-solving. By littering the early twenty-first century fragmented narrative with early twentieth-century characters who often times fit the American Exceptionalism grand narrative, *In the Shadow* draws attention to the frailty of the grand narrative and its performative prescription of a national identity. The early twentieth-century characters signify the nation’s naïveté and its episteme at the dawn of the twenty-first and our refortication when faced with an ontological rupture.

*In the Shadow*’s utilization of these classic characters invokes a sense of absence and loss. The graphic novel’s invocation of the characters is not a nostalgic gesture, a longing for a past free of the worries of the contemporary world (or a desire to return to a more freeing style of comics before it had become standardized) but rather points towards the ephemeral existence of life for those early comic strips. Like the newspapers they were printed in, the comics only lived for a day before the paper was discarded or used to wrap fish in the local market. Before the popular pastime of collection, the Sunday inserts (or “Funnies”) were viewed as disposable material whose existence was not meant to last. While the comics are themselves reproducible, as evident by the second half of *In the Shadow*, the original material newspapers have effectively turned to dust. The ephemerality of the original newspaper comics echoes the ephemerality of the Twin Towers. Although they were meant to survive into the future, the absolute erasure of the Towers and the thousands who died that day acts as a reminder of the ephemerality of life and calls up its existential crisis.

Even as *In the Shadow* acknowledges the ephemerality of its own (and life’s) existence, it resists its fate through its own materiality. The oversized graphic novel, measuring 10 by 14.5 inches, is printed on thick cardboard stock paper, similar to a
young child’s first reading books that are durably built to sustain the onslaught of small children, who have a tendency towards destruction. The cardboard stock materiality of the novel becomes a defiant performance of presence in the terror of absence. The composition of the novel resists the decomposition of the turn-of-the-previous century newspapers, the Towers, the people, and even its own, all the while gesturing towards its own inherent failure. Durability does not equate immortality; it doesn’t even mean a later expiration date, only the desire for the eternal.

*In the Shadow’s* material existence not only expresses a desire for resilience in the face of its own terminality but also positions the reader to critically examine her/his own state of being. The tactile exchange and spatial relationship between audience and object provokes a sense memory, recalling the reader’s own childhood experiences with early reading/picture books made of the same cardboard stock. *In the Shadows* is also far larger than the normal 7 by 10.5 inches printing dimensions of most other graphic novels. While it was meant to replicate the dimensions of the Sunday comics inserts, in the hands of an adult the book replicates the size ratio of a child holding a picture book. The act of reading the oversized text physically approximates the subject/object relations of the past, invoking the somatic memory of childhood and disrupting the normative absorption into the graphic novel. Reading the oversize book does not necessarily render the reader into an infantile state or try to situate the individual into the subject position of a child, though one could certainly could arrive to that conclusion. Rather, it defamiliarizes the act of reading through one’s own body in relation to the narrative object in order to provoke a self-reflexivity on the part of the reader, a self-awareness that is furthered by *In the Shadow’s* presentation.
The graphic novel does not follow the normative layout of panel progression found in most graphic novels. As discussed above, when comic books use the two-page spread, it is usually used to make pictorial impact like the opening non-black visual of Spider-man witnessing Ground Zero. But even in the two-page spread, the physical comic book is held with two pages side by side horizontally. However, *In the Shadow*'s ten scenes and the supplemental reproduction of the classic comic strips are laid out vertically, forcing the reader to physically rotate the novel 90 degrees in order to read it. The reorientation of the layout works against both the normative graphic presentation and the Western tradition of physically reading a book. Additionally, given the over-size construction of the book itself (the dimensions of the open book now being 14.5 by 19.875 inches), the physical act of turning the book to read the graphic narratives is incommodious, particularly since the portions of the book are twice interspersed with verbally driven text that follow the normative horizontal layout orientation, forcing the reader to rotate the book again. The reorientation of the text forces the reader to physically work at reading the graphic novel in its entirety, denying a level of comfort and absorption as the text forcibly disconnects the reader in its reading demands. Coupled with the fragmented overall narrative and the chaotic, sometimes multi- or parallel stories contained within the individual episodes, the act of reading itself is defamiliarized and becomes a more consciously embodied act as it forces the reader to reorient the book, the reader’s body, and, given the size of the text, anything immediately around the reader for fear of knocking nearby objects over and causing their fall.

The vertical layout (re)orientation, along with the usage of the classic comic strip facsimiles, simulates the material reading of the Sunday comics, but there is a further
demand on the reader that is tied to the motif of *In the Shadows*. Because the comic utilizes the two-page spread in combination with its vertical layout, the reader’s eye “falls” along the length of the page in the act of reading. While the eye does move from the top of the page to the bottom of the page while the subject reads, in Western reading tradition the dominant move is horizontal, laterally moving from side to side. But in *In the Shadow*, the pervasive eye movement is downward as it replicates the act of watching something fall. The reader’s eye performs what is graphically and textually represented on the page. The insistence of the fall makes its mark in the first episode entitled, “Waiting for That Other Shoe to Drop!” where several different narratives are played out on the page. Along the lower left side and the entire right side of the two-page vertical spread, images of one of the two Towers are in a state of falling.

As indicative of his style, Spiegelman draws his towers in a non-realistic way, where the lines of the building invoke the iconic façade of the Twin Towers but are colored orange-red that signifies flames. The simple colored-line drawing of the Tower is reminiscent of Expressionistic painting, which expresses the internalized emotionality of the artist through the art object. Expressionism is utterly subjective as it articulates a distorted, often violent, perception devoid of rationality. In the accompanying text Spiegelman discusses how the vision of the burning buildings seared into his mind even though they were not dominant visuals in the media, unlike the distant shots of the buildings wrapped in smoke (iii). While the image and coloring are taken from his experiences, the renderings do not convey the material existence of the buildings on fire but rather their emotional content.
Cathy Caruth discusses the notion of the fall in her analysis of Paul de Man’s critical theory of reference as itself a traumatic narrative. According to Caruth, the fall for de Man functions as a citational representation of the trauma as its referential return (*Unclaimed Experience* 7). Trauma’s return is bound by the subject’s inability to comprehend the event when initially confronted. The traumatic representation acts as a citation to that unknowable event. And its return points to the inevitable impact. But the image of the falling body as a reference to the initial traumatic impact has special meaning in Spiegelman’s work. Where the falling body for Caruth in de Man’s work was indirect, for Spiegelman the reoccurring image of the fall is directly tied to the visuals of 9/11, whether it was falling bodies or falling buildings. Along with the burning Towers the notion of falling is a recurring visual in Spiegelman’s graphics throughout the ten episodes. Throughout *In the Shadow*’s illustrations the image of the fall permeates graphics. While Caruth was discussing the recurrence of the fall as the symbolic representations of the return to the traumatic event, in Spiegelman’s work, the fall is materially tied, as well as symbolically, to the traumatic event itself.

While the falling images are representative of the material bodies and buildings that fell on 9/11, Spiegelman makes no effort to depict them in a photo-realistic way. The falling images are stylized and self-referential as they draw attention to their cartoonish renderings, which vary in technique and aesthetic on a single page. The various anti-realistic visual styles Spiegelman deploys in his *In the Shadow*, particularly when juxtaposed against each other, allow for a Brechtian technique of *verfremdungseffekt* or estrangement that draws attention to the act of mediating and representation. As media and ethics scholar Katalin Orbán notes about Spiegelman’s art,
the “anti-realist use of the image, confronting readers with what they see and what they
don’t, draws attention not only to the limitations of images but also to the object of loss
itself, that which images are unable to show” (63). Spiegelman’s anti-realist styles,
including his occasional use of anthropomorphism when drawing himself as a mouse,32
critically distance the audience from the graphic novel. And in doing so Spiegelman
invites the reader to recognize the limitations of representation as well as the ontology of
erasure as the drawn image acts as a citation to its own lacuna.

There is a congruent strategy at play in the simple, anti-realist drawings
Spiegelman uses in *In the Shadow*. The simple line drawings allowed for what Scott
McCloud identifies as “amplification through simplification” where the abstraction of the
image through the simplified line of cartooning does not so much eliminate details, as
rather focus attention on the specific details included. As McCloud argues, “By stripping
down an image to its essential ‘meaning,’ an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that
realistic art can’t” (30). Because of the image’s lack of photorealistic particulars, what
details are included focus the attention of the reader and are given extra value in the
sparse economy of line. Beyond the amplification through simplification, the
unelaborated image allows for greater participation for the readers. The lack of detail

32 Art Spiegelman is best known for his graphic novel, *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*. *Maus*
depicts the relationship between Spiegelman and his father, Vladek, a Polish Jew survivor
of the Holocaust. The graphic narrative oscillates between Vladek’s memories of living
through Nazi occupied Europe with his wife Anja and the Auschwitz concentration camp
and Art Spiegelman’s interviews with his father in the contemporary world. While the
former tells the story of Vladek’s surviving the Holocaust, the latter tells the story of
surviving the survivor as the interview scenes depict the troubled generational
relationship between father and son. *Maus* has won numerous awards and has been
canonized in Holocaust studies but is famous for Spiegelman’s anthropomorphic
rendering of different national and ethnic groups: Jews were drawn as mice, Germans as
cats, Americans as dogs, and the Polish as pigs.
calls on the audience to “fill in the gaps” as it were, projecting emotions, thoughts, and intentions onto the characters. This level of involvement does not contradict the estrangement as we are not absorbed in the emotionality of the individual character but are drawn to the affect as a result of the material forces at work within the narrative. Spiegelman utilizes antirealist aesthetics, including McCloud’s idea of amplification through simplification, to facilitate an estrangement effect as he directs the reader to recognize and re-conceptualize the fall.

Even the placement and orientation of the panels participate in the fall-as-signifying-chain. The top panel of the right hand side of page overlaps the panel vertically below it and is at an angle, as if the panel was itself dropped on the page. As I discussed above, the panel is meant to confine the image but the skewed panel marks the inability to contain the trauma that exists both within its borders in the form of the burning building as well as its own spatial relationship to its other panels. Random chance and gravity rather than meticulous ordering places the panel. The graphic representation is not an external mimetic replication of the fall but rather Spiegelman’s expression of his ongoing negotiation of his internalized trauma and continuous fall.

The falling building images are echoed in the other narrative played out on the page that is more directly connected to the first episode’s title “Waiting for That Other Shoe to Drop.” In the twelve panel mini-narrative entitled “Etymological Vaudeville: Revealed: 19th Century Source for 21st Century’s Dominant Metaphor!” our protagonist, dressed in late Victorian clothing and top hat, makes his way to his upstairs apartment after a late night of drinking. Getting ready for bed, our unnamed drunken character kicks off his boot into the air only to make a tremendous “KLOMP!” sound when it
lands. Suddenly aware that the noise will wake his downstairs neighbors, he quietly takes off his remaining shoe and gets into bed. Enough time has passed for our protagonist to fall asleep before profanities are shouted at him from downstairs. Awoken from the loud KLOMP of the first shoe, the neighbors scream in unison, “Drop the other @*%! shoe so we can go to sleep!” (1). What frustrates the neighbors to the point of hurling comic book profanities is not the dropping of the first shoe, as it has already happened, but the anticipation of the second shoe dropping and making noise. While the residents were awoken by the sound of the first shoe, they cannot go to sleep until the second shoe drops, lest they be awoken again by its supposedly inevitable fall. The terror, then, is not the shoe that has fallen, but the shoe that will fall, echoing Derrida’s own thoughts about the trauma of 9/11: “Traumatism is produced by the future, by the to come, by the threat of the worst to come, rather than by an aggression that is ‘over and done with’” (Borradori 97). The repetition in the graphic novel is not simply the past memory of the Towers falling, but the anticipation of more towers to fall or already falling, psychologically performing the scenario over and over. The return is not to the past but to the anticipated nightmarish future.

The bottom half of the page’s central image of a giant shoe falling on the heads of citizens running echoes the traumatic nightmare of other towers already in free fall. Spiegelman highlights McCloud’s idea of amplification through simplification by juxtaposing a photograph cutout of a gigantic Dr. Marten brand shoe—known for its durability as a work shoe—falling on an anti-realistically drawn crowd running in fear. The crowd’s simple but exaggerated expressions amplify the feelings of terror, which is mirrored in the non-paralleled lines of the background buildings. The buildings’
disjointing-angled lines can convey Expressionistic codes of horrific emotions, are themselves falling, or, more than likely, both.

The notion of falling itself becomes unfamiliar in the second episode of the book. In the opening six-panel sequence of the untitled scene, falling moves laterally across the top resisting the vertical orientation of the page. In the first panel of the sequence, an overtly cartoonish Art Spiegelman stands on stage before a sleeping audience, with an American eagle tied around his neck. The rope is choking the eagle that is also wearing a star-spangled top hat similar to Uncle Sam. Spiegelman’s dialogue balloon reads, “Doomed! Doomed to drag this damned albatross around my neck, and compulsively retell the calamites of September 11th to anyone who’ll listen!…” while the eagle squawks, “Everything’s changed! Awk!” The second panel twists slightly and shifts from a two-dimensional plane to a three-dimensional one, while the image within the panel’s wall remains two-dimensional. Like a camera zooming in on its subject, the image of Spiegelman and the eagle fill more of the frame. Spiegelman now looks directly at the reader, breaking the fourth wall, holding his hands up saying, “I insist the sky is falling; they roll their eyes and tell me it’s only my Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder…” while the eagle enunciates a familiar refrain from President Bush immediately following the attacks when asked what could the citizenry do to help, “Go out and shop! Awk!” Following the motion of the second panel, the third panel twists at a greater degree, where the edge of the panel is more visible while the visual plane becomes more distorted as it points towards its vanishing point. Art Spiegelman’s head now fills the panel and states, “That’s when Time [sic] stands still at the moment of trauma… which strikes me as a totally reasonable response to current events….” The
eagle has disappeared from view but can still be heard through its voice balloon
screaming “Awk!” The fourth panel twists at a greater angle, revealing more of its edge
while the viewing plane becomes even more distorted and smaller. Spiegelman’s head
now fills the frame, crowding the word balloons, and his eyes become red swirls as he
says, “… I see that awesome tower glowing as it collapses!…” as the eagle screams, “Be
afraid!” The fifth panel continues the twisting movement of the previous panels to the
point where the visual plane is smaller than its edge. When the sixth panel finally makes
its landing, the former visual plane has disappeared, only revealing its edge that now
takes the form of a burning 1 World Trade Center, the North Tower, with its transmitter
antenna.

The lateral falling quickly interrupts the projected eye movement established in
the first episode and just as quickly resumes the dominant vertical eye movement for the
rest of the graphic novel. The novel’s disruption of its own graphic narrative strategy,
even as it establishes it, frustrates the reader’s expectations regarding how the novel is to
be read. The shifting graphic narrative master plan situates the reader to expect anything,
a strategy that encompasses the singular and the multiple with the possibility of the
infinite. The eclectic graphic narrative strategy (or to some the lack thereof)
acknowledges the impossibility of representing 9/11, even as In the Shadow develops
alternative means in opposition to the conventional. The multiple approaches in the
graphic narrative are themselves performances in trying to understand the traumatic
encounter of 9/11. All attempts utterly fail to capture the Real as even the simple physics
of falling become complicated and reveal a tautological explanation that says nothing.
As Spiegelman tries to explain the effect of the 9/11 attacks to a slumbering populace, his
entire epistemological being falls into and is erased by the image of the burning Tower. The sideways falling sequence points to the foreclosure of the traumatic event as it returns and the understood laws of physical nature are no longer applicable.

Not only does the sequence disrupt the downward gravitational pull of falling, it ruptures the notion of finality that is usually assigned to phenomenological reading of the fall. As the panel falls sideways and eventually becomes the standing North Tower, it is not a whole pre-9/11 illustration. The depicted Tower is already engulfed in flame and smoke, billowing out of its front. The sequential art that transforms a panel into a building also brings to mind the historical sequence of events, which dictate that from the burning building comes its collapse. For the reader as well as for Spiegelman, the building is not simply standing but is already falling in memory. And its resulting fall and utter destruction leads to Spiegelman’s enunciation of “the sky is falling” that will erase him again in the panel’s fall, creating a phenomenological loop and ontological freefall. The normative reading of panel progression indicates a forward movement in time as it moves from left to right. But in the panel-chronological progression, the reader’s memory is hurled back to the moment just prior to the collapse. The forward and backward reading of the panels transforms the sequence into a palindrome that signals a closed loop with no beginning or ends, a graphic traumatic Möbius strip.

The defiant return of the traumatic event ruptures what is perhaps the most lucid and linear graphic narrative in the graphic novel. The sixth episode begins with Art Spiegelman in a state of freefall, as represented by five exact “stills” of the artist’s body at different angles that gradually grow larger as he gets closer to the ground, along the length of the left-hand side of the vertical two-page spread with the burning Tower.
behind him within a single tall panel. Interspersed with the falling Spiegelman are free-floating text captions that read:

He keeps falling through the holes in his head, though he no longer knows which holes were made by Arab terrorists way back in 2001, and which ones were always there… He is haunted now by the images he didn’t witness… images of people tumbling to the street below… especially one man (according to a neighbor) who executed a graceful Olympic dive as his last living act. But in the economic dislocation that has followed that day, he has witnessed lots of people landing in the streets of Manhattan. (6)

At the bottom of the tall panel that indicates the end of Spiegelman’s fall is the early comic character Happy Hooligan, depicted as a homeless person lying amid trash. It is unclear whether the falling Art Spiegelman becomes the homeless Happy Hooligan (who stands in for Art Spiegelman in episode 10); if the Happy Hooligan character is awoken from a nightmare as indicated by his very large eyes and his sitting up from a reclined posture and different color palates between him and the falling Spiegelman, indicating psychological difference; if we are looking at two different moments within a single panel; or if the images are metaphorical representations to indicate the economic effect of 9/11 on lower Manhattan. Given the novel’s overall aesthetic, it is seems likely to be a combination of all of them. The final image of the homeless Happy Hooligan thematically ties into the second, larger narrative of the episode that revolves around Spiegelman’s concerns over his neighborhood’s “Crazy Lady.”

The episode begins with Art Spiegelman’s pre-9/11 memory of walking through his SoHo neighborhood and trying to avoid a homeless woman who regularly hurled anti-Semitic epithets at him in Russian, whom he called “Crazy Lady.” Even though he avoided personal contact with the woman, she was neighborhood fixture, as affirmed by
Spiegelman’s statement, “We weren’t exactly friends but—aside from the time she was hauled away for assaulting a black woman—she was always there for me…” (6). But in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 the homeless woman had vanished. At first Spiegelman’s narrative follows a very conventional panel sequence. The straight-edged framing boxes are equally spaced along a linear sequence and are roughly the same size. The orderly progression of panels is a far cry from the more chaotic panel layout and progression throughout most of the graphic novel.

However, in the middle of the sequence and at the time in the narrative where Spiegelman recognizes her absence, a single exploding panel, as indicated by its jagged and pointed shape, disrupts the frame progression. In a blood red hue, the violent rupturing panel is reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch painting, *The Last Judgment*. The exploding panel depicts the giant head of Crazy Lady, cocked back and screaming with turban-wearing snakes slithering out of her eye sockets. In the background buildings are crumbling all around as dead bodies are raining down from the fiery and smoked-filled sky, while demonic figures run along the ground. There are two airplanes made of flesh with giant mouths in the air and a giant demon carrying an oversized box-cutter riding a monstrous horse on the ground.

The temporal existence of the exploding panel lasts until the very next conventional panel when Spiegelman sees his neighborhood’s homeless woman, where he gives a sigh and thinks, “She’s back!” The relief that Crazy Lady did not die on 9/11 is short lived. Now Crazy Lady no longer spews anti-Semitic epithets in Russian, but in English, “YOU DAMN KIKES—YOU DID IT! DIRTY JEW! WE’LL HANG YOU FROM THE LAMP POSTS, ONE BY ONE! YOU HEAR ME, JEW? ONE BY
ONE!!” The Crazy Lady’s word balloons are actually word explosions as the balloon outlines follow the same jagged line as the rupturing panel and the letters are all in bold and capitalized, signifying unrelenting volume and emotions. Crazy Lady’s familiar scapegoating of the Jewish community as the cause of the terrorist attacks (one of the more popular 9/11 conspiracy theories) is met by an equal explosion from Spiegelman as he returns with an equal level of emotionality and volume, “DAMN IT, LADY! IF YOU DON’T STOP BLAMING EVERYTHING ON THE JEWS, PEOPLE ARE GONNA THINK YOU’RE CRAZY!” (6). Spiegelman’s final word, “crazy,” is both larger in size and bolder in texture, such that it draws extra attention from the reader even as it depicts a performed emphasis. Spiegelman notes in the penultimate panel of the larger narrative, “She avoided me after that…,” indicating that they had exchanged roles from the beginning of the story. Instead of Spiegelman consciously avoiding confronting Crazy Lady with her excessive emotional and psychological outbursts, it is now Crazy Lady who avoids him, not wanting to be on the end of Spiegelman’s “crazy” lashings.

But the final panel of the scene displaces the linearity of the larger episode’s narrative. Drawn in the style of Winsor McCay’s *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, the final panel depicts a young boy, presumably a young Art Spiegelman since he is drawn as his *Maus*-headed character, lying on the ground next to his bed, as if he had fallen there from his dream, with his mother standing before him, a familiar ending to the *Little Nemo* comic strip. The child Spiegelman says, “Then John Ashcroft pulled off his burka and shoved me out the window, and—” but is cut off by his mother, who is wearing a World-War-I-era gasmask and a nightgown, who ends the scene with, “Hush. You fell out of bed, sweetie” (6). Similar to the smaller narrative that begins the episode with a possible
Spiegelman/Happy Hooligan waking from a dream of falling, the final panel of the larger narrative ends with Spiegelman/Maus/Little Nemo waking after falling from his nightmare. The graphic narrative pushes the audience out of the potential absorption of the larger story and onto the floor, forcing the reader to question whether or not what was portrayed actually happened or was it all Spiegelman’s nightmare. Or is the waking world a nightmare as indicated by Spiegelman’s transformation into his Maus image and his mother sleeping with a gasmask on? Or is it more than likely both? Although there are no indications to answer the questions the graphic episode raises, the comic’s efficacy of jolting the audience from its slumber into critical self-awareness is profound.

Even in its finish, In the Shadow obstructs conventional resolutions, as it provides no sense of an ending so much as it simply stops roughly where it began. The final episode is literally framed by the Twin Towers, whose outlines contain the graphic narrative sequence. The page’s left-sided South Tower sequence explores the first anniversary of 9/11 and Spiegelman’s participation in NBC’s Concert for America. Taking the form of Happy Hooligan, dubbed “Hapless Hooligan” for the narrative, Spiegelman is asked to take part in a planned montage of “typical” New Yorkers by the NBC producers. At first he is resistant to participating in such a commemoration since the mood of the nation has shifted from memorial to jingoism as reflected by the faxed questions he can expect: “This sez [sic] they’ll ask me stuff like ‘who’s my favorite American hero!’ I don’t even believe in heroes!” But his wife argues that he should participate since his “point of view never gets on network TV” (10). Conceding, Spiegelman-as-Hapless Hooligan agrees to the interview, but his pre-taped interview
never makes air since it doesn’t fit the nationalistic fervor expected. The entire sequence offers itself up as an ironic commentary that freedom of speech is celebrated and disseminated for all to hear so long as it conforms to pre-existing narratives and desired performances.

The page’s right-sided North Tower sequence is a “waiting for the other shoe to drop” echo. The first panel has Art Spiegelman looking out at the reader with a caption that reads “On 9/11/01 time stopped.” The next panel Spiegelman holds a Twin Tower souvenir clock. The ticking clock has a giant New York firefighter holding an American flag standing before the Towers, while an American eagle engulfs the buildings in its wings. Spiegelman’s word balloon reads, “By 9/12/01 clocks began to tick again…” In the third panel the Towers have been replaced by two lit dynamite sticks with Spiegelman’s word balloon reading, “But everyone knew it was the ticking of a giant time bomb.” In the fourth panel the lit fuses cover Spiegelman’s face as the ticking sound effects get louder and his word balloon reads, “Still, even anxious New Yorkers eventually run out of adrenaline and…” The fifth panel is a comic book explosion with bold white letters that read “BOOM!” that is followed by the sixth panel revealing an ash-covered Spiegelman, now looking like Happy Hooligan, saying “…You go back to thinking that you might live forever after all!” (10).

Spiegelman answers “Shrimp Pad Thai” as his favorite American food; “Paris, France” as the place in America where he feels most American; and “that as long as you’re not an Arab you’re allowed to think America’s not always so great” as being the greatest thing about America. The last panel has him literally being kicked out of the building as he thinks aloud, “Rats! I shoulda [sic] said ‘American tobacco!’” regarding the greatest thing about America (10).
A larger seventh panel that recalls the dominant image from the first episode of people running from the falling giant shoe follows the equally sized and spaced six-panel sequence. However, this time the foreground characters are rendered in the *Maus* style, equipped with simple mouse heads yet still simply expressing horrific visages. In the background the buildings are once again drawn at angles and disjointedly while the rest of the populace are famous comic characters from various strips (*Popeye, Pogo, Lil’ Abner, Peanuts, and Little Orphan Annie* just to name a few). But instead of a single shoe falling from the sky, the air is littered with cowboy boots, signifying the Republican Party’s 2004 Presidential Convention held in New York as the captions discuss the politicization of the national tragedy. The final three panels sequentially depict the fall of the North Tower as they fade to black and the captions read, “The Towers have come to loom far larger than life… but they seem to get smaller every day… happy anniversary” (10).

Although the sequence fades to black indicating an ending, the graphic narrative concerning Spiegelman’s negotiation with the trauma of 9/11 merely stops without a sense of resolution. Much like the sideways falling Tower sequence discussed above, the literal framing of the panels with the silhouette of the Twin Towers indicates a cognitive collapse as it situates the reader to make sense of the trauma by using the trauma as its own reference. Through its ideologically driven narratives, particularly the structuring metaphor of regeneration through violence, politicians can capitalize on the symbolic power of 9/11 as a national tragedy. But the trauma remains beyond the mythopoeia, the hard kernel of the Real that resists summation or symbolization, as it remains the open wound. There is no sense of closure, resolution, or endings concerning the tragedy. Any
simplistic attempt would prove to be inadequate and unsatisfying. The fade to black acknowledges a temporal distancing, as the phrase “they seem to get smaller every day… happy anniversary” indicates, but not a sense of conclusion. And given the supplemental matter in the graphic novel that follows—Spiegelman’s essay concerning his own work and the classic comics reprints—9/11 does not end so much as it simply stops, an unresolved narrative for an open wound.

Spiegelman’s non-ending ending and purposed obfuscation demands the reader to participate in the sense-making endeavor by producing meaning rather than merely consuming it. Passivity is rejected on multiple levels, as the reading itself is an embodied performance of sense-making. Due to the size and alternating layouts within the graphic novel, the reader’s reorientation of the book demands a spatial awareness of the surroundings. This reorientation goes beyond the book, as the reader must reorient her or his body in the process. This physical awareness of one’s environment and one’s own body beyond the pages disrupts any potential absorption into the graphic story. And, as we have seen, the narrative structure already resists the reader’s absorption through its fragmented, non-linear, and multi-layered self-reflexivity that critically distances the reader. Far from the conventional thinking surrounding mainstream comic books as mind-numbing and childish escapism, In the Shadow of No Towers graphically forces its audience to work through its reading, just as it performs its own navigations through and negotiations with the trauma of 9/11. Spiegelman’s graphic novel calls on its reader to help it make sense of 9/11 in its participatory performance. Unlike other performances that searched to make sense of the traumatic encounter of the Real by restoring past behaviors and scenarios, which are infused with the regeneration-through-violence
structuring metaphor, *In the Shadow* resists and frustrates such acting-out treatments that provide the illusionist conclusions to trauma.

In the chapters above, I examine different performances that utilize what Richard Slotkin has identified as the regeneration through violence trope to make sense out of 9/11. Slotkin argues that the trope functions as the structuring metaphor for the American experience, dating back to early Puritan narratives and persisting throughout the different epochs over the last four hundred years. Romanticizing violence as regenerative instead of traumatic, generations of Americans have imagined a national identity based on action and sacrifice, leading to a performative loop of restored behavior where the image prescribes the material world and its representations. In Nelson’s *The Guys*, the trauma of 9/11 turns into the rescuing of the rescue narrative itself as the dead firefighters are transformed into spectral palimpsests, eidolons derived from the quotidian traits of masculinity. Nelson’s play reinscribes heteronormative attributes of the male hero that emerges from the ashes of Ground Zero to rescue the damsel in distress. In *United 93*, Greengrass performs the lacuna of the tragic flight as a successful revolt through the embodied storming of the aircraft cabin. Contradicting the official record, Greengrass projects embodied hands struggling for the steering wheel, sacrificing themselves in order to save unknown innocents on the ground. Greengrass’s claims of authenticity rest less on his adherence to the material facts and more on audiences’ desire for the image to be true. Oliver Stone transforms Ground Zero into a womb in his *World Trade Center*, transmuting the suffering of his protagonist into the birthing pains of the re-discovered American hero.
For a nation staggering from its encounter with the Real of 9/11, regeneration through violence functions as more than just a descriptive of violence, but also as a prescriptive act. In the aftermath, many Americans—from politicians to common people—likened 9/11 to Pearl Harbor. However, the labeling expressed a desire to frame the unfamiliar world into one not only familiar but also idealizing ourselves in the process. Quickly following the terrorist acts the United States invaded Afghanistan to destroy al Qaeda and overthrow the Taliban government harboring the terrorist group’s upper echelon. No sooner did armed forces land in the South-Central Asian country then the Bush administration begin constructing a war narrative against Iraq that emulated the World War II mythos. In an attempt to re-perform the role of the Greatest Generation within a three-act melodrama, the Bush administration, along with media pundits and news corporations, engaged in the oxymoronic pre-emptive war with Iraq under the anamorphic War on Terror. Reconfiguring Saddam Hussein as the twenty-first century Hitler and spearheading an invasion against the “Axis of Evil,” the nation entered into the war with the intention of reclaiming the heroic role as much as procuring suspected weapons of mass destruction. Through the Iraq War, the United States would regenerate its national identity, which was wounded on 9/11.

Spiegelman resists nationalistic and jingoistic narratives in his graphic novel because they provide little meaning and comfort to the trauma of 9/11. In one particular episode, Spiegelman crawls underneath an American flag but finds no comfort demonstrating the effort was an empty act, as it did nothing to relieve his state (7). While politicians wrap themselves in the flag as they take advantage of the post-9/11 climate of terror and rage, the simplistic sloganeering provides no consolation to the trauma. The
national(istic) performances are heavily invested in viewing the violent act as containing within it the subsequent act of regeneration. But the investment in regenerative violence calls for its validation and valorization, as violence is answered with more violence. As a consequence, this investment creates the illusion of leaving the originary trauma behind. Spiegelman’s work demonstrates that the trauma has not been left behind but rather is always with us. And as a performative act, In the Shadow of No Towers prescribes a strategy of critical engagement with the trauma. While it does not offer up a simple cure for the trauma, it does suggest a way of working through the Real of 9/11.

Empty Sky reprise

Beyond its critical performative and embodied engagement with its audience, I included In the Shadow of No Towers in my dissertation because, of all of the theatrical and performative representations concerning 9/11, Spiegelman’s work spoke most directly to my own negotiations with the trauma of that day. The various works that this dissertation has explored have tried to explain the unexplainable. Many of them, such The Guys, United 93, World Trade Center, even the Iraq War itself, have framed 9/11 as an event of regeneration through the violence. Some of the iconography that has emerged from Ground Zero, such as Thomas E. Franklin’s Flag Photo and President Bush’s bullhorn moment atop of the rubble, have perpetuated 9/11’s mythic rendering through the trope, especially by connecting it to World War II narratives. But these various performances displace the trauma even as they romanticize the conceptual essence of violence, if not the physical act itself. Even those performances that act as interventions I have discussed, Sam Shepard’s God of Hell and Clint Eastwood’s Flags of
Our Fathers, which critically examine the American operation of viewing violence as a regenerative act, displace the trauma of 9/11 even though that violence shaped their coming into being. The sampling of the works discussed in this dissertation offer themselves up as complete pieces providing a sense of closure. Nelson’s The Guys only appears opened-ended as it gestures towards a desire for the rescue narrative as its conclusion. Only Spiegelman’s work resists any finality, as it focuses on the working through the trauma, which calls on its audience to be embodied, active agents in the process rather than interpellated subjects.

Spiegelman’s work, which calls on its audience to be embodied and active agents rather than consumers of ideologically constructed narratives, serves as an intervention against the normative framing of 9/11 specifically and of violence and trauma in the United States in general. The power of regeneration through violence as a structuring metaphor of the American experience is its transformative potential, particularly overcoming adversity, whether big or small. As a coping strategy, the trope provides a positive outcome from tragedy and sorrow. However, in a culture that historically privileges hypermasculinity, the trauma is evaded and erased while the originary violence is both romanticized and maligned. The hero does not linger in the trauma but strives forward, emerging greater through his baptism of fire. So integrated is this cliché into the national psyche that it appears as a self-evident truism.

While not exclusive to the American narrative, regeneration through violence is an integral part of our national character. The mythopoeia of the nation’s formation and expansion is rooted in the pervasive trope. Whether the Puritans suffering through persecution, the horrific elements of nature, and the Savage Indians; the birth of a
Revolution against oppression from foreign seas; or the taming of the Wild West, the American mythos is rooted in what Sacvan Bercovitch identifies as *translatio studii*, the providential westward expansion of civilization (145). Writers and historians have used the regenerative violence trope to construct an America as a cognitive space of renewal and personal discovery that is projected on the physical landscape. But this Imagined America continues to erase and violate the material world as the general public valorizes the performance of violence. These national myths may serve as an anchor for an imagined community as it brings diverse people together through shared narratives and beliefs, but they provide little comfort for the traumatized and atomized subject. For the national body, these narratives give the illusion of recovery and renewal, but do little for the individual still suffering, such as Doc Bradley in Eastwood’s *Flags of Our Fathers*. “Doc” Bradley is part of the Greatest Generation, who has been elevated to near superhuman standing, but his being imagined into the heroic pantheon does not save him from his trauma. Decades after Iwo Jima, the vision of his dead and mutilated comrade still haunt Bradley, a horrific image that indicates he never left the ashen Pacific island.

Like many Americans, I watched events unfold on television. Although I missed the impact of the first airplane, I was already awake and watching the news when the second plane struck the South Tower. For hours I was transfixed to my television as I watched buildings burning and collapsing, bodies falling like rag dolls in the wind, and the walking wounded, whose bodies were covered in ash. I stood frozen before my television set as I watched horrified faces watching horrific events. For days afterwards I watched the news until I felt I was drowning beneath the deluge of pain and death, such that I would turn it off, only to feel guilty in a matter of moments: guilty that I wasn’t
there in New York. I felt guilty that I could physically switch off the news even if I could not switch it off in my mind as the Towers were in a perpetual state of freefall. I felt guilty that I could escape, if only for a moment. I felt guilty that I survived. So I returned to the news until I found myself drowning again, my repetitive gestures taking on a ritualistic feel. In my surreal existence at the time, the only thing that made sense was trying to make sense of it all: an impossible act.

A month after the attack I was in New York. I was staying with my family who lived in Brooklyn and decided to visit Ground Zero, both as a sign of respect but also to experience it directly instead of through the mediated gaze of the television. Growing up in Brooklyn I had taken the train to Manhattan numerous times and have memories of seeing the Twin Towers dominate the skyline just before submerging underground. However, I was struck by the Towers’ absence even though I knew they would not be there. I was overwhelmed by how empty the sky was as the train disappeared into the ground, just as the Towers had done a month earlier. Ground Zero was still undergoing the recovery and clearing phase and was cordoned off to pedestrian traffic. The surrounding streets were still covered by the makeshift memorials and missing person walls. Like many others on the streets, I walked along the perimeter of the cordon to view the hole in the ground but was never able to see it, only the damaged buildings still standing. Although respectful in my intentions and demeanor, at times I felt like a tourist taking in a curiosity. While I was there to look at the hole, my gaze kept falling upward, looking at the sky and the missing iconography of the city, of the nation, and of my childhood. My walk through lower Manhattan reflected my other experiences regarding 9/11 and echoed in Spiegelman’s *In the Shadows of No Towers*: fragmented, at times
incoherent, incomplete, and in the end still unknowable. But the impossibility of fully knowing does not preclude the need to try.
Bibliography


