

9/11 Did Not Take Place: Apocalypse and Amnesia in Film and *The Road*

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On September 10, 2001, Americans had two favorite kinds of action movies: special effects-laden depictions of New York City's gratuitous destruction; and special effects-laden discoveries, preferably involving gratuitous destruction, that our perceived reality is simulated and unreal. Although the director of *Independence Day* and *Godzilla*, Roland Emmerich, tried to repeat New York's devastation in *The Day After Tomorrow* in 2004, critics and audiences would not have it. Who could feel as though Manhattan's destruction would be a fear, or even an anti-East Coast wish? It had come to pass. Who could feel as though *The Truman Show* and *The Matrix* contributed a new truth, that American safety and complacency were tenuous illusions? That, too, had come to pass.

Instead, in the years immediately following 9/11, Americans intuitively moved from both genres' operative narratives, a compulsion to uncover the truth—about alien menace or techno-conspiracy—to a desire to forget it. Slavoj Žižek writes that television responded to the national trauma with “the compulsion to repeat and jouissance beyond the pleasure principle: we wanted to see it again and again; the same shots were repeated ad nauseum, and the uncanny satisfaction we got from it was jouissance at its purest” (12). But on film, the compulsion to repeat took a new form: toward depicting, and thus mirroring, the traumatic amnesiac, who simply, and dangerously, forgets.

The 2000s may be remembered, or, forgotten, as the decade of amnesia. Both of Jim Carrey's post-*Truman* dramatic efforts, *The Majestic* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, involved characters who have their memories erased. Retrospection has, I believe, proven Žižek hasty. Yes, the attacks of 9/11 enacted, and thus undermined, apocalyptic film fantasies of aliens destroying New York or men discovering that their happy reality was an artificial construct. But in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks,

Americans moved from a desire to repeat 9/11 to a desire to forget 9/11, to erase it from consciousness and memory. The terrorists may have destroyed the towers, but immediately after 2001, popular culture, through erasure and amnesia, seemed bent on annihilating their emblematic existence, even their history. But as I will argue, the best of the amnesia movies also offer a warning against letting the past disappear. And in *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy, writing with a half-decade's hindsight, has rewritten the apocalyptic imagery of pre-9/11 fantasies as an elegiac, chastened meditation on the balancing nature of forgetting and faith, and of terror and storytelling.

Erasing the Past

Immediately after 9/11, erasure as symbolic destruction seemed eerily literal: HBO's "Sex and the City" digitally removed the Towers from its introduction (Salamon); Chock Full o' Nuts Coffee removed its small, signature skyline from the bottom of its cans (Barry); "The Simpsons'" Twin Towers-themed episode, "The City of New York vs. Homer Simpson," was temporarily pulled from syndication; trailers and posters for *Spider-Man* showing the towers were shelved, and *Serendipity*, *People I Know*, *Zoolander*, *Men in Black II*, and the remake of *The Time Machine* re-shot scenes to circumvent the towers or cut scenes deemed egregiously destructive to New York City (Page 204). Also, the films *Collateral Damage*, *The Heist*, and *Sidewalks of New York* pushed back release dates (Page 206-207). Finally, while the establishing shot of New York in *Maid in Manhattan* indeed depicts a tower-less Financial District, the movie poster substitutes the inoffensive Empire State Building for the standard filmic skyline that has dominated images of Manhattan since the 1970s. Of course, this erasure makes sense.

As Max Page writes, filmmakers "claimed that they were simply trying to avoid offending and disturbing audiences unnecessarily. It seems equally likely that filmmakers worried that the sight of the towers would detract from the narrative and undermine the escapist pleasure that is the essence of Hollywood films" (204). Consumers may have had little appetite for a reminder of the towers with their coffee, or for the memory of the towers to intrude, in their absence, upon the American Cinderella fantasy of *Maid in Manhattan*.

But the deletions reveal more than mere good commerce, or good sense. Through these cuts, the towers intrude in their absence, as erasure always leaves traces of the original. As Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak writes in the “Translator’s Preface” to Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*:

[P]redicament is an analogue for a certain philosophical exigency that drives Derrida to writing “sous rapture,” which I translate as “under erasure.” This is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both the word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible.)... In examining familiar things we come to such unfamiliar conclusions that our very language is twisted and bent even as it guides us. (xiv)

In this sense, 9/11 represents an act of destruction and deconstruction, twisting the familiar into the unfamiliar and violently demonstrating the ways in which the destruction of the towers, like the crossed-out word, only calls attention to its former existence.¹ Art Spiegelman’s September 24, 2001 *New Yorker* cover,² and later book cover, superimposing black towers against black background, illustrates this point: erasure creates absence, certainly, but also ensures its own paradoxical presence, as eloquently suggested in Spiegelman’s book title, *In the Shadow of No Towers*. Similarly, “Tribute in Light,” the 2002 spectral display of high wattage lamps that now annually pays homage to the Twin Towers, wrote their intangible, luminescent outlines over the erased towers like a palimpsest, emphasizing not what is there but what formerly existed underneath.³

In his introduction to the 2002 collection *Film and Television after 9/11*, Wheeler Winston Dixon suggests that “in this bleak [post-9/11] landscape of personal loss, paranoia, and political cynicism, American culture has been forever changed” (3), and despite the propensity to use movies as escapism, “one salient fact remains: the memory of 9/11 can never be obliterated from the American national consciousness...” (3). But Dixon’s familiar “we will never forget 9/11” maxim runs counter what movies after 9/11 have depicted: Americans seem desperately nostalgic, desperate to forget the present, and want desperately to go back to a prelapsarian September 10th, when Americans were free to enjoy our fictional apocalypses without fear or guilt.

With all of the “never forget” rhetoric surrounding 9/11, how can such amnesia be possible? While politicians, the architects of the new World Trade Center, and victims have not, of course, forgotten the Twin Towers, Americans,

bumper stickers to the contrary, certainly wish to. Even in 9/11's immediate aftermath, Art Spiegelman saw the divide between New Yorkers, who had no opportunity to forget 9/11, and the rest of the country, for whom New York was only ever a celluloid simulation ripe for destruction:

Only when I traveled to a university in the Midwest in early October 2001 did I realize that *all* New Yorkers were out of their minds compared to those for whom the attack was an abstraction. The assault on the Pentagon confirmed that the carnage in New York City was indeed an attack on America, not one more skirmish on foreign soil. Still, the small town I visited in Indiana ... was at least as worked up over a frat house's zoning violations as with threats from "raghead terrorists." It was as if I'd wandered into an inverted version of Saul Steinberg's famous map of America seen from Ninth Avenue, where the rest of the known world ends at the Hudson; in Indiana everything east of the Alleghenies was very, very far away. (unpaged)

Yes, right-wing politicians have continuously used the attacks for political posturing; most famously, Joe Biden referred to then-Presidential candidate Rudolph Giuliani's entire rhetorical repertoire as "a noun and a verb and 9/11." But at best, in keeping with Zizek, turning "9/11" into a repeated mantra has made it an empty signifier. At worst, in keeping with this essay's argument, Giuliani, other conservatives, and many Americans have, in fact, forgotten about 9/11, epitomized by Giuliani's remark that "We had no domestic attacks under Bush; we've had one under Obama." Dan Amira goes further, saying "There is a strange amnesia permeating the Republican ranks lately," including Giuliani, Dana Perino, and Mary Matalin, each of whom "seems to be jumping on the '9/11 never happened or at least not on Bush's watch bandwagon." The gap between remembering the date and agreeing about the nature of an event's cultural, historical, and political significance has grown even vaster in the past decade. For a few years, amnesia became the new apocalypse.

Erasing Forgetting the Past

Giuliani and Spiegelman to the contrary, however, Americans traumatized by the attacks could not easily gain comfort in merely erasing or deleting images of the Towers. The only symbolic recourse remaining, then, was to erase the memories of the trauma. And forgetting is precisely the trope that cinema embraced after 9/11. Amnesia has long been a dubious film scenario, so much so that “the Screenwriters Guild went so far as to prohibit amnesia as a plot device” (Flora 24). Yet amnesia’s new form seems different—post 9/11 films do not use amnesia to exemplify American archetypes of rebirth, youth, or lack of history. As Terrence Rafferty suggests, amnesia is the down side of “one of the most unshakable American values: our conviction that we should be free to invent ourselves, and reinvent ourselves, at will.” Instead, the best of these movies discordantly center on the loss of a morality that accompanies loss of memory, and by extension, the loss of identity. Writing just before 9/11, Jonathan Lethem began to observe this upcoming urgency in his introduction to *The Vintage Book of Amnesia*: “Amnesia appeared pulsing just beneath the surface, an existential syndrome that seemed to nag at fictional characters with increasing frequency, a floating metaphor very much in the air.

Amnesia as concept and plot device went on to shape and inspire at least thirty post-9/11 releases, many with top actors, writers, or directors: Jim Carrey in *The Majestic*, Tom Cruise in *Vanilla Sky*, Guy Pearce in *Memento*, Matt Damon in three *Bourne* movies, Ben Affleck in *Paycheck*, Halle Berry in *Gothika*, Finnish director Aki Kauronaki’s *The Man Without a Past*, Woody Allen’s *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion*, Adam Sandler in *50 First Dates*, Pixar’s *Finding Nemo*, Brian Singer’s two *X-Men* films as well as *X-Men III* and *Wolverine*, Ashton Kutcher in *The Butterfly Effect* and *Dude, Where’s My Car?*, David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive*, screenwriter Charlie Kaufman’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill: Vols. I and II*, Denzel Washington in *The Manchurian Candidate*, Julianne Moore in *The Forgotten*, Milla Jovovich in *Resident Evil*, Robin Williams in *The Final Cut*, the documentary *Unknown White Male*, Liam Neeson in *Unknown*, Daniel Craig and Harrison Ford in *Cowboys and Aliens*, and Nick Cassavetes’s *The Notebook*.⁴ *The Notebook* is unusual, in that the amnesia was brought on by Alzheimer’s disease. But its exception underscores the problem: amnesia, an exceedingly rare condition in non-elderly

people, has likely occurred more frequently on film in the past decade than at any time in real life.

Of course, several of the films, most notably *Memento* and *Mulholland Drive*, cannot be thought of as conscious reactions to 9/11, and neither can Lethem's analysis. Analyzing the amnesia trend, *New York Times* film critic John Leland says that while "it may be tempting to relate them to Sept. 11, the movies were all conceived years before, during the economic boom, which produced waves of collective amnesia." Instead, Leland connects the films to irrational market exuberance, fixation on status, and the fluidity of identity that accompanied the technological capitalism of the late 1990s, when the films were conceived and shot, rather than in the after-effects of September 11, 2001, when they were screened and reviewed. Leland's analysis fairly and, I think, correctly identifies the conditions under which the films were made. But by the time the films emerged, were viewed, and were available for cultural interpretation, the context crucially, changed. Had the movies not appealed to viewers' newfound psychic vulnerability, they may have failed and, perhaps appropriately, been forgotten. Instead, *Memento* and *Mulholland Dive* have become cult classics, and Hollywood, as always, took notice. The films' reception remains more salient than their geneses.

In place of the chronological, and certainly in place of the scientific, since "the overwhelming majority of films that portray amnesia do so in a grossly inaccurate fashion" (Merckelbach et al 37), I would substitute the semiotic and the metaphorical. Indeed, James Gorman writes that amnesia films "may seem realistic, but they are really fairy tales... An old-time Freudian might take these movies as public dreams and look for a hidden wish. What it would be is clear. Enough! Enough collecting of information. Enough creation of new records." While Gorman does not connect amnesia to 9/11, his point echoes Zizek, who, in his analysis of the pre-9/11 movies that destroyed New York, writes: "[T]he unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise" (16). Zizek's "fantasy," the not-so-hidden wish, is renewed but revised through the amnesia imagery. Annihilating civilization is not enough. Instead, amnesia represents the will to annihilate even the memory of civilization. Gorman's "Enough!" rejects technology or bureaucracy, but it also represents a wish to escape psychology, history, and even narrative itself. The prevalent amnesia imagery turned the pre-

9/11 apocalypses inside out; rather destroying the external structures of civilization, the new films destroyed its internal frameworks.

Even so, the amnesia plot device is, of course, nothing new. Soap operas have used it for decades as a slipshod way to bring back written-off characters, explain narrative inconsistencies, or create cheap thrills. Pulp mystery and harlequin romance novels use it routinely as well, for its obvious and readymade drama. But many of the new films are different: together, they represent a post-9/11 ambivalence, the mixed wishes and fears of forgetting the recent past, and the final extension of post-9/11 desire to erase the World Trade Center images from posters, screens, and coffee cans, to the desire to erase the towers from our collective memory.⁵ And the best of these films, *Memento*, *Mulholland Drive*, and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, do not just use amnesia as high concept; in addition, they construct a cinematic language of the amnesiac experience, and this visual and aural aesthetic of amnesia places the viewer into the amnesiac's perspective. Lethem's analysis of amnesia in fiction clearly applies to these films: "I had in mind a fiction that, more than just presenting a character who'd suffered memory loss, entered into an amnesiac state at some level of the narrative itself—and invited the reader to do the same.

Fiction that made something of the white spaces that are fiction's native habitat or somehow induced a dreamy state of loss of identity's grip" (xvi). Even genre films, like *Paycheck* and the *Bourne* sequels, withhold key information, functioning like the third person limited perspective in a novel, so that the viewer only knows as much as the characters do, and often even less. September 11th may not have been the end of irony, as some pundits hastily predicted, but it challenged dramatic irony: the venerable literary device, where viewers connect and understand that which characters cannot, seems notably absent from amnesia pictures. Instead, the viewer is forced to identify with the amnesiac's plight, confusion, and struggle for comprehension. The ruined topography of pre-9/11 apocalypses turned inward, to the shattered setting of the mind.

In keeping, after beginning with a murder literally in reverse (shooting a double exposure of a backwind), *Memento* constructs its narrative through fragmented alternation between chronologically backward episodes in color and forward moving scenes in black and white, continuously reenacting various beginnings and endings. The viewer, like amnesiac protagonist Leonard Shelby, understands the unending shock and dislocation of memory loss. Leonard spends the film attempting to track down the man who murdered his wife and inflicted

the injury that stole his memory, but he must rely on Polaroids, Post-It notes, and even his own tattoos in order to have any sense of where, or even at times who, he is. In keeping with the low-tech high-jacking of planes on 9/11, Leonard uses reliable but primitive pre-digital devices, resorting even to his own body as a repository of information. Writing on the body becomes a last refuge against a mind that refuses to accept the indelible; tattoos literally keep Leonard from being a *tabula rasa*, here a state of ignorance over innocence. The film's fragmentation coalesces at the end, which is really the story's beginning, when the viewer finally understands that Leonard may know himself even less well than he, or we, thought.⁶

Mulholland Drive is visually and narratively confusing as well—the viewer is left unsure of its main characters' identities, the scenes' chronology, and even whether sequences are dreams or reality. After the opening's car accident, a beautiful woman is left unsure who she is. Calling herself Rita, based on a poster of Rita Hayworth, she is discovered and cared for by another woman, Betty, a saccharine aspiring actress new to Los Angeles. Together, they attempt to piece together Rita's mysterious identity. It, too, though, seems to put the end at the beginning, forcing the viewer to reconcile the film's final act, in which it seems as though Rita's amnesia, as well as Betty's earnest innocence, may be a dream, sexual fantasy, or projection. Using frequent blurs, ambient sub-bass noise, and surreal juxtaposition, the visual and sonic aesthetics of the movie attempt to recreate the amnesiac experience, and viewer frequently feels as lost as Rita does, by design.

Of all the recent amnesia films, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is the most visually reminiscent of 9/11 itself. Jim Carrey's Joel undergoes a procedure to erase his memories of ex-girlfriend Clementine, after discovering that she has done the same of him. Like *Memento*, the film begins near the end, although the first-time viewer has no way of knowing this: it seems to show Joel and Clementine's first meeting, but actually reveals their post-amnesia reunion. Through flashbacks within flashbacks, the viewer witnesses the memory erasure from inside Joel's head, so that, as in *Mulholland Drive*, voices are out of synch with mouths and various buzzes and muffling effects obscure dialogue. But in addition, people, like words, disappear in blurs, fog and water darken backgrounds, and, most disconcertingly, buildings shake, collapse, and crumble. The destruction of matter signifies the destruction of memory, and viewers understand that this renewed demolition of New York (even if it is upstate New

York, *Spotless Mind*'s location), unlike in *Independence Day*, within the movie is representational rather than literal. But it was the symbolic as well as literal destruction of New York that 9/11's terrorists sought. If these films' characters emblemize our need to forget, they also bring to the surface our repressed post-traumatic turmoil. And in the place of disintegrating buildings, *Spotless Mind* (as well as *Paycheck*) shows images of brains on computer screens, with lit up neurons targeted and obliterated, along with metaphorical or hypothetical buildings collapsing.

In *Requiem for the Twin Towers*, Jean Baudrillard suggests that:

although the two towers have disappeared, they have not been annihilated. Even in their pulverized state, they have left behind an intense awareness of their presence. No one who knew them can cease imagining them and the imprints they made in the skyline from all points of the city. ... By the grace of terrorism, the World Trade Center has become the world's most beautiful building—the eighth wonder of the world! (48)

Despite his powerful rhetoric, the luminous, numinous efforts of “Tribute in Light,” or Art Spiegelman's sublime work, however, Baudrillard, like Zezik, spoke too soon. The Towers' symbolism is endangered, overpowered by the culture's need to erase and forget. Baudrillard's own conclusion about the first Gulf War, published in 1995, now seems more applicable to the fall of the Twin Towers. At the time, he wrote:

There is no interrogation into the event itself or its reality; or into the fraudulence of this war, the programmed and always delayed illusion of battle; or into the machination of this war or its amplification by information, not to mention the improbable orgy of material, the systematic manipulation of data, the artificial dramatization... If we do not have practical intelligence (and none among us has), at least let us have a skeptical intelligence towards it, without renouncing the pathetic feeling of its absurdity. (253)

If Baudrillard still maintains that the criteria for symbolic or actual existence of an event is “interrogation into the event itself or its reality,” or “the programmed and always delayed illusion of battle,” or “its amplification by information,” or “the

systematic manipulation of data, the artificial dramatization,” or “practical intelligence,” or even “skeptical intelligence,” then 9/11 never took place. If, thanks to the disappearances of images, the towers never existed, then they never fell. If all traces of the towers are erased from memory and culture, if moviegoers and Americans are metaphorical and metaphysical amnesiacs, then the symbolic violence of this amnesia and erasure completes the work of the terrorists. For their goal, as Baudrillard implies, was not just to demolish the towers themselves, but to destroy the towers’ very significance. It is now our own unwillingness to bear witness to the towers that is annihilating them, expunging them of their posthumous symbolism.

Our hope to forget is forgivable. Just as we found comfort in the apocalyptic imagery of *Independence Day* and *The Matrix* for depicting our simultaneous worst fears and dearest wishes, or maybe dearest fears and worst wishes, we now find comfort in the wave of amnesia, with films that allow us to escape the twin prisons of identity and chronology. What’s more, the movies replicate but ultimately reverse one of the most insidious and pervasive fears in the post-9/11 world: that the terrorists lived in America and held jobs, and then one day were activated, the word equally applicable to terrorist cells and time bombs.

Amnesia films invert this anxiety. *Memento*’s Leonard, formerly a mild-mannered insurance assessor, suddenly becomes capable of detective work, gunplay, and murder, with no explanation; *The Bourne Identity*’s Jason Bourne discovers amazing fighting abilities unbeknownst even to himself; in comic-book films *X-Men* and *X2*, Hugh Jackman’s Wolverine possesses superhuman healing abilities, an unbreakable metal skeleton, and retractable claws, but no clue about how he became this killing machine—or anything before his mysterious trauma. Later sequels reveal that Bourne and Wolverine were created to be American right-wing quasi-terrorists themselves, reversing the reality of the 9/11 suicide bombers in heroic American fashion: we can all wake up from our everyday lives and routine normalcy capable of detective work, superheroics, and killing, but crucially as an autonomous, heroic individual unattached to a government or even ideology, working only to solve the personal, existential mystery of who we really are.

Like this reversal of moral alignment, perhaps the amnesia films may be less interested in erasing than in warning us, like *Hamlet*’s Ghost, to remember. In their dénouements, the best of these films do not ever espouse amnesia as much as alert us to its dangers. Like the best film apocalypses, they function as cautionary

tales rather than exemplars, correctives for, rather than perpetrators against, destruction, in this case, of memory. Even as they embody our post 9/11 wish to become, in Gore Vidal's disparaging phrase, a "United States of Amnesia," they demonstrate amnesia's ultimate harm. While some, like *Paycheck* or *The Majestic*, with their hackneyed happy endings, imply that amnesia is bliss, opportunity, or resurgence, more serious films self-consciously challenge their own cinematic assertions.

In *Memento*, viewers discover that Leonard is incapable of true revenge; instead, in keeping with his former profession, he is using his condition to release himself of any moral accountability, since he remembers neither vengeance, nor any crimes committed toward his ends. Indeed, like Leonard's impotent but dangerous retribution, our post 9/11 War on Terror—even now, after the moniker has been discarded—is by definition a war without end, as we moved from Afghanistan to Iraq, with Libya or Pakistan or Syria or Iran on the horizon even after the death of Osama bin Laden. Our 9/11 retaliation, it seems, is doomed to be as short lived and continuously deferred as Leonard's revenge.

In *Mulholland Drive*, after much confusion, by the end it seems as though Rita's amnesia really is part of Betty's fantasy, one of starting over sexually, romantically, and personally. And in *Eternal Sunshine*, Joel realizes that he needs his memories, despite as well as because of their pain. While he and Clementine understand that their reconciliation may be doomed, they venture on nonetheless. The pleasures of life and love are more valuable than the ignorant safety of amnesia. Like *Eternal Sunshine's* memory erasure, these amnesia movies seem a way to ease our collective pain and embody our collective desires. Instead, though, the surprise endings of *Memento* and *Mulholland Drive* depict the dark consequences of amnesia, while *Spotless Mind* suggests its corrective: faith. Perhaps the new American wish and fear is not the complete destruction of time. Warning of the danger of individual and collective amnesia, the films depict specific memories as visible, discrete, separable, and destroyable entities in the mind, substituting vanishing neurons for *Independence Day's* demolition of New York and *The Matrix's* ravage of reality.

Yet in the end, the films' amnesias differ medically, not just metaphorically. *Memento* depicts anterograde amnesia: the inability to remember ongoing events *after* the incidence of trauma; *Mulholland Drive*, retrograde amnesia: the inability to remember events that occurred *before* the incidence of trauma. *Spotless Mind's* electronic targeting of specific memories is science fiction. Their warnings, thus,

are different but equally important: if we as a culture, like Rita, forget everything that happened before the trauma, we are childlike, helpless ciphers for whatever delusion or fantasy those in power choose to impose upon us. But if we forget all that occurs after the trauma; if, like Leonard, we live in a perpetual present; if we lose our ability to form a new future, and by extension a new understanding of the past, then we will be forced, futilely and forever, to relive our suffering. Rita loses her consciousness; Leonard, his conscience. Americans in the aftermath of 9/11 seem in danger of losing both. And if we do, then that loss would be far worse than merely losing our collective memory, or even losing the world, as we have on film so many times. Unlike memory, which in real life, although not in movies, is frequently recovered; or buildings, which are nearly always rebuilt, delays to the new World Trade Center to the contrary, consciousness and conscience are delicate, precious, and irreparable. Life after 9/11 has been painful, even excruciating. But like Joel of *Spotless Mind*, we must not only reject amnesia; in addition, we must cherish our memories, even our pain. Despite that Clementine reminds Joel that “you will think of things” that he won’t like about her and that “I’ll get bored with you and feel trapped because that’s what happens with me,” in the end, we must emulate Joel and Clementine’s reply and agree to press forward:

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

The Road to from 9/11

Not surprisingly, as the decade progressed, amnesia set in with filmmakers and audiences. Yes, Roland Emmerich’s *The Day After Tomorrow*, title to the contrary, appeared too soon, but a score of superhero movies and television shows (the *Spider-Man* and *Batman* franchises, *Heroes*), *The War of the Worlds*, *I Am Legend*, *Cloverfield*, and Emmerich’s next attempt, *2012*, did not. Whereas in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, movies displayed atypical sensitivity, by 2006 it was safe for Hollywood to destroy New York, and the world, once again.

Writing independently of any Hollywood trends—independently, it would at first seem, of anything—Cormac McCarthy authored *The Road*, a book that would go on to win the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. At first glance, the novel seems in keeping the post-apocalyptic resurgence of the above-named films, the

old fears of a post-nuclear holocaust renewed in the aftermath of fresh disaster. Its main conceit—the plight of solitary survivors in a ravaged world—was already well-worn by 1981’s *The Road Warrior*, let alone by *The Road*, decades and dozens of dystopian narratives later.

But context is crucial. The shadow of no towers envelopes the novel. Of course, just as *Cloverfield* and the rest are not “9/11 movies” in the manner of *World Trade Center*, *United 93*, or *25th Hour*, *The Road* is not a “9/11 novel” in the sense of Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and others in the emergent field. McCarthy certainly does not depict the events of the attack on New York or Washington, D.C., refer to the escape or death of anyone trapped in the World Trade Center, or connect his world in any clear or linear way with America in the 2000s. As Richard Gray suggests, though, “it is surely right to see *The Road* as a post-9/11 novel, not just in the obvious, literal sense, but to the extent that it takes the measure of that sense of crisis that has seemed to haunt the West, and the United States in particular, ever since the destruction of the World Trade Center” (39-40).

Moreover, the novel clearly displays the apocalyptic tropes of the post-9/11 world: its imagery of the dazed and traumatized man, walking amidst blackened ash and amorphous organic and inorganic debris; its consistent sense of looming, impending, but mostly nameless terror; the haunted vision of a crippled America; and the renewed emphasis on hope, struggle, masculinity, and family that characterized sentiments in America after the attacks. And unlike the aliens, monsters, super-villains, and zombies that infest film’s post-apocalyptic imagination, humans themselves represent the worst blight, even amidst McCarthy’s ruined landscape. *The Road*’s America is despoiled, but even more troublingly, most of its survivors are morally contaminated as well.

More importantly, however, like *Memento*, *Mulholland Drive*, and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *The Road* consistently emphasizes the danger of forgetting one’s personal and national past, balancing the dual danger of apocalypse and amnesia. In fact, the unnamed man and his son’s physical peril distracts them from the moral danger of their impending, and maybe inevitable, cultural amnesia. As the man explains to his son early in the novel:

Just remember that the things you put in your head are there forever, he said. You might want to think about that.

You forget some things, don't you?

Yes. You forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget. (12)

The man's combination of cliché with antimetabole emphasizes the way in which Žižek's televisual repetition of trauma may not be at odds with the amnesiac's compulsion to forget: people may repeat some elements of the past and suppress others, with the unfortunate likelihood that they will repeat the harmful and suppress the valuable. *The Road's* intersections between trauma, memory, and redemption thus function as an ethical and literary response to the shock of 9/11, even more than its apparent warnings of disasters environmental or eschatological.

Even referring to "the man" and "the boy" underscores the novel's central preoccupation with forgetting, along with the novel's early detail that the man "hadn't kept a calendar for years" (4). While other novels (*Invisible Man*, *Fight Club*) and movies (Clint Eastwood's Westerns) deliberately do not name their main characters, *The Road* goes further: only one character, Ely, is ever named.⁷ The lack of proper names certainly suggests McCarthy's allegorical intentions, as other critics have explored.⁸ Yet it is not that the characters do not have proper names; rather, their names are under erasure, representing a forgotten past, and by extension lost future, as well as a present in which names no longer serve any purpose. At the same time, the lack of names, like the amnesia movies, continuously forces the reader into the sustained acceptance of narrative ambiguity.

In an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, unusual for the reclusive writer, McCarthy describes his experience of becoming a father again:

Soon after, in 2001, [McCarthy] was visiting Tennessee when the attacks of 9/11 unfolded. Being a septuagenarian dad in the modern age is sobering. "When you're young and single, you hang out in bars and don't think about what's going to happen," McCarthy says. "But in the next fifty years when you have kids, you start thinking of their life and the world they have to live in. And that's a sobering thought these days."

McCarthy began to wonder about the future facing his boy. “I think about John all the time and what the world’s going to be like,” he says. “It’s going to be a very troubled place.” One night, during a trip to Texas with John, McCarthy imagined such a place. While his son slept, McCarthy gazed out the window of his room and pictured flames on the hill. He later decided to write a novel about it; *The Road* is dedicated to his son. While McCarthy suggests that the ash-covered world in the novel is the result of a meteor hit, his money is on humans destroying each other before an environmental catastrophe sets in. “We’re going to do ourselves in first,” he says. (Kushner)

September 11 looms in the background of the novel’s genesis, because the attacks, unlike McCarthy’s extra-textual meteor strike, actually occurred. And while Gray notes that “many reviewers of the book referred to the setting of *The Road* as post-nuclear,” (39), unlike *Dr. Strangelove* at the beginning of the Cold War and *The Day After* near its end, *The Road* never explicitly names, discusses, or even mentions the cause of the catastrophe—not as human-made atomic fallout (Gray observes that “there are no signs of radioactivity, and none of the characters suffer from radiation sickness” [39]), and certainly not meteors. This decision starkly contrasts nearly all post-apocalyptic movies. The catastrophe is supposed to establish the narrative—say, the war and subsequent plague that kill almost everyone in *The Omega Man*. Or the true cause of the catastrophe must reveal itself in the climax: the surprise that “Soylent Green is people!,” or in *Planet of the Apes*, that “I’m back. I’m home. All the time, it was... We finally really did it,” to cite Charlton Heston’s dystopias alone. In *The Road*, the cause, or discovery at the end, is irrelevant and, like the characters, never named. Perhaps it has been forgotten. The novel is not interested in historical urgency, political commentary, or straightforward adventure. Instead, the book lyrically but discordantly dramatizes the suspended state of an amnesia-like perpetual present: “Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it fading slowly from memory” (18).

The novel channels the raw shock and suffering after 9/11, the fear of and for the future, and recasts it as a poetic rumination on the stripped down existence of the man and his son. Certainly other post-9/11 apocalypses draw upon the same semiotics of the attacks. But *The Road* is very different from, say, *Cloverfield*. As Stephanie Zacharek suggests, “*Cloverfield* harnesses the horror of 9/11—

specifically as it was felt in New York—and repackages it as an amusement-park ride. We see familiar buildings exploding and crumpling before our eyes, and plumes of smoke rolling up the narrow corridors formed by lower-Manhattan streets, images that were once the province of news footage and have now been reduced to special effects.” McCarthy does nearly the opposite: no explosions, no falling men or falling buildings, and any plumes of smoke are relegated to the archetypal, burned-out image of “the road,” which here has little in common with “lower-Manhattan streets.” The book is no amusement-park ride: not the brief, safe, and wordless thrill of simulated physical excitement, but a slow, emotionally painful linguistic reflection on what the end of things would mean not just for humans, but for our humanity.

John Cant writes that “*The Road* is a literary return, a retrospective on the author’s own previous works, a re-viewing of his own work that offers a different perspective to that of the young man whose vision was structured by the oedipal paradigm that we find in...*Suttree* and *Blood Meridian*” (184). But while Cant then analyzes the novel primarily in terms of its “poetic language and expression of profound ideas” (191), the main theme of the novel is *itself* “return” and “retrospective,” the wishes and fears of remembering and forgetting in a dying world. Indeed, a concordance of all the pages in *The Road* that use the words “memory,” forms of “remember,” or forms of “forget” threatens to run nearly as long as the novel itself. Yet the ways in which it evokes memory suggests a man who needs his past and his memories even as he finds them painful and futile. Returning to his old house, the man finds “All much as he remembered it” (26). Later, he tells the boy “Old stories of courage and justice as he remembered them” (41). While lost, “He tried to remember if he knew anything about it or if it were only a fable. In what direction did lost men veer?” (116-117). Before scouting and leaving the boy, “He thought about waking him but he knew he wouldn’t remember anything if he did” (118-119). Setting up camp, he thinks, “It was as long a night as he could remember out of a great plenty of such nights” (125).

Yet the most troubling description comes when, finding a deck of cards, the man tries:

to remember the rules of childhood games Sometimes the child would ask him questions about the world that for him was not even a memory. He thought hard how to answer. There is no past. What would you like?

But he stopped making things up because those things were not true either and the telling made him feel bad. The child had his own fantasies. How things would be in the south. Other children. He tried to keep a rein on this but his heart was not in it. Whose would be? (54)

The only thoughts worse than the memories are the fictions we create in memory's absence. With the man's—and the world's—past nearly gone, there can be no future. The opposite of memory here is not forgetting; it is “making things up,” “fantasy,” or falsehood.

In keeping with Cant, readers of *The Road* will notice the hallmarks of McCarthy's earlier style: the poetic turns of phrase, frequent use of fragments, and unusual word choices, all exemplified by this sentence on the opening page: “Their light playing over the wet flowstone walls” (3). And as McCarthy's readers have come to expect, no dialogue is rendered using quotation marks. Certainly, unnamed characters, lack of quotation marks, missing apostrophes (“wont,” “cant”), and frequent sentence fragments are not unique to *The Road*, much less to McCarthy. Yet this minimalist rhetoric, derived from Hemingway and Faulkner and developed throughout McCarthy's *oeuvre*, here becomes a powerful symbol within the larger context of this particular novel and its response to 9/11. Here, the characters, and the world, have been reduced to their most spare. As the duo scavenges for ever-scarcer food supplies (17, 29, 158, 181, and *passim*) or drops of oil (136), McCarthy also uses his words and punctuation marks as though they might soon run out. Similarly, his idiosyncratic vocabulary choices here feel less like poetry and more like makeshift devices, as though he were using the only word left in his verbal shopping cart, just as the man “went through the drawers but there was nothing there that he could use. Good half-inch drive sockets. A ratchet” (6).

Like everything in *The Road*'s barren world, punctuation marks and words have been laid waste, reduced to their bare minimum, so that some sentences are a single word or handful of words, while others run comma-less, powered by their own rolling inertia: “He pushed the cart off the road and tilted it over where it could not be seen and they left their packs and went back to the station” (7). Apostrophes after the apocalypse seem wasteful. The lack of quotation marks is even more ominous: even the novelist, it seems, lacks the power, the memory, to recreate words as the characters spoke them. The best we can hope for, in this world, and possibly ours, is the imperfection of indirect discourse, the

approximation of what people said based on our fallible and waning memories. *The Road*'s style and language, for what it provides as well as what it withholds, presents the perfect medium for its bleak, terrifying, but ultimately redemptive story.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, despite the awards and critical accolades, *The Road* was voted by online readers the most depressing novel of all time, over Sylvia Plath's semi-autobiographical novel about suicide, *The Bell Jar*, and Elie Wiesel's *Night*, about Nazi atrocities (Laming). Throughout most of *The Road*, life seems hopeless, except for the man and boy's bond. Even then, the man is burdened by his memories; the boy, by his amnesia-like ignorance:

Did you have any friends?

Yes. I did.

Lots of them?

Yes. Do you remember them?

Yes. I remember them.

What happened to them?

They died.

All of them?

Yes. All of them. (60-61)

Yet at the end of the novel, despite the man's death, the boy survives and is found by a full family. Just as the man hoped, "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again" (281). And so when the new unnamed man, the possible adoptive father, finds the boy, the boy asks,

Are you carrying the fire?

Am I what?

Carrying the fire.

You're kind of weirded out, aren't you?

No.

Just a little.

Yeah.

That's okay.

So are you?
 What, carrying the fire?
 Yes. (283)

As Amy Hungerford observes, “It is hard to decide whether the boy’s light is nothing or everything” (135). Clearly, many readers fear it means nothing. Yet the light, the fire, is a clear-cut symbol that the man, the boy, and the new family are, in a refrain repeated as though for light and heat throughout the novel, “the good guys” (77, 103, 129, 137, 140, 115, 184, 245-6, 278, 283). Fire and light also seem straightforward images of divine wisdom and hope, whether that divinity is Prometheus and his gift to humankind, the Hebrew Bible’s Creation story, or Jesus saying, “I am the light of the world.” And McCarthy’s fire and light can be each of these. Certainly a novel that begins in a cave and refers to fire dozens of times pays homage to Plato. Like “the man” and “the boy,” the language feels allegorical, as though McCarthy were less interested in the road than the spiritual journey. Yet I’m not ready to accept mere allegory. The novel, unlike Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave* or Medieval morality plays, forces the reader to identify emotionally and often viscerally with the man’s struggle and danger, and with his fervent, animal love for his son. For an allegory, the novel painfully details the minutiae of physical survival: keeping alive, staying sheltered, finding food, protecting oneself from the elements and bands of marauding cannibals, and moving on. The fire in the novel, then, is God, hope, light, and wisdom. But in the aftermath of 9/11, when physical and metaphysical seem inextricable, sometimes the fire means fire: “He threw the branches on the fire and set out again” (96); “He kept a fire going” (237), and many other instances. The fire may be a metaphor, but it is not an allegory; unlike allegory, metaphor balances relationship between the literal and figurative. The novel as a whole, then, is also not a mere allegory for 9/11. It is a moving, multi-layered metaphor not easily reduced to post-9/11, Manichean oppositions. It is both terrifying but, in the end, like the best apocalyptic tales, strangely comforting. When the man reassures the boy that “I’ll be back and then we’ll have a fire and then you won’t be scared anymore” (72), the boy believes him, and so, within and beyond the novel, do we.

Yet if the fire must be more than fire, and surely it must, then it is not just spirituality or sanctity: it is also memory. When the man sees “a forest fire making its way along the tinderbox ridges above them[, ...], [t]he color of it moved something in him long forgotten. Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember”

(31). And thus when, in the end, the boy is assured that the new people—a nuclear family of father, mother, little boy, and little girl—are “good guys” and “carrying the fire,” the narrative shifts to the boy’s perspective for the first time: “I’ll talk to you every day, he whispered. And I won’t forget. No matter what. Then he rose and turned and walked back to the road” (286). Perhaps this ending is too conventional or conservative for some readers. Yet I believe that McCarthy’s moral urgency, represented by both the boy’s survival and memory, rescue what seems like a post-War on Terror Manichaeanism of “good guys” and “bad guys.” Richard Gray sees the conclusion’s “sheltering confines of American myth” as “deeply unconvincing” (47). Instead, I would suggest that the original, evocative, and elegiac language, rather than its plotline, allow readers to move beyond apocalypse and toward McCarthy’s literary and spiritual redemption.

This final series of tensions—originality and formula, life and death, past and present, end and beginning, memory and forgetting—even more than soot-stained, solitary figures amidst broken buildings and landscapes, evokes McCarthy’s, and film’s, ultimate narrative response to 9/11. And in one of the novel’s last quotation mark-less dialogues, the new man and the boy, exactly like *Eternal Sunshine*’s Joel and Clementine, assure each other that it’s “okay”:

And can I go with you?

Yes. You can.

Okay then.

Okay.

Still, McCarthy does not end the novel here, or with the boy’s quiet eulogy. Instead, the novel concludes with its own tribute to the dead world, one far beyond any potential misgiving about the novel’s seemingly conventional conclusion: “Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains” (286). But despite the poetry, the fish can never return, and there is no “happily ever after” to close the “Once there were...” construction. The world represented by the “vermiculate patterns” on their backs would “not be right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery” (287). Life after the apocalypse can never return to its previous bliss, if such a state ever really existed. But we can take comfort in knowing that time, in its attendant mystery, exists independently of human loss or memory. There can be no return to September 10th, no uncomplicated erasure, no painless amnesia.

Nor should there be. But in *The Road*'s post-apocalyptic world, or perhaps our own post-9/11 one, saying "okay" to our past, present, and future is good enough. We will have a fire and then we won't be scared anymore.

Notes

- ¹ Artist Damien Hirst and composer Karlheinz Stockhausen were both excoriated for viewing the destruction of the Twin Towers as a work of art. It does seem clear, though, that the attacks were a form of criticism, although not in the analytical sense of the word. Art Spiegelman sardonically writes that "if not for all the tragedy and death, I could think of the attack as some sort of radical architectural criticism" (unpaged).
- ² "9/11/2001" by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly, September 24, 2001, viewed at http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2011/09/September-11th-covers-mouly-spiegelman.html#slide_ss_0=1.
- ³ Derek Jensen, "Tribute in Light," Derek Jensen, 11 September, 2004, viewed at <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wtc-2004-memorial.jpg>.
- ⁴ The fact that many of the amnesia films are remakes or adaptations whose sources long predate September 11th does not discount them; I see them as suggesting a sudden interest, immediacy, and relevance to the material.
- ⁵ Jess Walter's under-examined novel *The Zero* also provides an interesting intersection between the political and metaphorical concerns of 9/11 and amnesia.
- ⁶ The distinction in Russian Formalism between "story" ("*fabula*"), or the chronological sequence of events, and "plot" ("*syuzhet*"), or the events in the order in which they're presented to the reader, seems crucial to understanding how these films work. In *Memento*, the *fabula* essentially runs in reverse of the *syuzhet*, making the film's opening shot an important visual, narrative, and symbolic cue to the viewer, even as he or she cannot appreciate its significance during the initial viewing.
- ⁷ Another post-9/11 post-apocalyptic movie, *The Book of Eli* (2010), serves as a foil to the film adaptation of *The Road* (2009): both revolve around a male survivor's journey through dangerous, burned out landscape. Yet *The Book of Eli* is a straightforward adventure with attendant Hollywood violence, despite that the quest turns out to be the delivery of the last Bible. In *The Road*, the violence is far more harrowing, in part because the characters' survival does not

seem self-evident, and because the film, thanks to its source material, dramatizes the love between the man and his son.

- ⁸ The range of allegorical interpretations is wide, from John Vanderheide's "allegorical daemonism" (111) to Carl James Grindley's reading of *The Road* as an unambiguous "document of the so-called Tribulation of Judeo-Christian mythology" (11).

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