Superheroes and the Bush doctrine: narrative and politics in post--9/11 discourse
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Chapter 5: Late Capitalism and the End of the World: The Disaster Film and Apocalyptic Superhero Narratives

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

The popular entertainments of the postmodern era have seen an ongoing proliferation of apocalyptic narrative motifs and imagery. From the science-fiction B-movies of the 1950s to the horror and disaster films of the 1960s and 1970s, and from the millennial disaster revival of the late 1990s to the superhero movies of the early 21st century, end-of-the-world scenarios have maintained a constant grip on the popular imagination. The spectacular visual effects associated with films depicting cataclysmic events ensure the marketability of films from Earth vs. The Flying Saucers (dir. Fred F. Sears, 1956) to digital cinema blockbusters like 2012 (dir. Roland Emmerich, 2009).

The audiovisual depiction of large-scale destruction can be framed most easily within the context of Tom Gunning’s “cinema of attractions” paradigm, which elevates the attraction exerted by spectacular imagery above the traditional emphasis on storytelling and diegesis. This perspective, which gained much ground in contemporary film studies alongside the rise of the postclassical Hollywood blockbuster and the development of digital cinema, certainly has relevance for the formulaic and narratively shallow disaster film, which emphasizes kinetic thrills and spectacular visual effects over elements such as character development, complex plotting, and verisimilitude.

But there is also a consistent narrative motif in these end-of-the-world scenarios that connects strongly with the postmodern condition and its public anxieties concerning the subject’s loss of agency and dwindling sense of historicity. As Frank Kermode pointed out in his classic study of apocalyptic narratives in literary history, apocalyptic fantasies offer an illusion of order and
progression by providing history with a sense of closure: hence, “apocalyptic thought belongs to rectilinear rather than cyclical views of the world” (5). Furthermore, it is an extremely flexible motif that is adaptable to a seemingly infinite range of historical periods, genres, and narrative forms:

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

Among such naïve forms of apocalyptic thought are clearly the pop-cultural narratives that range across numerous genres in multiple media, including post-World War II Hollywood cinema. But perhaps most remarkable about the systemic occurrence of apocalyptic narratives in Hollywood cinema is that such popular films—with very few exceptions—ultimately show the world being saved from disaster on the eve of its destruction, frequently due to the direct intervention of a martyr figure. Such martyr figures have become increasingly commonplace in apocalyptic blockbuster films of the late 20th century, where “the Hollywood appropriation of martyrdom situates it in the larger context of the redemption of mankind” (Copier 245).

While most Hollywood films of this kind avoid explicit religious references that would run the risk of limiting the films’ popular appeal within a predominantly secularized Western culture, Biblical notions of martyrdom and sacrifice do continue to dominate these pictures. From The Poseidon Adventure (dir. Ronald Neame, 1972) to Armageddon (dir. Michael Bay, 1998), Hollywood disaster films have indulged in the fantasy of a heroic martyr sacrificing his own life to redeem a corrupt and decadent world from the very brink of destruction. The contemporary superhero movie is certainly no exception to this pattern: Superman Returns for instance represents but one of the many ways in which the genre has appropriated messianic imagery and themes in connection with such apocalyptic scenarios.
Although apocalyptism therefore makes up recurring motif in classical and postclassical Hollywood cinema, it has continuously responded to historical circumstances that have been reflected in popular genres. The 1950s cycle of apocalyptic monster and science-fiction films can for instance be read as symptomatic of wider socio-cultural fears and anxieties relating directly to the specificities of political discourse of the period:

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

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

By examining the apocalyptic elements that can be identified in popular contemporary superhero narratives, this chapter will argue that these end-of-the-world scenarios reveal how one of the pervasive elements of 9/11 discourse is the false notion that we have indeed reached the end of history. These films stand as a telling example of how the absence of historicity in late capitalism triggers a desire for Kermode’s “rectilinear views of the world,” the resulting re-establishment of order, and perhaps even a promise of redemption. The disaster film acts out the wider fantasy that the world has reached the point of collapse, while promising a nostalgic sense of rebirth and renewal. This is why the disaster film connects so strongly to 9/11 discourse: the spectacular imagery of the attacks immediately led the public to understand the events as part of a postmodern culture associated with spectacular entertainments, thereby isolating the events from their socio-historical context.

But whereas many films from the disaster movie genre embody a strong sense of nostalgia for a pre-modern world, using the films’ cataclysmic events
as a kind of societal reboot, apocalyptic superhero movies display a more ambivalent attitude towards postmodernity. For while the superhero films consistently include spectacular scenes of mass destruction that define much of these films’ commodity value and drawing power, the narrative tradition of the superhero also requires that the world is saved, ensuring the preservation of a status quo that will inevitably lead to a similar challenge in the inevitable next installment. The superhero film is therefore an even better example of the kind of postmodern culture that has developed post-9/11. Instead of the repeated fantasy/anxiety of a devastating attack on New York City, these 21st-century films circulate in a culture where this has already happened, and where the conflicting desires to revisit those events while also fantasizing that they never took place creates a strange kind of short circuit. The endlessly repeated superhero cycles fulfill this antinomy: the world is both saved and destroyed, the hero both sacrifices himself and survives, the events in the films both did and did not happen.

In order to describe accurately how the superhero movie is both similar to and different from the disaster movie in the ways it reflects historically situated anxieties, the first section of this chapter will offer an analysis of *Cloverfield* (dir. Matt Reeves, 2008) that relates it to the generic tradition of the monster movie, and how such genre conventions offer the audience a sense of cultural continuity while also introducing connections to 9/11 discourse and 21st-century anxieties. In the second section of this chapter, I will then turn to the contemporary superhero genre, focusing on the first season of the popular television series *Heroes* as an example of superhero narratives incorporating aspects of apocalyptic thought from the cultural context of 9/11 discourse. Throughout this chapter, the theoretical focus will shift most strongly towards the work of Slavoj Žižek, whose use of Lacanian theory within the context of neomarxist critical thought offers the most useful tools for decoding contemporary popular texts from the perspective of cultural studies.
**Disaster Movies and America’s Addiction to Catastrophe**

Only a catastrophe gets our attention. We want them, we need them, we depend on them, as long as they happen somewhere else. (DeLillo 1999: 66)

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

This perspective on the postmodern desire for moments of spectacular disaster that momentarily disrupt the deadening monotony of late capitalist consumerism indicates the contradictory nature of postmodern popular culture. According to this logic, the disaster film is symptomatic of both the desire to upset the status quo, and the opposite wish to see that same balance endlessly and immediately restored. This dialectical process is typical of the perpetual boom-and-bust cycles that define the capitalist system, and it was suggested by essayist, literary theorist, and cultural critic Susan Sontag as early as 1965, in her influential essay “The Imagination of Disaster”:

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

As Sontag pointed out so accurately, the spectacular and repetitive nature of cataclysmic imagery in Hollywood films from the 1950s onward was to become a crucial moment in the historical development of postmodernism. As science-fiction and horror movies from the Cold War era offered more and more depictions of large-scale destruction, the public perception of catastrophe was increasingly defined by fantasy representations, as “movies increasingly set the standard for convincing spectacles of destruction” (Rozario 166).
The popularity of disaster movies in the 1950s and early 1960s marks a difference from the wave of science-fiction novels that had originated two decades earlier, for the films could provide a sensuous, immersive engagement with the apocalyptic imaginary that was shaping the episteme of the burgeoning postmodern era. Unlike the more speculative, science-oriented narratives of early-20th century science-fiction novels, the Cold War disaster films offered the audience a more haptic form of involvement, allowing it to engage in a fantasy of seeing the most recognizable landmarks of the modern world destroyed and civilization brought to a sudden end. The ubiquitous nature of disaster footage in the Hollywood movies of the 1950s therefore “owed a good deal of their fascination to the therapeutic opportunity they presented for working through anxieties about the frightening prospect of global annihilation, particularly because they so consistently supplied happy endings and comforting resolutions” (Rozario 168).

The persistent appearance of such endings, in which humanity is saved and the status quo restored, may be seen as simultaneously necessary and wholly redundant: a formal necessity on the one hand because of Hollywood films’ reliance on a Production Code that was restrictive and repressive in the way it embodied a strict system of self-censorship for the film industry, and on the other because studios were wary of providing entertainment that audiences would find potentially too upsetting.7 Yet paradoxically, the happy endings may also be viewed as redundant generic requirements that were of little or no interest for audiences whose enjoyment of these films was obviously dictated entirely by the prospect of visual effects sequences of mass destruction.

While it has become commonplace to interpret these films’ fantasy plots featuring alien invasions, atomic mutation, and identity theft as metaphorical representations of anxieties related to the threats of nuclear warfare,

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7 An example of the latter form of self-censorship is the Cold War classic Invasion of the Body Snatchers (dir. Don Siegel, 1956), for which the studio decided to bookend the film in postproduction with scenes that largely dispel the film’s apocalyptic implications.
communism and McCarthyism, more recent studies of these film genres have focused on the way they articulated and acted out wider resentments against modernity itself, and the complex relationship with capitalism they seem to represent. If the period of late or globalized capitalism has indeed ushered in an era in which the Baudrillardian simulacrum has usurped our perceptions of reality, then “the postmodern culture of calamity may well be defined by a collision or collusion between the apocalyptic and the hyperreal” (Rozario 188).


**The Dialectics of the 1950s Monster Movie**

Harryhausen’s monsters offered audiences a productive way of engaging with the dialectical view of (post)modernity that is embodied by the disaster film as the product of a mass culture in which “everything becomes a spectacle, that is, essentially non-participatory” (Lefebvre 337). The resentments and anxieties concerning the breakdown of the distinction between the natural and the cultural, the modernist opposition that was being challenged by the swift development of technology and commodification in the 1950s, were acted out in these films by monsters wreaking havoc on the major American cities that represented modern progress most explicitly. Whether the monster in the film took the form of a giant lizard, a gargantuan octopus, or the monstrous yet
endearing alien “Ymir” from 20 Million Miles to Earth, the creatures represented a primitive, peculiarly innocent force of nature that came to respond violently and spectacularly to the arrogance of modern humanity. These films thereby came to perform “valuable, if problematic, therapeutic work for a modern people living in a world of constant turmoil and turbulence, in a world haunted by violence” (Rozario 188).

This contradictory desire to see resentments against modernity from within the context of narratives that systematically restored the upset balance indicates some of the doubleness that is so typical of the historical period of the 1950s. The schizophrenia that critical theorists such as Fredric Jameson and Deleuze and Guattari have described as an essential characteristic of postmodernism may be witnessed here: “the overt doubleness of American culture in the 1950s can ... be taken as a reflection of the increasing hegemony of capitalism in the decade, as the last remnants of agrarian alternatives to capitalism were swept from the American scene once and for all” (Booker 4).

Just as Marx argued that the Hegelian form of dialectical analysis was necessary in order to chart the complexities and contradictions of capitalism, an analysis of American Cold War popular culture should be similarly dialectical in nature in order to recognize the embedded contradictions that fuelled this cultural period.

Indeed, the Hollywood disaster films of this era present us with such overwhelming contradictions that their narrative logic becomes a form of shorthand for dialectical thought: the films’ entire raison d’être is the depiction of apocalyptic imagery, yet they must present narratives of historical redemption; the imagined communist threat is allegorically represented in the form of mind-controlling aliens that transform American citizens into a homogeneous mass, while American commodity culture of the period represents exactly this kind of cultural homogeneity; the destructive monsters provide a form of therapy for postmodern audiences that lack a sense of agency, while this “therapeutic activity” takes the form of a passive consumer spectacle that Lefebvre and Debord defined as essentially non-participatory,
emerging precisely at “the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life” (Debord 29). If the popular culture of the 1950s can thus be interpreted as a symptom of this historical moment in which we see the beginning of late capitalism and an incipient postmodernism, it could be rewarding to compare the features of this period’s allegorical disaster films with more recent texts that share the same genre tradition.

One way of coming to terms with shifts and possible ruptures in ideological values over time is by examining similar texts and focusing on the ways in which they represent the dialectical values of continuity (in the form of stable intertextual genre conventions) and change (in the form of modifications to the formula that connect to historically specific reading positions). One of the traditional ingredients of the disaster movie genre is the hero’s vocation as a scientist. As Susan Sontag pointed out, the typical disaster movie “opens with the scientist-hero in his laboratory, which is located in the basement or on the grounds of his tasteful, prosperous house” (43). The protagonist thereby represents not only the traditional Enlightenment values of scientific knowledge and rational thought, but also the ideological values associated with white heterosexual patriarchy, his female assistant an important but subservient accessory in his ongoing investigation. This formula holds true for all the key texts mentioned above: the paleontologist-hero of The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms; the doctor-hero of Invasion of the Body Snatchers; the rocket scientist-hero of Earth vs. The Flying Saucers; the marine-biologist-hero of It Came From Beneath the Sea; the medical scientist-hero of 20 Million Miles to Earth; and so on.

Not only is the scientist-hero instrumental in saving the world from whatever attacking force is featured in these disaster films; his cooperation with the American military also represents the successful operation of the military-industrial complex associated with post-WWII America. In one sense, the narratives of 1950s disaster movies thereby dramatize the successful cooperation between the government and the enlightened individual, often overcoming initial conflict and/or misunderstandings to rise together and
overcome seemingly insurmountable odds. At the most superficial symbolic level, these narratives therefore seem to offer thinly veiled metaphorical representations of American superiority, always in the form of explicitly masculine and patriarchal fantasies of mastery.

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

Meanwhile, the monster that functions as the picture’s nominal villain may also be said to be the film’s actual protagonist-hero, and the prime source of audience interest. Like the eponymous main character in archetypal monster movie King Kong (dir. Merian C. Cooper, 1933), the stop-motion animated creatures in the 1950s cycle of monster movies constitute “a narratively centralised special effect ... whose singular nature not only forms the basis for the diegetic story, but also supports a meta-narrative about spectacular display” (North 66-67). In marked contrast to the bland, interchangeable leading men who portray these films’ scientist-heroes, the spectacular monsters in the 1950s disaster movies are colorful, larger-than-life characters, given forceful and distinctive personalities. Indeed, their longevity within fan culture and genre film history derives from the creature effects more than anything else in these films. Even the film posters’ design usually emphasizes
the dominance of the creature over the human characters in the film, who dwell in the margins as the monster overshadows every other aspect of the image (figure 1).

Figure 1: 20 Million Miles to Earth and its central monster protagonist.

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

Cloverfield and the Post-9/11 Disaster Film

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

Like most genres, the disaster movie with its end-of-the-world scenarios has gone through numerous cycles, each of which reflects different aspects of historical shifts in social habits, political discourse, technical innovation, and film viewing and distribution practices. While it is problematic to suggest that every disaster movie cycle of automatically denotes a wider sense of socio-political unrest in American culture, it is nevertheless possible to relate changes in political and moral values from one cycle to another to public issues and anxieties from their individual historical periods. As Susan Sontag implies in the above quotation, the imagination of disaster within this popular genre reflects wider social concerns about the nature of (post)modernity and the individual subject’s lack of agency within it.

In its ambivalent treatment of apocalyptic imagery and narratives, distinct cycles in the disaster movie genre’s history can be related to political and ideological values of their periods. For instance, just as the 1950s cycle of monster movies reflects concerns about the Atomic Age, the post-WWII rise of consumerism, and the loss of individual identity this cultural shift entails, the late 1990s “millennial” cycle, spearheaded by the success of Independence Day (dir. Roland Emmerich, 1996), represents the contradictions of the fully globalized capitalism of Clinton’s post-Cold War “Pax Americana.” Throughout
this cycle, which also includes films like *Deep Impact* (dir. Mimi Leder, 1998) and *Armageddon*, the focus is placed squarely on America’s leading role in world politics, willing to sacrifice a martyr figure to redeem the world (e.g. Randy Newman in *Independence Day*, Téa Leoni in *Deep Impact*, and Bruce Willis in *Armageddon*) while a benevolent, patriarchal American president succeeds in unifying the world and directing a global response to the cataclysmic event at hand.

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

This contradictory relationship with 9/11 and its problematic connection with the spectacles of the disaster movie genre confirms Slavoj Žižek’s explanation of the unreal qualities of the attacks and their imagery:
What happens at the end of this process of virtualization ... is that we begin to experience “real reality” itself as a virtual entity. For the great majority of the public, the WTC explosions were events on the TV screen, and when we watched the oft-repeated shot of frightened people running towards the camera ahead of the giant cloud of dust from the collapsing tower, was not the framing of the shot itself reminiscent of the spectacular shots in catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others, since—as Jeremy Bentham knew—reality is the best appearance of itself? (2002: 11)

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

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

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

In many ways, the “9/11 angle” to which Reeves refers in *Cloverfield* is all too obvious. For while the film establishes itself in the generic tradition of the disaster movie by forging intertextual connections with the classic Ray Harryhausen monsters, it repurposes the genre’s familiar narrative and visual tropes as an extension of contemporary post-9/11 culture.

Both notions, of generic continuity and of contemporary relevance, were foregrounded in the film’s influential publicity campaign. The first item to appear in that campaign was the film’s teaser trailer, which showed handheld video footage of a going-away party that is interrupted by a mysterious crash, followed by television news reports of “a thunderous, roaring sound” in New York City. The partygoers then ascend to the roof of their Manhattan downtown loft apartment, from where the video camera captures footage of a spectacular explosion between the skyscrapers of the Financial District. After everyone runs downstairs, they find panicked crowds rushing up the street, away from the disaster area, one of whom yells out clearly: “I saw it. It’s alive! It’s huge!” The teaser trailer reaches its climax as the head of the Statue of Liberty comes soaring down the avenue to land in the middle of the street right before the camera, ending with the text captions “From Producer J.J. Abrams” and “In Theaters 1-18-08,” separated by a shot of one of the partygoers saying directly to the camera: “It’s going to be the best night ever.” Released in July 2007, this teaser trailer did not include the film’s title, thereafter spearheading a viral publicity campaign that encouraged curious viewers to seek out hints about the upcoming film across various online media sources.

What the teaser trailer thus immediately established was not only the subjectivity and immediacy of the digital-video aesthetic associated with 9/11 and its various media representations, but also the tradition of the monster
movie ("It’s huge! It’s alive!") and the resulting nature of the film as defined primarily by its entertainment value (the metatextual comment “It’s going to be the best night ever!”). Besides the associative connections between the handheld digicam conceit with the endlessly recycled 9/11 footage, most of which was filmed by non-professionals on the streets of Manhattan during the attacks, the film re-stages iconic images from 9/11 from within the safety of its own monster movie context.

The first example occurs when the main characters leave the apartment building to discover what is happening, and the monster’s approach is heralded by a billowing cloud of dust and rubble. This spectacular wave of destruction sends the crowds assembled on the street running in panic towards the camera in an uncanny recreation of some of the most familiar 9/11 images (figure 2), the only difference being the bright daylight of the actual disaster footage, while most of Cloverfield takes place at night.

Similarly, the immediate aftermath of this initial attack in the film shows the streets of downtown Manhattan as a dust-covered wasteland, enshrouded in an eerie, sudden silence that follows the crashing noise of tumbling skyscrapers. The survivors shuffle down the street with dazed expressions and ashes in their faces and hair, while sheets of paper float around in the air and settle slowly on the streets around them (figure 3).
These obvious symmetries largely shaped the critical response to the film, with reviewers and audiences alike immediately voicing the film's uncanny appropriations of 9/11 imagery. Dubbing the film's nameless monster “Al-Qaedazilla,” *Village Voice* film critic Nathan Lee was one of many writers to observe that “street-level 9/11 footage would fit seamlessly into *Cloverfield*'s hand-held, ersatz-amateur POV; the initial onslaught of mayhem, panic, plummeting concrete, and toxic avalanches could have been storyboarded directly from the CNN archive” (n. pag.).

Given the fact that *Cloverfield*'s multiple and deliberate articulations of 9/11 discourse were equal to (if not larger than) its disaster movie genre trappings, the film's enormous critical and commercial success may testify to an audience readiness to engage with these issues within the relative “safety” of its explicit monster movie context. Hollywood films that have presented aspects of the 9/11 attacks in a more literal way (such as *United 93* and *World Trade Center*) were surrounded by a great deal of controversy, and attracted only a fraction of *Cloverfield*'s blockbuster-sized audience. An often-heard complaint was that audiences were still too traumatized by the attacks to confront a cinematic recreation of the events directly, thereby once again foregrounding the traumatic aspects of 9/11, as discussed previously in chapter 2. These films’ narratives provided little more than abstract tales of heroic American
martyrdom aimed at transforming a passive and victimized America into an image of active and capable masculinity.

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

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

This simplistic reduction of historical events into ready-made generic binary patterns conforms once again to Lynn Spigel’s description of “infantile citizenship,” as I have developed previously in chapter 2. With the mass media coverage presented in ways that are both sensational and sentimental, while entirely lacking in historical or geopolitical understanding, both the news footage and Hollywood’s cinematic depictions of 9/11 patronize their viewers as if they were children. This position helped the American public adopt a role of victimized exceptionalism “that allows adult viewers comfortably to confront the horrors and guilt of war by donning the cloak of childhood innocence” (Spigel 128).

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

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

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

> As the film’s poster illustrates, the monstrous attacks on New York constitute *Cloverfield*’s quintessential attraction: the notion of a post-9/11 New York under attack from a mysterious creature is the sole focus of the poster’s design.
While the image on the poster recreates familiar images of the attack that showed downtown Manhattan from the water, enormous smoke clouds rising from the Financial District (figure 4), it adds the tag line “Some Thing Has Found Us” as its sole indication of the force behind this destruction.

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

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

The monster thus comes to represent a far more accurate embodiment of how 9/11 was given form in the media, and therefore of the way it was experienced by the public. Unlike the more literal recreations of the attacks, post-9/11
disaster movies like *Cloverfield*, *War of the Worlds* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2005), and *Children of Men* (dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 2006) offer more productive ways of “traversing the fantasy” of 9/11. The fundamental ambiguity of genre cinema perfectly accommodates the “Janus-like structure” that is required of such a fantasy: “simultaneously pacifying, disarming (providing an imaginary scenario which enables us to endure the abyss of the Other’s desire) and shattering, disturbing, inassimilable into our reality” (ibid.: 15-16).

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

These issues will be further developed in the second section of this chapter, in which the apocalyptic scenarios of the superhero movie cycle will be discussed in relation to the overthrowing of the Lacanian symbolic order, and the crumbling faith in the existence of the Big Other in postmodernity. By relating the apocalyptic motifs of the popular television series *Heroes* to this form of Lacanian analysis, I will establish a connection between the symbolic relevance of such narratives and the context of capitalist realism that informs them.
9/11 and the End of History

Each apparent movement of history brings us imperceptibly closer to its antipodal point, if not indeed to its starting point. This is the end of linearity. In this perspective, the future no longer exists. But if there is no longer a future, there is no longer an end either. So this is not even the end of history. We are faced with a paradoxical process of reversal, a reversive effect of modernity which, having reached its speculative limit and extrapolated all its virtual developments, is disintegrating into its simple elements in a catastrophic process of recurrence and turbulence. (Baudrillard 1994: 10-11)

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. (Fukuyama 4)

Of the many genres incorporated and appropriated by the “post-genre genre” of the superhero movie, the disaster film is certainly one of the most obvious. Most superhero movies directly invoke the threat of an impending apocalypse; most feature narratives that are structured around set pieces that foreground spectacular visual effects of mass destruction; and most feature a superhero-versus-supervillain dynamic that functions in a similarly dialectical way as the ambivalent scientist/hero-versus-monster binary of the classic disaster film.

Just as the previous section of this chapter demonstrated that the historical development of the disaster film reflects both continuity and change in relation to its cultural context, so does the superhero movie as a popular film genre that began to take shape in the late 1970s, when the cultural logic of postmodernism had taken hold, but which did not become a sustained cycle until its most vital characteristics took shape as part of 9/11 discourse. Previous chapters have argued that 9/11 discourse and that of the superhero figure both revolve around central themes of trauma, the postmodern city, and panoptic surveillance. The fourth and final element that binds these two discourses together within our contemporary Foucauldian episteme is that of apocalyptism and end-of-the-world scenarios.

The systematic occurrence of such apocalyptic motifs in the most popular forms of contemporary entertainment strongly suggests a connection with the
absence of historicity proposed by theorists such as Jameson and Žižek. The attacks of 9/11 were presented and publicly experienced in a historical vacuum, which led to a new set of public anxieties of which these films are clearly symptomatic. The superhero movie cycle offers a way to mobilize the contradictory desire to see spectacular images of mass destruction repeated over and over from the safety of a genre that allows for such endless repetition. For as one of the superheroes in The Incredibles (dir. Brad Bird, 2004) comments with obvious irony: “No matter how many times you save the world, it always manages to get back in jeopardy again!”

The perpetual threat of the world coming to an end takes many forms in the superhero movie, ranging from the “moral apocalypse” represented by the post-historical, post-ethical world of The Dark Knight, to the more traditional last-minute postponements and/or reversals of the world’s destruction, from Superman turning back time in Superman: The Movie to the successful containment of corporate greed run amok in the Spider-Man trilogy. As with the disaster film, the structural logic of these films embodies the contradictory desire to witness the physical destruction of the world while also seeing it saved by way of the traditional “happy ending” of the Hollywood blockbuster.

This desire to see a spectacularly physical apocalypse may be read as a symptom of the logic of the postmodern condition, which has been repeatedly described in terms that suggest that we have entered an era that exists outside of the continuity of history. From the utopian claims of Francis Fukuyama to the hyperbolic cultural pessimism of Jean Baudrillard, the tendency to identify our age as the “end of history” has been a pervasive, unifying element among otherwise highly diverse and often contradictory postmodern theorists. But whatever their political or theoretical views, they do also have in common their emphasis on establishing a connection between the current state of global capitalism and the wider sense of cultural apocalyptism they describe:

The global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point. Its “four riders of the apocalypse” are comprised by the ecological crisis, the consequences of the biogenetic revolution, imbalances within the system itself
(problems with intellectual property; forthcoming struggles over raw materials, food and water), and the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions. (Žižek 2010: x)

But whether we follow Žižek’s claim in stating that our system is indeed “approaching an apocalyptic point,” or Baudrillard’s thesis that “history, meaning and progress are no longer able to reach their escape velocity” (1994: 4), the apocalyptic imagination of superhero movies offers a way of dramatizing such irresolvable contradictions. It is therefore less important to define what kind of “post-historical” thinking they represent than it is to emphasize how such texts act them out in a way that leaves intact their fundamental incommensurability.

One popular superhero text that focuses strongly on an impending apocalypse from the context of post-9/11 culture is the first season of the television series *Heroes*. Not only did this phenomenally successful television narrative bring together numerous strands of the superhero genre, but it did so in a way that was typically postmodern in its use of intertextuality, hyperconsciousness, and self-reflexivity. This makes it an ideal case study not only for the complex ways in which popular culture mobilizes and enacts the circular motion of late capitalism, creating a self-sustaining feedback loop that refers back endlessly to itself; but this closed circle is repeated on another level in the narrative of *Heroes*’ first season, in which we find that its repeated use of apocalyptic threats ultimately resides in a temporal short circuit that offers an uncanny example of the “post-historical” aspects of contemporary culture.
Heroes: Reversing the Flow of History

In recent days, a seemingly random group of individuals has emerged with what can only be described as “special” abilities. Although unaware of it now, these individuals will not only save the world, but change it forever. This transformation from ordinary to extraordinary will not occur overnight. Every story has a beginning. Volume One of their epic tale begins here...

Opening text crawl from Heroes (episode 1: “Genesis”)

The weekly television series Heroes premiered on September 25, 2006, its pilot episode drawing 14.3 million viewers, making it NBC’s most successful drama series debut in over five years. Throughout its first season, the series maintained this level of popularity, its success further compounded by numerous spin-offs in the form of countless comic books, novelizations, and other forms of licensed merchandising and fan fiction. Although the following three seasons would see a dramatic decrease in the show’s popularity, ultimately leading to its cancellation in 2010, Heroes was for a time a popular phenomenon that brought together several strands of the ongoing superhero movie cycle. It incorporated the superhero genre’s cultural association with discourses of fandom and subcultures, while extending this paradigm to become more deliberately inclusive in its attempt to appeal to multiple socio-demographic groups. Moreover, by incorporating elements from the superhero’s narrative genealogy (most notably from the X-Men series and from Watchmen), it offered a re-reading of the genre through the prism of post-9/11 culture.

As with the post-9/11 disaster film Cloverfield and its complex interaction with its genre traditions on the one hand and the historical specificities of its own cultural context on the other, an analysis of Heroes becomes productive by focusing on the ways in which it follows certain familiar genre tropes, while explicitly breaking with others. This combination of continuity and change can provide insight into the ways in which discursive formations do not emerge out of a vacuum, fully formed, but draw on an established archive of historically
determined material that functions as “the general system of the formation and transformation of statements” (Foucault 2002: 146). By viewing 9/11 as a discursive formation that draws on an established archive that “forms and transforms” groups of statements and thereby potentially alters the episteme of our discursive reality, one must also emphasize this aspect of simultaneous change and continuity. As Foucault explains in his archaeological approach to the differentiation of discursive formations:

To say that one discursive formation is substituted for another is not to say that a whole world of absolutely new objects, enunciations, concepts, and theoretical choices emerge fully armed and fully organized in a text that will place that world once and for all; it is to say that a general transformation of relations has occurred, but that it does not necessarily alter all the elements; it is to say that statements are governed by new rules of formation, it is not to say that all objects or concepts, all enunciations or all theoretical choices disappear. (ibid. 191)

This Foucauldian perspective on how historical change must be viewed as a process in which continuity and genealogy play as great a role as change and revolution is particularly helpful when using popular genres to chart shifts in cultural discourse. Another way of countering the “shock doctrine” associated with the seemingly abrupt and world-changing events of postmodern disasters is Fredric Jameson’s emphasis on historicity, and how “historical events are never really punctual” (2002a: 301). So although the popular texts themselves may be said to reproduce the logic of late capitalism and the “perpetual present” that isolates audiences from any actual engagement with history, a closer analysis of the interaction between such texts, their place in relation to genre history, and their relationship to their own historical context can teach us about the functioning of ideology within them.

Like the superhero movie genre and many other popular 21st-century narratives, Heroes may also be said to inhabit a space that is “post-genre.” It follows the postmodern logic of a television series like Twin Peaks, firstly because it no longer approaches its audience “as a homogeneous mass, but rather as an amalgamation of microcultural groups stratified by age, gender, race, and geographic location” (Collins 1992: 342). In Heroes, this is expressed
not only through the show’s large group of protagonists, who are made up of a
diverse selection of characters that allow for interpellation along lines of gender,
ethnicity, age, nationality, and subculture, but also through the interweaving of
various popular genres. Just as other 21st-century television series such as 24, 
Lost (ABC, 2004-2010), and Battlestar Galactica (Sci-Fi Channel, 2003-2008)
each offer similarly diverse postmodern genre texts, Heroes combines elements
from fantasy, science-fiction, action, and superhero genres within the episodic
framework of the weekly television soap opera. This polysemy of genres and
characters makes the series accessible to a wide variety of distinct audience
groups, each of which can be interpellated by one or more aspects of the series.

Another aspect of Heroes that makes it fit Collins’ definition of typically
postmodern television so neatly is the series’ repeated use of “generic and tonal
variations” in its treatment of the diverse genres it incorporates:

At one moment, the conventions of a genre are taken “seriously”; in another
scene, they might be subjected to the sort of ambivalent parody that Linda
Hutcheon associates with postmodern textuality. These generic and tonal
variations occur within scenes as well as across scenes, sometimes oscillating on a
line-by-line basis, or across episodes when scenes set in paradigmatic
relationship to one another (through the use of the same character, setting, or
soundtrack music) are given virtually antithetical treatments. The movement in
and out of parodic discourse is common in all of the episodes. (ibid. 345-6)

Collins’ description of Twin Peaks applies equally to the postmodern bricolage of
Heroes, which opens up the same kind of space to navigate between various
viewer positions: from melodramatic sincerity to ironic detachment, and from
parodic hyperconsciousness to immersive forms of intertextuality, often within
a single scene. The pair of characters most strongly associated with this extreme
kind of tonal fluidity are the series’ duo of Japanese characters Hiro Nakamura
(played by Masi Oka) and Ando Masahashi (played by James Kyson-Lee).

These two characters most directly embody the subculture of comic book
fandom, responding to the events around them with a full awareness of the rules
and conventions of exactly the kind of genre fiction they inhabit. As their highly
coded form of discourse illustrates, both characters belong to a specific
subculture of comic book fandom that Matthew Wolf-Meyer has described as a Foucauldian “discourse of comics”:

Comic book fandom is a subculture predicated upon its language of difference, which relies, in part, upon continuity similar to Foucault’s critique of the theoretical construction of history with a vocabulary of names, places, and events particular to the community, employed within the culture to communicate, and outside of the culture to promote itself as culturally important while retaining difference. This continuity, and the knowledge of this continuity [...], is an essential component of the discourse of comics. (499)

As representatives of this specific subculture, the characters present an obvious entry point into the series for audiences who recognize and appreciate this “discourse of comics.” When Hiro first discovers that he has supernatural abilities, the two characters repeatedly engage in detailed discussions of familiar superhero figures such as Superman and Spider-Man in order to determine their next course of action. This explicit acknowledgment of the series’ relationship to ongoing genre traditions performs several functions at once: it establishes character in a way that makes these figures easily relatable by viewers who share their perspective on cultures of comic book fandom; it signals the text’s awareness of its own position within a specific form of popular culture; and it establishes a relationship towards older superhero traditions that is both respectful and gently parodic.

But unlike most explicitly self-reflexive characters in these types of hyperconscious texts, Hiro and Ando do not merely comment on the ongoing action around them, but also participate actively and sincerely in it. In many ways, Hiro can in fact be viewed as the series’ main protagonist, as he simultaneously discovers the narrative’s basic rules for the audience and gives new form to the traditional superhero (with Ando as the classic sidekick figure). The character’s continuous oscillation between the roles of fan/genre expert and increasingly competent superhero figure makes Hiro a particularly successful audience substitute for viewers who recognize and share his discourse of comics fandom, and for whom he therefore offers both a “realistic” character and the traditional adolescent fantasy of developing one’s own superpowers.
On the other hand, an all too exclusive focus on Hiro as protagonist might have limited the series’ audience to viewers who felt comfortable and familiar with the kind of discourse these two characters represent. For as likely as it is that fans of the show might single out Hiro (who was indeed the most popular character among internet fan communities) as the “hero” of Heroes, he shares both equal screen time and narrative prominence with several others, who could just as easily be identified as central characters within the ensemble cast. Each of these other characters provides a different audience segment with a point of identification (and hence: ideological interpellation) in the text: Claire Bennet (played by Hayden Panettiere) represents a strong female teenager from rural Texas; Peter Petrelli (played by Milo Ventimiglia) represents a feminized, sensitive postmodern embodiment of masculinity; Matt Parkman (played by Greg Grunberg) represents the more traditional form of masculinity of the blue-collar working man; Niki Sanders (played by Ali Larter) represents both sides of the phantasmic female sex object (alternately submissive and aggressive); and so on.

While each of the numerous lead characters in Heroes can therefore be viewed as possible points of identification for a diversified and explicitly heterogeneous postmodern audience, they can also function as multiple points of entrance simultaneously. Claire for instance can be embraced by teenage girls as a sympathetic way of dramatizing issues they recognize and identify with, such as family conflicts, social issues, and the character’s drive towards self-mutilation; but at the same time, her scenes can be enjoyed by male audiences as a pleasurable, heavily eroticized depiction of the culturally fetishized cheerleader sex fantasy. The series’ employment of such a diverse cast of characters in prominent roles thereby constitutes another viable postmodern strategy of appealing directly to a large variety of individual subcultures, lifestyles and audience groups simultaneously.

Meanwhile, the main narrative of the first season of Heroes frames these multiple and fluid forms of postmodern subjectivity within a cultural context that foregrounds specific ideological choices. As with so many superhero
narratives, the larger story arc deals with the threat of an apocalyptic crisis that must be averted, and with which a group of individuals with supernatural abilities are ultimately charged. In this sense, *Heroes* is very much a part of a form of genre continuity that connects it explicitly with other similar superhero movies and narrative franchises in other media.

The most obvious parallels are firstly with the X-Men series, which became a lasting favorite among comics book fans from the 1960s “Silver Age” onward, and which was among the very first of the 21st-century cycle of superhero movie blockbusters; and secondly with Alan Moore’s influential graphic novel *Watchmen*, numerous structural elements of which are copied or mirrored in the first season of *Heroes*. As in *X-Men* (dir. Bryan Singer, 2000), the protagonists of *Heroes* discover that some form of genetic mutation/evolution has endowed them with superhuman powers that generally conform with those of the most familiar superhero characters (e.g. invulnerability, physical strength, invisibility, pyrokinesis, the ability to fly, etc.). As in *X-Men*, this discovery leads the characters towards concerns about how they will be perceived by others, while government organizations seek to regulate and contain them. And as in *X-Men*, the sympathetic characters move towards working together in a collaborative team in order to save the world from a looming apocalyptic threat.

But *Heroes* also sets itself apart from its genre roots by eschewing some of the more iconic motifs associated with the superhero tradition. First among these is the series’ total abandonment of the superhero costume. In recent films like *X-Men* and *Hancock*, superhero characters regularly expressed a parodic form of self-reflexivity by commenting sarcastically on their costumes, offering the viewer a form of ironic engagement with these traditional genre elements. Nevertheless, most films in the post-9/11 movie cycle maintained the semantic genre motif of the costumed vigilante. In *Heroes*, this tradition is jettisoned completely, as the eponymous heroes work together without the apparent need to organize themselves into a costumed band of crime-fighters.

In one sense, this can be understood as another way of making the series more accessible to audience groups that are excluded by the discourses of
fandom and subcultures that have limited the superhero’s appeal to particular socio-demographic groups. By abandoning the most visually garish iconography associated with the genre and its ghettoized culture of adolescent males, the series’ treatment of more or less identical narrative material is thus rendered more formally “realistic,” and thereby opens itself up to new audiences. Meanwhile, the traditional cultures of fandom were offered the opportunity to embrace the series’ “innovative” way of presenting superheroes more realistically, while seeing their own form of discourse reaffirmed by the show’s many sly references to other superhero authors and characters, and by its sympathetic treatment of fan culture.

The ideological implications of the characters’ lack of costumes however warrant further investigation and a more detailed theoretical analysis. The tradition of the costumed superhero, like so many other genre elements, would appear to be contradictory. On the one hand, the eccentric costumes seem to offer “ordinary” modern subjects like Clark Kent, Bruce Wayne or Peter Parker a performative mode of standing out from the crowd: their iconic tights, capes and logos brand them with an identity that establishes them as unique individual subjects. The superhero’s costume thus comes to function as a mask that makes it possible to overcome the limitations of free-floating postmodern subjectivity and to successfully enact a form of masculine authority. This points however towards the other side of the costume’s inherent paradox, which is that the costume simultaneously functions as a uniform that by its very definition robs the individual subject of his unique identity, transforming him into a part of a Symbolic order that points directly towards the world of “the big Other.”

“The Big Other” in Post-9/11 Superhero Narratives
In Lacanian terms, the Symbolic order represents the structuring aspect of language that is associated with the “law of the Father” and which allows individual subjects to experience the world as coherent and organized. Although this Symbolic order is—like language itself—riddled with gaps and
inconsistencies, it allows the individual to imagine the existence of this “big Other” that functions along lines of “fetishistic disavowal.” As Žižek explains this concept in his book *The Ticklish Subject*, it involves the classic Lacanian disavowal strategy of “je sais bien, mais quand même...” (“I know very well, but still...”). The strongest example Žižek provides of this is the figure of the judge, who is treated with respect not because of the way this individual person is perceived (i.e. as a normal man with the usual abundance of human flaws and inconsistencies), but because “it is the Law itself which speaks through him” (389).

This imagined “big Other” as the fantasmatic embodiment of an operational and effective symbolic order therefore comes to represent the existence of a coherent socio-symbolic reality that structures our daily reality. The problematic nature of postmodernity is now that the individual’s faith in this “big Other” has come to collapse:

> The problem today is not that subjects are more dispersed than they were before, in the alleged good old days of the self-identical Ego; the fact that “the big Other” no longer exists implies, rather, that the symbolic fiction which confers a performatve status on one level of my identity, determining which of my acts will display “symbolic efficiency,” is no longer operative. (399)

The dissolution of this public belief in “the big Other” can be stated in numerous ways within the framework of postmodern theory. It is evident in one form in Jean-François Lyotard’s postmodern condition of the collapse of the Grand Narratives. It is recognizable in Jean Baudrillard’s development of the simulacrum as the contemporary short-circuit of signification that prevents us from engaging with Reality. It informs Foucault’s description of the Panopticon as a modern emblem of power, occupied by an “empty center.” And it informs Fredric Jameson’s definition of postmodernism as a cultural dominant that blocks the individual’s experience of historicity.

While all these critical theorists of postmodernism share this concern for how individual subjectivity takes shape within contemporary culture, Žižek’s
use of Lacanian theory brings them together in a way that helps explain not only how this relates to politics and ideology, but also to apocalyptic narratives:

Fredric Jameson’s old quip holds today more than ever: it is easier to imagine a total catastrophe which ends all life on earth than it is to imagine a real change in capitalist relations—as if, even after a global cataclysm, capitalism will somehow continue... We may worry as much as we want about global realities, but it is Capital which is the [Lacanian] Real of our lives. (Žižek 2010: 334)

As the nation state developed into the market state, and entrepreneurial capitalism became a “virtual,” post-Fordist capitalism, the symbolic fiction of “the big Other” came to dissolve, and the symbolic function of the father was increasingly undermined. Popular apocalyptic texts are thus clearly symptomatic of this form of anxiety, staging on the one hand a return of the symbolic mandate of patriarchal figures, and on the other an apocalyptic threat that provides the final telos so crucial in allowing our acts to be properly located and accounted for.

To return now once more to Heroes in order to illustrate this theoretical perspective, our first observation must be that the secret organization that tracks individuals with special powers and seeks to control them is led by Noah Bennet (played by Jack Coleman). Bennet is one of several prominent father figures in Heroes, his character defined most strongly by his conflicting responsibilities as a father on the one hand and as a secret agent tracking down superheroes on the other. Like the three other most prominent patriarchal figures in this season, Linderman (played by Malcolm McDowell), Chandra Suresh (played by Erick Avari), and Kaito Nakamura (played by George Takei), Bennet’s character is associated most emphatically with mysterious organizations that secretly control and organize the major characters and events throughout the narrative.

As the main protagonists struggle throughout the season’s narrative arc to solve the mysteries they encounter, their moments of revelation repeatedly involve the discovery that their own father had been secretly orchestrating and monitoring their actions from the start. Their struggle (like that of Batman,
Superman, and Iron Man) therefore comes to revolve around the question how to deal with these father figures, and to what extent their individual destinies have been pre-defined by the authority their patriarchal power represents. The series’ diverse range of characters demonstrates a variety of strategies for dealing with this anxiety: from Hiro’s full acceptance of the patriarchal order to Claire’s decision to accept her adopted father’s decision to sacrifice his own identity for her.

But while many of the series’ subplots feature benevolent fathers, the key character representing this conjunction of patriarchy and capitalism is that of Daniel Linderman, the most malevolent father figure in the series, whose leading role within “the Company” along with his prominence as CEO of a powerful multinational corporation establishes an explicit link between the figure of patriarchal authority and capitalist enterprise. As politician/superhero Nathan Petrelli’s surrogate father figure, Linderman explains in the following dialogue from episode 20, “0.07%,” how his plan to destroy New York City constitutes an attempt to re-establish a socio-symbolic order that functions like the inherently frightening “big Other”:

Linderman: People need hope, Nathan.
Nathan Petrelli: An explosion of that magnitude would destroy half the population of New York City like that. [snaps fingers]
L: There’s six and a half billion people on the planet. That’s less than 0.07%. Come on, that’s an acceptable loss by anyone’s count.
NP: By anybody’s count?
L: Look, I said people needed hope, but they trust fear.
NP: This is crazy.
L: This tragedy will be a catalyst for good, for change. Out of the ashes, humanity will find a common goal, a united sense of hope, couched in a united sense of fear. And it is your destiny, Nathan, to be the leader who uses this event to rally a city, a nation, a world. Now you look deep into your heart. You know I’m right.
Linderman’s revelation of the nature of his scheme casts a new light on the season’s overarching narrative. Throughout the preceding eighteen episodes, the protagonists had been struggling to avoid the destruction of New York City, of which they had been forewarned by various visions of the future. Following the series’ mantra “Save the Cheerleader, Save the World,” the main characters came to band together against what appeared to be the main villain: the former watchmaker Sylar (played by Zachary Quinto), who has been murdering other characters with powers in order to steal them and make them his own. Once it has been established that New York will be destroyed by a nuclear explosion caused by a mysterious “exploding man,” the general assumption among the characters has been that Sylar will be responsible for this, and is therefore the one who must be stopped.

The above scene thus changes both the characters’ and the viewers’ understanding of the mechanisms that drive the plot. Firstly, this development establishes a direct connection with Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*, in which the character of Adrian Veidt also reveals that he is responsible for the deliberate destruction of New York City as an attempt to restore balance to the world and thereby avoid a global apocalypse. Like Veidt, Linderman is also portrayed as the embodiment of global capitalism, his corporation a ubiquitous presence throughout the many levels of the narrative. But whereas Adrian Veidt was a
member of the central superhero team in *Watchmen* and therefore a generational peer of the other protagonists in the story, Linderman functions as a surrogate father figure who thus clearly represents a patriarchal figure whose relationship to Nathan Petrelli is classically Oedipal. Like the figure of Ducard in *Batman Begins*, he provides a false father figure who must be resisted and ultimately defeated in order for the superheroic son to establish his own position in the patriarchal order.

The other main difference between Daniel Linderman and Adrian Veidt involves the outcome of their apocalyptic plots. For whereas the destruction of New York in *Watchmen* is orchestrated in a way that precludes any form of resistance (as explained in more detail in chapter 4), the similar disaster in *Heroes* is narrowly avoided. And yet, one of the series’ most confounding contradictions is the ambiguous, even contradictory nature of the disaster. Just as the classic disaster film provides both spectacular images of mass destruction and a last-minute happy ending that transforms the apocalypse into a redemptive new beginning, *Heroes* repeatedly shows both the explosion and its aftermath in various forms, from the garish “future-vision” paintings to CGI footage of skyscrapers falling before a billowing dust cloud (figure 6).

![Figure 6: Visions of the destruction of New York in Heroes.](image-url)
Unwriting the Past: The Historical Vacuum of 9/11

The strange ambiguity in the series’ representation of this central moment of apocalyptic spectacle revolves around *Heroes’* participation in 9/11 discourse. As I have argued in previous chapters, central elements within this form of discourse are constituted by the attacks’ singularly traumatic effects, the resulting emphasis on cultures of surveillance and panoptic control, and a redefinition of the global postmetropolis (signified by New York City) as the “Ground Zero” of postmodern culture and identity. The apocalyptic narrative of *Heroes* brings these elements together, firstly, by presenting the deeply traumatic aftereffects of an attack on New York; secondly, by introducing numerous organizations (both private and government-controlled) that secretly govern characters and events via panoptic control; and thirdly, by equating the destruction of the postmetropolis with the end of the world (an alternate, more accurate wording of the series’ catchphrase would have been “Save New York, Save the World”).

Episode 20, “Five Years Gone,” establishes these elements, and thereby the season’s relationship to its historical context of 9/11 discourse, most dramatically. In this installment, Hiro and Ando accidentally travel five years forward in time, finding themselves in a future in which the attack they were trying to prevent has already occurred. In this future New York, both the city and the series’ other protagonists are portrayed as physically and emotionally scarred: downtown Manhattan is still in ruins, slowly undergoing reconstruction; the government has developed into a totalitarian form of police state; terror suspects and “illegals” are routinely tortured by state agents; and the surviving main characters have become cynical and embittered. Within this dystopian environment, Hiro works together with his future self to mobilize the other protagonists and assemble a team that can send him back in time to prevent this future from happening.
This narrative device, familiar from popular Reagan-ear time-travel narratives such as *The Terminator* (dir. James Cameron, 1984) and *Back to the Future* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1985), involves a complex relationship between the text and its historical context. For example, *Back to the Future* juxtaposes its narrative present of the mid-1980s with the clearly superior past of the 1950s, while *The Terminator* offers a similar indictment of postmodernity by revealing that its present will lead inevitably to an apocalyptic future. *Heroes* demands to be historicized in a similar way, especially because its first season (and this episode in particular) represents a post-9/11 New York as the kind of future that must be avoided at all costs.

This becomes most explicit as “Five Years Gone” reaches its climax during the ceremony to commemorate the five-year anniversary of the explosion that devastated the city. In this scene, Nathan Petrelli (who is President in this alternate future) ascends a podium constructed at Ground Zero, the scene’s staging an obvious recreation of George W. Bush’s commemorative speech on the occasion of the five-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks (figures 7 and 8).

![Figure 7: The presidential podium at Ground Zero in Heroes.](image)
Figure 8: The view from the presidential podium at Ground Zero in Heroes.

Not only is the mise-en-scène an uncanny reminder of the real-world events organized at Ground Zero in New York City after 9/11; Petrelli’s speech also echoes the familiar War on Terror rhetoric that came to define post-9/11 American politics:

My fellow Americans, fellow New Yorkers. Please let us take a moment to remember the men, women and children who were taken from us five years ago: five bells for the five years of sorrow. [A bell tolls five times]
Sacrifice: something we are all too familiar with. We've all lost, we've all mourned, and we've all had to become soldiers—heroes—protecting one another from the great danger. This is a battle none of us wanted. One that we entered with a heavy heart, knowing that the enemy was ourselves. We've won battles the world over, not only against those that would do us harm, but against poverty, reclaiming the environment...
But we do not forget the price that we've had to pay, the laws that we've had to pass to keep our citizens safe, to preserve our way of life.

In connection with Petrelli’s earlier dialogue with Linderman, in which the latter argued that the attack would bring the people together in “a united sense of hope, couched in a united sense of fear,” his later speech demonstrates that this goal was never achieved, and has led instead to a culture of fear and a “battle that none of us wanted.” As in previously discussed examples such as Batman
Begins and Superman Returns, the narrative therefore comes to revolve around finding a way to retroactively avoid the traumatic events of 9/11, thus restoring the socio-symbolic order that had been disrupted by them.

What is therefore most problematic about Heroes, as well as the many other superhero narratives that deal with this central concern, is that this repeatedly involves the attempted restoration of the big Other and the patriarchal symbolic order for which it stands. When these narratives reject father figures, it is because they are revealed as inauthentic, even perverse embodiments of patriarchy who use their status to point the heroic protagonists in the wrong direction (e.g. Ducard in Batman Begins, Obadiah in Iron Man, Magneto in X-Men, etc.). Unlike the authentic fathers, who consistently represent values associated with modernist, entrepreneurial capitalism, these false figures of patriarchy are explicitly aligned with postmodern, global capitalism, which is thereby identified as the apocalyptic threat that has already occurred, and which yet must somehow be avoided.

Paradoxically, this final interpretive step, which reveals the true threat behind the false, empty father figure, ultimately short-circuits the ideological framework that informs these postmodern narratives. For if the fear of the monstrous cause of the apocalypse in the disaster movie, in Heroes as well as in Cloverfield, is the Lacanian Thing (“das Ding”) that points towards what lies in the unknowable void of the Other, the source of this Thing must ultimately be found within oneself. It constitutes the excess within the subject that triggers the drive towards jouissance:

The subject of drive is grounded in a constitutive surplus — that is to say, in the excessive presence of some Thing that is inherently “impossible” and should not be here, in our present reality — the Thing which, of course, is ultimately the subject itself. (Žižek 1999: 371)

What seems like a strange contradiction here, locating the unknowable void of the Other within the subject itself, makes more sense when we start applying this to the narratives in the examples discussed previously in this chapter. For in
all cases, the story logic creates a short circuit that interrupts the process of othering, pointing back towards the subject itself.

In the dialectical structure of the 1950s disaster film, the formal protagonist is traditionally the scientist-hero, joining forces with the military in order to fight off the apocalyptic threat of some monstrous Thing that is wreaking havoc on the modern city. But as I have discussed in the first section of this chapter, what initially appears to be an inhuman monster turns out to be the result of human scientific experimentation, making the scientist-hero ultimately responsible for its actions. Furthermore, the monster in these films provides the central point of audience interest in the film, its destructive capabilities embodying our own unleashed sense of jouissance as it acts out our secret fantasies and allows us to revel in spectacular images of mass destruction.

*Cloverfield* incorporates many elements of continuity as part of this genre tradition, from its spectacular set pieces of New York City under attack by a giant visual effect to its small group of protagonists on an impossible mission to rescue one of their own from the creature’s onslaught. But the film’s departures from genre conventions tell us a great deal about historical processes, changes in ideology, and the postmodern dissolution of older notions of “the big Other.” For whereas the socio-symbolic order associated with patriarchal traditions was always restored at the end of the 1950s disaster film, *Cloverfield* ends in a vacuum, the image fading to black as the final two protagonists perish in Central Park. If the monster represents a threat to the existing symbolic order, then this film is remarkable for the way in which it deliberately rejects the notion that this order will always be restored.

Similarly, the change of perspective from that of the traditional scientist/hero to a small group of young “neo-yuppies” is significant. For not only does this limit our perspective to that of individual subjects undergoing the experience without the resources to contextualize it or explain it; this also demonstrates how our notions of “the big Other” have shifted from an archaic belief in scientific progress towards the invisible, all-encompassing power of global capitalism. If the traditional disaster film therefore acted out anxieties
relating to the increasingly problematic perceptions of Enlightenment values in the atomic age, then we can see how Cloverfield corresponds uncannily with similar anxieties relating to the status of capitalism in the postmodern risk society:

What happens today, with the “postmodern” risk society, is that there is no “Invisible Hand” whose mechanism, blind as it may be, somehow re-establishes the balance; no Other Scene in which the accounts are properly kept, no fictional Other Place in which, from the perspective of the Last Judgement, our acts will be properly located and accounted for. Not only do we not know what our acts will in fact amount to, there is even no global mechanism regulating our interactions — this is what the properly “postmodern” nonexistence of the big Other means. (Žižek 1999: 412)

This perspective on the structure of the postmodern disaster film, in which disastrous events are presented as kinetic, frightening experiences without explanation or the traditionally redemptive resolution, clearly connects with Žižek’s compelling description of the postmodern nonexistence of the big Other. At the same time, the fact that the protagonists of Cloverfield are presented as near-caricatures of postmodern capitalists illustrates how this shift has relocated responsibility for disaster to the ongoing crisis of late capitalism. In this perpetual present of postmodernity, our lack of historical bearings has reduced all such events to mere commodities: “in a world bereft of historical bearings even the most awful events inevitably offer themselves up as pure spectacles” (Rozario 6-7).

Moreover, the logic of the subject as the very source of the monstrous Thing is compounded by our libidinal investment in the phantasmic images of mass destruction. Indeed, the perverse notion that the attacks of 9/11 were exactly what America had asked for has found resonance in many forms and levels of narrative and theory. In Falling Man, one character argues that the towers of the World Trade Center already represented such fantasies of destruction:

“But that’s why you built the towers, isn’t it? Weren’t the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction? You built a thing like that so you can see it come down. The provocation is obvious.
What other reason could there be to go so high and then to double it, do it twice? It's a fantasy, so why not do it twice? You are saying, Here it is, bring it down.”

(16)

Similarly, Žižek is one among many theorists who have noted the uncanny resemblance between the sublime imagery of the 9/11 attacks and a late capitalist culture fueled by fantasies of self-destruction:

The fact that the September 11 attacks were the stuff of popular fantasies long before they actually took place provides yet another case of the twisted logic of dreams: it is easy to account for the fact that poor people dream about becoming Americans — so what do the well-to-do Americans, immobilized in their well-being dream about? About a global catastrophe that would shatter their lives — why? This is what psychoanalysis is about: to explain why, in the midst of well-being, we are haunted by nightmarish visions of catastrophes. (Žižek 2002: 17)

This ambiguous relationship towards these “nightmarish visions of catastrophes” also informs the narrative logic (or lack thereof) in the first season of *Heroes*, which similarly becomes easier to understand once we locate the source of this (self)destructive drive within the subject. The main narrative, centering on the explosion that will destroy New York City, follows a causal chain of events that is initiated by “future Hiro’s” appearance before Peter Petrelli, instructing him to avoid disaster with the words “Save the Cheerleader, Save the World.”

The curious narrative bootstrapping of “future Hiro” and his initial appearance to Peter Petrelli in episode 5, “Hiros,” is mirrored by “present Hiro” and his trips into the future. As early as the second episode, he accidentally time-travels a month forward in time, where he witnesses the explosion as it occurs, while his extended stay in the future New York of five years after the disaster in episode 20, “Five Years Gone,” makes up a crucial episode in his “hero’s journey”: not until he witnesses for himself the lasting and traumatic repercussions of the explosion is he able to develop the necessary skills and motivation to travel back in time to avoid it. As in *Batman Begins, Superman Returns*, and *Spider-Man, Heroes* thus comes to relate explicitly to the historical events of 9/11 once again as an overwhelmingly traumatic singularity that
eludes symbolization, and from which the only escape comes in the form of historical regression.

This is perhaps the key reason why the superhero genre has proved so popular in post-9/11 popular culture: it has provided images and events that offer viewers the opportunity to “traverse the fantasy” that underlies our fascination with the 9/11 attacks while keeping intact the historical vacuum that contributed to the cultural trauma they caused. As archetypal examples of postmodern commodity culture, the superhero franchises offer endlessly adaptable templates for mass entertainment that mobilize the quintessential antinomies of postmodernity: its worlds are constantly being destroyed, yet never end; its characters have long and complex histories, yet they never age; and an absolute dividing line between good and evil is constantly being established, only to be re-defined as historical circumstances alter popular conceptions of what is most fearsome. Like the other superhero films that have dominated popular culture franchises after 9/11, Heroes brings together the strands of apocalypticism and postmodern culture that have come to define our period of capitalist realism.

While Hiro’s main narrative therefore reflects the contradictory position the 9/11 attacks have taken up historically as an exceptional moment that was experienced outside of any form of socio-political context, Peter Petrelli’s character arc comes to embody the disturbing paradox that the cause for this crisis lies within ourselves. Peter’s power as a superhero is his ability to absorb other characters’ powers, which makes him an obvious symbolic representation of the endlessly adaptable formlessness of capitalism:

[Capitalism] is a system which is no longer governed by any transcendent Law; on the contrary, it dismantles all such codes, only to re-install them on an ad hoc basis. The limits of capitalism are not fixed by fiat, but defined (and re-defined) pragmatically and improvisationally. This makes capitalism very much like the Thing in John Carpenter’s film of the same name: a monstrous, infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolizing and absorbing anything with which it comes into contact. (Fisher 2009: 6)
And while Peter Petrelli’s “infinitely plastic” nature therefore symbolically represents some of the most fundamental aspects of capitalism, it should come as no surprise that the central villain Sylar has exactly identical powers: like Peter, he incorporates the abilities of other characters. The only difference is that Peter adopts others’ powers by simply coming into contact with them, thus embodying the myth of benevolent capitalism as a painless, “natural” development, whereas Sylar takes those powers by force, his violence an uncanny reminder of the monstrous destruction inherent in the capitalist system.

If we therefore identify Peter Petrelli as one of the series’ nominal protagonists and Sylar as his main antagonist, we come to recognize how Heroes’ seemingly contradictory logic in fact perfectly reflects both the central antinomies of postmodern capitalism and the post-9/11 structure of global terrorism. For not only does Heroes repeat the typical ambivalence of the disaster film towards its protagonist; it also suggests that both sides in the War on Terror are part of the same system, and that they use identical methods to achieve opposite goals. In his book Terror and Consent: The Wars for the Twenty-First Century, Philip Bobbitt explains how contemporary market state terrorism is radically different from the older forms of nation state terrorism:

In the twenty-first century, terrorism presents a different face. It is global, not national; it is decentralized and networked in its operations like a mutant nongovernmental organization (NGO) or a multinational corporation; it does not resemble the centralized and hierarchical bureaucracy of a nation state. ... It will operate in the international marketplace of weapons, targets, personnel, information, media influence, and persuasion, not in the national arenas of revolution and policy reform. (84)

Bobbitt’s insightful analysis of the nature of 21st-century terrorism thus emphasizes how forces such as Al Qaeda, which are consistently presented as the polar opposite of Western democratic values, at a deeper level in fact operate according to the same logic that drives the “states of consent” of liberal democratic multiculturalism. As in the narrative logic of the disaster film, the
monstrous Other that threatens and attacks us is thus revealed as emanating from the very same subject that sees it as an absolute challenge to its identity.

While it would go much too far to describe a television series like *Heroes* as an insightful critique of the contradictory logic of late capitalism after 9/11, its narrative patterns and seemingly incoherent causal logic do reflect the ideological frameworks and historical short-circuits of the series’ cultural-historical context. Within the post-9/11 narratives of *Cloverfield* and *Heroes*, we can thus identify what Slavoj Žižek has described as the postmodern nonexistence of the big Other: on the one hand, the lack of strong patriarchal order that allows the characters to frame the ongoing events in a coherent, meaningful context in *Cloverfield*; on the other hand, the desire to find a way to restore the very same patriarchal order, acted out by the multitude of father figures that secretly orchestrate the events in *Heroes*. In both instances, popular culture texts can be viewed as a symptom of the cultural dominant of post-9/11 discourse, and also as a helpful illustration of contemporary critical theory.

**Conclusion**

This fifth and final chapter has dealt with the theme of the apocalypse in theories and narratives of postmodernism. As a popular film genre that has maintained a central position throughout post-World War II cinema, the disaster film has been the quintessential embodiment of the apocalyptic imaginary. The first part of this chapter therefore related this genre to its cultural context of Cold War American culture and emerging discourses of consumerism and postmodernism. By focusing on the dialectical structure that informs the unusual protagonist-antagonist dynamic of the classic monster movie, I have demonstrated how such popular narratives can function as a site that allows audiences to engage in these ambivalent symbolic narratives by negotiating between opposite positions, the fluid movement between the two corresponding with postmodern theories of more fluid, unstable forms of subjectivity.
My analysis of post-9/11 disaster movie *Cloverfield* then illustrated how genre cinema can respond to shifts in the cultural context while also maintaining continuity through its adherence to certain stable conventions and genre traditions. Like the Cold War disaster films and the public anxieties they address, *Cloverfield* and the post-9/11 disaster film incorporates similar hostilities and concerns towards postmodernity, while articulating them from within the safety of seemingly apolitical genre fiction. The film’s obvious connection with 9/11 imagery and discourse however reaffirms not only how the historical events were experienced as a monstrous, unforeseeable singularity, but also how the “Thing” that carries out the attacks emerges from the postmodern subject itself, creating a feedback loop that makes the audience the victim of its own crime. The double nature of the text is meanwhile further compounded by the fact that the films that act out these anxieties are themselves consumer commodities that make the spectator complicit. This circular motion thus constitutes a Möbius strip that maintains the absolute hegemony of capitalist realism with all its obvious contradictions.

Turning to the superhero narrative of the television series *Heroes*, the second section of this chapter first explained how the disaster film and its genre traditions have been successfully appropriated by the “post-genre genre” of the superhero movie, its plot usually presenting a world under the constant threat of annihilation. This tradition structures the first season of *Heroes*, which revolved around a devastating attack on New York that is presented as both inevitable and yet still avoidable. Like *Cloverfield*, the series incorporates numerous visual and thematic references to 9/11, contributing similarly to a form of discourse that frames the attacks from a wider context of apocalypticism and trauma.

But unlike *Cloverfield*, which follows Žižek’s theory of the postmodern nonexistence of the big Other to its unremitting end, *Heroes* continuously attempts to restore this dissolved socio-symbolic order by foregrounding powerful father figures who structure and orchestrate the narrative world the other characters inhabit. Like most post-9/11 superhero films, *Heroes* therefore
not only contains many explicit connections to 9/11 discourse and contemporary ideology, but it also seeks the answers to the contemporary crises of late capitalism in a regressive attitude. By offering fantasies of traveling back in time, it aligns the successful avoidance of the 9/11 trauma with the return of patriarchy and the re-establishment of a coherent symbolic order.

But like the superhero films discussed in previous chapters, the big Other that represents stability and patriarchal order in *Heroes* is related systematically to corporations and other forms of capitalist fantasies. The ubiquity of such organizations, and the way in which they have so obviously superseded older forms of authority like that of the nation state, seems to confirm once again the familiar adage that it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Indeed, the popularity of superhero and disaster films in contemporary culture suggest that we have a strong desire to see the world end repeatedly, as long as the capitalist system that produces these entertainments remains intact to keep producing these spectacular fantasies.