

**Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* as a Representation of the
Collective Trauma of 9/11***

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Abstract

A traumatic event is one that is overwhelming and unexpected; it renders its victim helpless and powerless; it causes fear and shock; and it leads to a sense of loss of control and meaning. Scholars of trauma have emphasized that for an individual to recover from trauma, the traumatic events must be remembered, the trauma story must be told and some form of emotional release must take place. In this way the individual may integrate the trauma into their life narrative, ascribe some meaning to the events and repair some of the damage done to the individual's sense of self and the world. The above statements can equally be true for a nation or collectivity which experiences a catastrophic event such as America did on September 11, 2001. The events of 9/11 constitute one of the most traumatic experiences in the history of the American nation and have had a profound impact on the American national psyche. Thus, for recovery to take place from such a trauma the events must be remembered, assigned meaning and assimilated into the collective psyche. Since feelings of safety and security are disrupted by the collective trauma, faith and confidence in the nation, its people, and its institutions must be reinforced. On a collective level, during this process of repairing the damage done by the traumatic events, many political and social institutions and cultural devices are activated. Within this framework, cinema as a cultural device can play a very significant role in shaping how a nation is to interpret and remember the trauma. Released five years after September 11, Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* was the first major Hollywood film to bring the events of that day onto the silver screen. The film which details the struggle of two New York Port Authority police officers to stay alive under the rubbles of the towers focuses on the heroism, strength, endurance, and resourcefulness evidenced on 9/11. The film also projects a spirit of solidarity and unity in the face of such a trauma. Through a discussion

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of some of the major scenes of *World Trade Center*, this article aims to show how the film is designed to repair and reconstruct the American collective identity and heal the American national psyche in the aftermath of 9/11.

Keywords: Oliver Stone, *World Trade Center*, 9/11, collective trauma, national trauma

Öz

Travmatik olaylar beklenmediktir ve karşısındaki kişiyi savunmasız, güçsüz, ve korku içinde bırakır. Travma uzmanlarına göre travmanın neden olduğu yaraların onarılması için travmanın hatırlanması, hikayesinin anlatılması, ve bir çeşit duygusal boşalmanın sağlanması gerekir. Böylece kişi travmayı özümseyebilir, anlamlandırabilir ve kişinin benliğinde oluşmuş yaraları onarabilir. Psikolojik travma ile ilgili bu bilgiler, 11 Eylül 2001'de Amerikaya yapılan saldırılar ile yaşanan kolektif bir travma içinde geçerli olabilir. 9/11 Amerikan ulusunun tarihinde yaşadığı en travmatik olaylardan biridir. Amerikanın ulusal psikolojisi üzerinde derin bir darbe oluşturmuş, ulusun kendi imajı ile ilgili görüşlerini sarsmıştır. Böyle bir travmanın açtığı yaraların onarılabilmesi için travmayı yaratan olayların hatırlanması ve anlamlandırılması gerekir. Kolektif travma kişilerin güvende olma duygularını zedelediği için bireylerin ülkelerine ve onun ulusal kurumlarına duydukları güven ve inancın yeniden kazandırılması gerekir. Ulusal bir travmanın sebep olduğu yaraların onarılması sürecinde kolektif düzeyde pekçok politik ve sosyal kurumlar, kültürel araçlar harekete geçirilir. Bu bağlamda kültürel bir araç olan sinema travmatik olayların yol açtığı yaraların onarılmasında bireylerin ve ulusun travmayı nasıl yorumlaması ve hatırlaması gerektiği yönünde şekillendirici bir rol oynar. 11 Eylül olaylarını *World Trade Center* adlı filminde Oliver Stone beş yıl sonra beyaz perdeye aktarmış ve bu konudaki ilk önemli Amerikan sinema filmi olma niteliğini kazanmıştır. Adı geçen filmde New York şehrinde görevli iki polis memurunun yıkılan ikiz kulelerin enkazı altında hayatta kalma mücadelesi anlatılır. Bu iki polis memurunun kişiliğinde ve verdikleri savaşta 11 Eylül'de ortaya konan kahramanlık, güçlülük ve dayanıklılık gibi niteliklere odaklanılır. Aynı zamanda böyle bir travma ile ortaya çıkabilecek birlik ve beraberlik duygusunu vurgular. Bu makale *World Trade Center* adlı filmin belli başlı sahnelerini inceleyerek filmin 11 Eylül sonrasında Amerikan kimliğinin onarılması ve yeniden yapılandırılmak amacıyla tasarlanmış olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Oliver Stone, *World Trade Center*, 11 Eylül 2001, kolektif travma, ulusal travma

A collective trauma occurs when a large group of people experience an unexpected event which is accompanied by feelings of fear, powerlessness, and total helplessness. A collective trauma disrupts social life and leads to a loss of sense of coherence and meaning. National traumas threaten or invalidate people's core beliefs and their usual assessments of social reality. This leads people to doubt their future and they feel that the forces at work are incomprehensible and uncontrollable. With the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, America experienced a massive collective trauma. The nation watched in horror and disbelief as the planes hit

the twin towers, as people jumped out of the windows, and as the huge steel structures came crumbling down, killing thousands. This assault on America “was experienced as an incredible violation of the nation” and had a profound impact on the American national psyche (Smelser, 2004, p. 266). With the events of 9/11 one of America’s core assumptions—that it was invulnerable—was shattered. Furthermore, shattering the myth of exceptionalism, the collective trauma of 9/11 altered the American self-image.

After a collective trauma, such as the one experienced on September 11, due to the fact that “[t]he integrity of the social fabric is under attack . . . some form of repair work is needed to promote the continuity of social life” (Neal, 1998, p. 7). Judith Herman states that the three fundamental stages of recovery from a trauma are: “establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivor and their community” (1997, p. 3). Thus, for recovery and healing to take place on a collective level—as is the case on the individual level—the individuals must feel safe, the events must be remembered, spoken, and attributed with some sense of meaning, and unity between members of the collectivity must be reinforced. Moreover, if “helplessness constitutes the essential insult of trauma” then recovery necessitates a reinforcement of a sense of power and efficiency (Herman, 1997, p. 41). Thus in the aftermath of a collective trauma wounds must be healed, effective mourning must be facilitated and the national integrity must be restored.

On a collective or national level the process of remembering and representing a collective trauma is achieved through social, political, and cultural mechanisms. Within this context, film as a cultural device, becomes an ideal medium to represent and recreate a collective trauma and its psychological aftermath. Through film the collective trauma is “imagined, renarrated, and visualized in myths, pictures, and figures” and meaning is attributed to the events (Giesen, 2004, p. 113). As a result of the trauma of 9/11 then it becomes necessary for America as a nation to repair its self-image and reinforce its collective identity. This article aims to show how the film *World Trade Center*, as a representation of the collective trauma of 9/11, is a visual narrative of empowerment designed to heal the wounded American psyche. The film—focusing on themes such as heroism, strength, endurance, transformation, unity, and solidarity—is constructed to repair the American sense of self and restore national integrity.

Released five years after September 11, Oliver Stone’s *World Trade Center* was the first major American film which brought the traumatic events of that day onto the silver screen. The film tells the story of two New York City Port Authority policemen, John McLoughlin (Nicolas Cage) and Will Jimeno (Michael Pena), who stay trapped for twelve hours under twenty feet of rubble after the collapse of the towers. The film also follows the stories of the men’s wives, Allison Jimeno (Maggie Gyllenhaal) and Donna

McLoughlin (Maria Bello), and how they cope with the horrifying possibility that their husbands might be dead. The fifth character the film follows is Dave Karnes (Michael Shannon), an ex-Marine working as an accountant in Connecticut, who goes to New York to help with the rescue operations and ends up locating the two men under the rubbles.¹

The opening sequence of *World Trade Center* shows images of New York City waking up to a new day. It is a calm and serene New York City morning. A man is walking his dog, people are commuting to work, waiting for the train; it is a typical morning, just like any other. John and Will are seen getting ready to go to work and Stone presents distant shots of the statue of liberty, the Manhattan skyline—towers intact—as the sun gradually gets brighter and brighter. As Will drives into the city he is listening and singing along to “Only in America,” a country song whose lyrics reinforce national myths such as the American dream, America as the Promised Land and America as an egalitarian society. While Will drives closer to the city, the towers are shown in the backdrop and suddenly a title appears informing the audience that the date is September 11, 2001. This title serves as a wake up call, reminding the audience that it is not just another typical New York morning and this unsuspecting city radiating under the sun will soon experience the most traumatic event in its history.

The opening sequence marks the beginning of a pattern that the film follows where scenes alternate between light and dark. Throughout the film the visual device of using light and dark becomes a metaphor for life and death. Wavering between moments of hope and despair, it serves to reflect the psychological state of the characters and the nation. Stone states that the film “is really about light”;² thus the film begins with light, and despite the dark in between, it ends with light. This circular pattern not only provides closure, but it also provides a neat and tidy ending which closes the film on a hopeful and optimistic note. Corresponding to the use of light and dark the film follows a structural pattern where between the opening sequence and the final sequence there are a total of nine dark and claustrophobic “hole” scenes which take place under the rubbles; these scenes are broken by interludes showing what is going on in the outside world.

It is also important to note that although some of the other minor characters which will play a part in the story are also shown, it is only John and Will that the viewer follows leaving the house getting in their cars and going to work. This doubling or pairing is significant, for the film continually plays on this symmetry: two towers, two

¹ The title card of the film informs the viewer that the movie is “based on the accounts of the surviving participants.”

² Throughout this article all of the quotations of Oliver Stone are taken from the Director’s Commentary found in the Special Features section of the DVD version of the film.

men. The official poster of the film establishes this visual metaphor very clearly: the two men are shown between the towers as if to be miniature copies of these huge steel structures. Stone explains that his aim was to present “a microcosm” of that day through the story of John and Will. The courage, resilience and endurance on the micro level—these two men—is thus attributed to the macro—the American nation as a whole. The towers will get wounded and collapse; the men—as miniature organic symbols of the towers—will get wounded but survive. Jeffery C. Alexander notes that narratives which relate the stories of collective trauma are more effective when they personalize the trauma and its characters. He explains as follows:

This personalization brings the trauma drama “back home.” Rather than depicting the event on a mass historical scale; rather than focusing on larger-than-life-leaders, mass movements, organizations, crowds, and ideologies; these dramas portrayed the events in terms of small groups, families and friends, parents and children, brothers and sisters. In this way, the victims of trauma became everyman and everywoman, every child and every parent. (2004, p. 231-232)

In other words, by dealing with the collective trauma microcosmically, through the individual stories, Stone is able to capture a sincere and effective account, as opposed to concentrating on it on a massive scale. In doing so, the film allows for identification by rendering the characters and their stories more recognizable. And the strength and survival of these two individuals become synonymous with the strength and survival of America as a nation.

As the film shows the police officers go about their daily routines at their posts, Stone presents different scenes from New York life. Stone comments on these scenes as follows:

There were so many great New York types, and they behave in a certain blunt and ethnic way which I think is beautiful to make the point in a movie . . . there are so many different people, working people of the country, and we do blend and we do get along. And this is sort of always reinforced in the film constantly from Italians to Hispanic, to African-Americans, to Irish, and so forth.

What is important about Stone’s statement is the idea that the film tries to show a picture of a city which “blends” and “gets along.” New York is famous for its ethnic, religious and racial diversity, yet, what is emphasized is the idea that *America makes it work*. Thus, Stone’s words, and the film, become the very stuff of mythmaking.

After the planes hit the towers the police officers are sent to the site to help the evacuation of the buildings. When John asks who will volunteer to go with him into tower one, three men step forward: Will Jimeno, Dom Pezzulo and Antonio Rodrigues. All three of these volunteers are young and John, their higher ranking officer, is firmly positioned as their leader. The formation of this team is analogous to the fighting units

formed by soldiers during combat. The psychology and dynamics of this team will demonstrate on the screen the unifying effect that exposure to danger has on people who fight as a group. It will show how motivation, morale and strength are maintained through the loyalty that the members of the group have for each other and their leader. Once this rescue unit has entered the building they look up to their leader who continuously repeats what will become their motto: "Stay together!" The group cohesion and comradery exhibited by these men is one of the major examples of the theme of unity that reverberates throughout the film.

Then the audience witnesses the collapse sequence which is perhaps one of the most traumatizing sequences in the film. The traumatic event is reenacted with focus on sensory elements: a loud explosion or blast is heard; time slows down; the ground shakes, people start running and screaming, the glass from the shops explode and shatter, and smoke fills the air as pieces of the ceiling crumble down. In the midst of this chaos the men finally run to the elevator shaft on John's command as the building caves in on them, and then there is complete darkness and silence. The cut to black when the men are crushed under the collapsing building presents a feeling of sudden death. Then, in the dark, the camera shows a close-up of John as he opens his eyes or "come[s] back from death" as Stone puts it. The dark hole, which for Stone represents the womb, is where John "is born, again."

The trauma which is recreated not only places the viewer as a "witness" to the characters' extreme distress and confusion and fear, but also causes the audience to vicariously relive the trauma. According to several theories of trauma this reliving which is a necessary process for mastering a trauma, allows the audience to participate in the trauma and through a cathartic reliving to discharge its negative affect.

In the first of the hole scenes under the rubbles the viewer sees that John, Will and Dom are still alive, but that John and Will are stuck under blocks of cement. Dom, who is free, tries desperately to lift the block pinning Will down, but is unable to move it. They can see a light about twenty feet above them and Dom asks John if he should go up and get help. Echoing their motto to stay together, John yells "No! No! You're gonna get him out!" The code of combat dictates that no man is left behind. Dom tries again, but the block won't budge; determined he tells Will that he will get him out. The scenes are full of emotion and desperation. Suddenly another implosion occurs and Dom gets crushed from the waste down and is fatally injured. Dom, taking out his gun—Will assumes he is going to shoot himself—says "I really tried to save you guys . . . I love you Willy." With his last breath he fires the gun into the air in a last effort to save them by signaling their location and dies. John asks Will: "Jimeno can you still see the light?" The answer is yes; there is hope yet. This scene with Dom becomes relevant not only in demonstrating courage and loyalty but also in the way it will cause Will and John to feel guilty for surviving while others have died.

Next, the camera slowly ascends out of the rubbles, up over the ruins up into the sky to a satellite shot of New York City with smoke rising from Ground Zero; the camera continues to ascend into space to show a satellite and from there it moves on to present images of global reactions. Pulling out from the micro, Stone shows the macro: scenes from Europe, Africa, Asia, and The Middle East depict people watching the news or listening to the radio in disbelief and horror. After circling the planet, the camera comes back to America to show a group of cops in Wisconsin watching the news; the camera then focuses on one of the cops: “Bastards!” he declares. The way Stone presents this sequence is significant: after circling the world to present the global reaction, by neatly closing the circle with a verdict he creates the image of a consensus by continuity. The visual images inform the audience that the horror and anger felt towards the events not only belongs to America, but it belongs to the world.

The following scenes introduce the families of the two men who are struggling to stay alive. Allison is in New Jersey, she is pregnant and upon hearing the news she rushes home to be with her family. Donna is in Goshen, New York with other wives. The scenes with Donna parallels those of John, in that, as the women wait for news and cry and panic she is a pillar of strength: soothing and consoling her friends.

Back in the hole, John and Will talk about their physical condition: John explains that they are “bleeding inside,” which is also a metaphor for the bleeding city and nation. Their situation is dire, they are in a lot of pain, but even though they do not see each other they talk to each other to stay awake. Herman states that trauma, as well as inducing fear, may destroy “the victim’s sense of autonomy.” She explains that the “assault on bodily autonomy shames and demoralizes” the victim (1997, p. 77). Thus, in addition to a strategy to stay alive, the men’s assessment of their medical condition and their efforts to stay awake signify the men’s desire to maintain a sense of bodily autonomy that has been disrupted by the trauma. Herman notes that “the psychological effect of active resistance” enables the victim to fight off the feelings of defeat and helplessness caused by the trauma (1997, p. 79).

As with any national crisis the nation turns its eyes to its leader: the next scene depicts a group of people in an office in Connecticut listening to President Bush’s speech: “The resolve of our great nation is being tested. But make no mistake, we will show the world that we will pass this test. God Bless.” The caption under the image of the President reads: “BUSH VOWS TO ‘HUNT DOWN’ THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR ATTACKS.” The camera focuses on Dave Karnes who listens intently, saying yes with his eyes. When the speech is over Karnes walks out of the office, but not before informing his colleagues of the state of the nation: “I don’t know if you guys know it yet, but this country’s at war.” The scene cuts to an image of a church and then to a shot which shows the Bible opened to The Revelation to John. Next Karnes is shown telling his pastor that he has to go down to New York to help rescue victims. Then the image

of a huge cross is presented, which due to the angle from which it is shot is reminiscent of the image—presented earlier in the film—of the towers just before they got hit. The camera comes back to Karnes as he says “I’ve spent my best years with the Marines. God gave me a gift to be able to help people, to defend our country. And I feel him calling me now for this mission.” Shortly after this sequence Karnes will get his hair cut—a ritualistic preparation for war—put on his Marines uniform, and go to Ground Zero.

Commenting on Karnes, Stone says “he immediately goes to the war state, as did Bush, I’m not saying that’s wrong or right. I’m just saying that that’s a reaction, the war state, revenge.” The scenes with Karnes, however, do more than just link him with the war state America plunged into after 9/11: via symbols of Judeo-Christian mythology they present a character that is out on a crusade. The image of The Revelation to John clearly supports this linkage. Written in the apocalyptic tradition, The Revelation to John is a Christian prophecy which tells of the eventual triumph on this earth of good over evil. This presentation of Karnes ties him to the rhetoric used by the Bush administration following the attacks: shortly after 9/11 President Bush had said that they will “rid the world of the evil-doers” and that “This crusade, this war on terrorism is gonna take awhile” (qtd. in Perez-Rivas, 2001). This linkage is further reinforced when Karnes eventually finds John and Will and becomes a Christ figure. Furthermore, the blending of the two figures—that of Karnes and Christ in Will’s vision—via visual imagery later in the film functions to reinforce the representation of Karnes as “the savior.”

Meanwhile the film shows how the men’s families are handling this trauma. Both wives find out that their husbands went into the buildings and that they are missing. The audience witnesses the fear and despair of these women and their families as they try to cope with the possibility that their husbands might be dead. The families watch the news and try to support and calm each other. In between these scenes the camera goes back to the hole and shows the two men trying to stay alive by giving each other hope. As they give each other morale the audience witnesses the two men starting to bond as they tell each other about their wives and kids. While they are talking, Will sees a loose pipe and reaches up to pull it, making a clanking sound which could possibly be heard from the outside. A ray of hope washes over the men and audience with the discovery of this pipe. If the hole represents the womb, as Stone suggests, then the pipe will become the umbilical cord which ties the men to life.

At this point Stone presents the first flashback of the film. John remembers how he and Donna had found out that Donna was pregnant for their fourth child which they had not planned for. As the audience watches John’s flashback, they witness the couple’s initial reaction to the news of the pregnancy. Although they try to embrace the news with joy, the repressed memories indicate John’s initial reservations about having another child. The flashback then serves to reflect how John—in his present state of mind—feels

guilty about his initial hesitation. Given his present predicament he realizes how precious life and creating life is; in this context the flashback becomes almost like his atonement for his past conduct. This scene also marks the beginning of a process of realization and transformation for both John and Donna; being married for twenty years they had begun to take each other for granted. Now, however, they begin to realize that love, family and life are precious gifts that should be cherished at all times.

The next hole scene demonstrates one of the most common and painful aspects of experiencing a trauma: survivor guilt. Will remembers how just before the collapse Antonio had switched places with him to push the cart with the equipment to help him. He says that if he had not let Antonio push the cart for him, Antonio would still be alive. Will also says that he made Dom stay to try to save him, and that if Dom had tried to get out he might still have been alive. The following exchange takes place between the two men:

John: "I took them in. For what? What good did we do?"

Will: "We wanted to go in. Kassimatis said you were the best. . . . Dom, Antonio and Chris nothing was going to stop them from trying to help. We figured we might as well follow the best guy in."

John: "The best?"

Will: "They did what they had to do, Sarge. They couldn't have lived themselves if they hadn't gone in. That's who they were."

John: "Okay. . . . Thank you, Will."

This scene depicting the men suffering from survivor guilt functions on several different levels in relation to trauma. Herman explains one of the levels as follows:

Feelings of guilt are especially severe when the survivor has been a witness to the suffering or death of other people. To be spared oneself, in the knowledge that others have met a worse fate, creates a severe burden of conscience. Survivors of disaster and war are haunted by images of the dying whom they could not rescue. They feel guilty for not risking their lives to save others, or for failing to fulfill the request of a dying person. In combat, witnessing the death of a buddy places the soldier at particularly high risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder. (1997, p. 54)

Thus, on this initial level, the feelings of guilt result from the fact that Will and John feel guilty for having survived while their "comrades" have died. Furthermore, this feeling of guilt is intensified by their holding themselves personally responsible for the death of certain individuals. By saying that the men were only following orders and that he took them in, John as the leader of the team, assumes responsibility for the death of his men. Another level of survivor guilt that can be observed here is caused by the feeling of incompetence. Herman explains this level of survivor guilt as follows:

Unsatisfactory resolution of the normal developmental conflicts over initiative and competence leaves the person prone to feelings of guilt and inferiority. Traumatic events, by definition, thwart initiative and overwhelm individual competence. No matter how brave and resourceful the victim may have been, her actions were insufficient to ward off disaster. In the aftermath of traumatic events, as survivors review and judge their own conduct, feelings of guilt and inferiority are practically universal. (1997, p. 53)

The feeling of guilt and incompetence can be clearly understood from John's asking "What good did we do?" Feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt are further observed in John's questioning his capabilities. Herman explains that soldiers who experience the trauma of war "need to know whether their actions are viewed as heroic or dishonorable, brave or cowardly, necessary and purposeful or meaningless" (1997, p. 70-72). Similarly, John's words express his disappointment and doubt about their efficiency and his need to attribute meaning to their actions. When viewed within the context of the film they serve to remind the heroic stature of these men and to induce a reaction in the audience: these men did not die in vain. Thus, this scene also functions to honor those who had the courage to go in and those who died while trying to save others. Hence the answer to the question "What good did we do?" needs no answering for the viewer.

This scene is followed by yet another implosion and as the ground shakes debris falls into the hole through the opening making it pitch black. After the immediate threat to life is over Will calls out to John and John answers: "Yeah, Will. I'm here. I'm still here." According to Stone's approach of telling the story "microcosmically," the strength and resilience displayed repeatedly by these two men are meant to apply equally to America as a nation. Thus, these words imply that America, despite the attacks of that day, is still alive and standing.

Paralleling John's scenes of awakening and realization the film also shows Donna experiencing a flashback and dream sequence. In one example Donna is seen at home in John's workshop where she has a flashback in which she sees John giving their son tips on carpeting. This flashback creates a symmetry in the overall structure of the film and serves to inform the viewer that this traumatic experience which is transforming John is also transforming Donna. Just as in John's flashback and dream sequence, the message is clear: don't take love and life for granted.

The next scene presents the two men in the hole talking about their wives. As the men share details about their lives, the audience finds out that John was building Donna a new kitchen and that he had not yet finished making the cabinets. He says that Donna is "pissed" and that he has to get back home to finish building the kitchen. This scene exemplifies a coping strategy frequently observed in victims of prolonged trauma: identifying a specific goal for motivation. Next, Will tells John that he has a four year

old daughter and that his wife is five months pregnant with a baby girl. There is no need for him to state that he too has to get out. The scene then fades to Will's flashback which shows Will and Allison in bed talking about what to name their new baby. The two playfully laugh, and Will strokes Allison's belly as the sun shines on the couple. Immediately following this scene, Will is seen, back in the hole, taking out a scrap of paper and writing "I love you" on it. This whole sequence reinforces the theme of love and marriage. The focus on the baby, on new life, serves as a ray of hope and as a symbol of innocence. Furthermore, the audience witnesses the two men sharing and bonding as they struggle together to stay alive. Herman states that "A study of prisoner relationships in [Nazi death] camps found that the overwhelming majority of survivors became part of a 'stable pair,' a loyal buddy relationship of mutual sharing and protection, leading to the conclusion that the pair, rather than the individual, was the 'basic unit of survival'" (1997, p. 91-92). This pair bonding between John and Will also symbolizes on a micro level the unifying effect that a traumatic experience can have on a macro level.

As the hours pass and the families start to lose hope, the audience sees that Will's spirit is waning. He tells John that he does not think that he will make it to the morning. John trying to keep Will alive says "You die. I'm gonna die." These words indicate that—beyond traumatic bonding—the lives of these two men literally depend upon each other. John seems to be saying "United we stand, divided we fall" which indicates how unity is empowering and necessary in the face of danger. But as their spirits diminish the two men close their eyes in what seems to be a state of surrender. Then through the darkness a silhouette of a luminous figure appears; as the figure approaches, the camera focuses to reveal an image of Jesus Christ holding out a bottle of water. In this vision, which belongs to Will, the Sacred Heart of Christ which is mostly used in the Roman Catholic Church is also presented. This presentation of Christ functions to remind the audience that, like Will, many of the firemen and policemen who were on the scene that day were Catholics.

Meanwhile the audience watches as Karnes—together with another Marine—searches through the ruins for any possible survivors. As they walk through the rubbles calling out for survivors the camera locks onto the light of Karnes's flashlight and this light turns back into the luminous light of Will's Christ vision. The image of Christ is seen again and fades as Will wakes up with a gasp, as if resurrected from the dead. He calls out to John and says "The most amazing thing happened. I saw Jesus. . . . He is telling us to come home." The vision has "re-inspired" Will and he tries to keep John awake. The men continue to talk and keep each other alive. As Will keeps pulling at the pipe and making noise Karnes hears them and his flashlight beams through the rubbles down into the hole. The florescent tone of the flashlight changes to resemble the luminous yellow of the Will's Christ vision. "Gotcha" Karnes yells. When Will says "Don't leave us," Karnes answers: "We're not leaving you, buddy. We're Marines. You

are our mission.” The scene is highly cathartic and the dramatic use of light functions to connect Karnes to the image of Jesus Will saw in his vision.

When the families get news of the men, Allison’s father wakes his daughter up to give her the good news by saying “Allison he’s alive. They couldn’t kill him. They couldn’t kill him. . . He’s the toughest son of a gun I know. He’s made of rocks, is he not?” Again, these words not only reinforce the strength and perseverance shown by John and Will, but attribute these qualities to the American nation.

The film, however, does not end with the two men being discovered. The tension continues, for getting them out is an extremely difficult and dangerous process and it requires the collective effort of dozens of men and equipment. Men from the Emergency Service Unit and the Fire Department arrive, and once again the messages are clear: No man is dispensable and only when united can we accomplish this rescue.

Pulling Will out from under the ruins proves easier than getting John out, and as John—on the verge of death—waits to be rescued he hallucinates that Donna is there in the hole with him. The image of Donna tells John that she and the kids need him and that he has to come back. Paralleling Will’s vision, John’s hallucination also marks a transformational spiritual journey. The scene with Donna functions to give hope and inspiration, it also gives the message that although marriage, love, relationships and life are difficult, you have to work at it.

The following scene shows Donna, exhausted and anxious, waiting for John at the hospital. She meets an African-American woman who tells her that she is waiting for her son who was an elevator operator in the south tower. Scared and obviously in a lot of pain she tells Donna that the last time she saw her son she had yelled at him, and that all she wants to do now is to hold him. The fear of losing her son mixed with her feelings of regret overwhelms her as she begins to cry. Donna empathizing with the woman says “I know,” and the two embrace each other and cry. This highly emotional scene serves as a cathartic release not only for the characters but also for the audience. This scene depicting Donna reaching out to someone beyond her family, to a total stranger, reinforces the film’s general theme of unity. This unity knows no class divisions or racial boundaries; it presents the image of people united by a common suffering and grief. This scene parallels the bonding between John and Will and the images of unity, solidarity and support that were presented throughout the movie. As Neal suggests, “a national trauma is shared collectively and frequently has a cohesive effect as individuals gather in small and intimate groups to reflect on the tragedy and its consequences. Personal feelings of sadness, fear, and anger are confirmed as appropriate when similar emotions are expressed by others” (1998, p. 4). Again the film—focusing on the micro which represents the macro—tells the viewer that the trauma of 9/11 has the power to unite.

The audience then sees John being lifted up out of the hole. The opening of the rubble is cut into a perfect rectangle and as the camera rises out of the darkness into the light the point of view shots make the audience feel as if he is rising from the grave. With this visual effect John becomes Lazarus, coming back from the dead. As the light hits his face, John is reborn. Not only does he get second chance at life, but now that he is transformed by this traumatic experience he will live it more fully.

Once John is rescued he is passed along from hand to hand on a stretcher along a line of what seems like hundreds of rescuers from different departments. John thanks as many as he can, as they clap or say “God bless you, John,” “Welcome home,” and “Good job.” The sequence also presents the rescue scene from a distance allowing the audience to see just how collective this endeavor was. This scene reflects what Kai Erikson calls a state of “good feeling” which is said to be observed in the immediate aftermath of several collective traumas. Erikson comments on the “state of euphoria” following collective traumas as follows:

The energy with which rescuers work and the warmth with which neighbors respond act to reassure victims that there is still life among the wreckage, and they react with an outpouring of communal feeling, an urgent need to make contact with and even touch others by way of renewing old pledges of fellowship. They are celebrating the recovery of the community they momentarily thought dead, in a way, they are celebrating their own rebirth. (1995, p. 189)

The literature on collective traumas gives different names to societies who experience this state of “good feeling”; they may describe the city as a “city of comrades,” a “democracy of distress,” or an “altruistic community.” All of these descriptions convey the survivor’s state of mind: “as if survivors, digging out from the masses of debris, discover that the communal body is not only intact but mobilizing its remaining resources to dress the wound on its flank” (Erikson, 1995, p. 189). Thus, with this scene the viewer, through identification, leaves the traumatic experience they witnessed and relived at ground zero, paralleling the positive psychological state of those presented on the screen.

Furthermore, a collective trauma can allow for the coming together of people and institutions. Langewiesche states that in the aftermath of 9/11 the people’s “reaction was largely spontaneous, and it cut across the city’s class lines as New Yorkers of all backgrounds tried to respond” (2002, p. 6). Within this context it is important that the film presents the firemen, policemen and construction workers who rushed to rescue victims, for the most significant aspects of their efforts were cooperation and the breaking down of barriers. These scenes also work to reinforce characteristics that are thought to be typically American: an egalitarian society infused with a spirit of volunteerism and pragmatism. Langewiesche explains that with the urgency of the

situation and due to the fact that the problems that needed solving were mostly unprecedented “[ac]tion and invention were required on every level.” Thus, “a vital new culture” emerged at the Trade Center site, one in which “[t]raditional hierarchies broke down” (2002, p. 10). Langewiesche states that those “who gained the greatest influence were people without previous rank who discovered balance and ability within themselves, and who in turn were discovered by others. The unexpected ones were front-line firemen and construction workers, young engineers, and obscure city employees” (2002, p. 10-11).

About this scene, Stone says the shots depicted “a line of 50, 60, 70 uniforms, different uniforms, from out of state, county, all kinds of New York uniforms, FBI. [A] working-class view of Ground Zero level combat. It was a true patch quilt of all agencies combined. A sort of a strong counterpoint to the bureaucracy that blinds us sometimes.” Antonious C.G.M. Robben and Marcel M. Suarez-Orozco argue that due to a collective trauma trust in “the social institutions and cultural practices that structure experience and give meaning to human lives” must be reconstructed for healing to take place (qtd. in Kaplan, 2005, p. 67-68). Thus, in line with Stone’s comments and the statement presented above, this scene, by showing the collective effort of different institutions working in a spirit of comradeship, functions not only to enhance a sense of unity but also to restore the American audience’s faith in the nation’s institutions.

If the opening sequence of the film showed images of New York “before” the attacks, the next scenes present the “after.” The viewer sees images from different parts of the city mirroring those of the opening, only now everything has changed. There is a distant shot of Manhattan with smoke coming from Ground Zero; the wound is still bleeding. The city has been altered; some of the same places shown in the opening sequence are shown, only this time the subway train is empty, the streets are covered with dust, paper and debris. Nevertheless, Stone also presents images of bulldozers clearing away rubble and a street-cleaning truck washing the streets. Langewiesche depicts the state of New York City after the attacks as follows:

There was a sadness to the site, to be sure, and anger, but there was none of the emptiness—the ghostly quality of abandonment—that lurks in the aftermath of battle. In fact, quite the opposite quality materialized here: within hours of the collapse, as the rescuers rushed in and resources were marshaled, the disaster was smothered in an exuberant and distinctly American embrace. Despite the apocalyptic nature of the scene, the response was unhesitant and almost childishly optimistic: it was simply understood that you would find survivors, and then that you would find the dead, and that this would help their families to get on with their lives, and that your resources were unlimited, and that you would work night and day to clean up the mess, and that this would allow the world’s greatest city to rebuild quickly, and maybe even make itself into something better than before. (2002, p. 8)

The process that took place at the World Trade Center site after 9/11 was basically: rescue, recovery, clearing, sorting, removing, rebuilding and reconstructing. As the nation's leader had announced after the attacks: "People will be amazed at how quickly we rebuild New York. How quickly people come together to really wipe away the rubble and show the world that we're still the strongest nation in the world" (qtd. in Perez-Rivas, 2001). These words and the images presented in the film serve to say: Yes, America has taken a blow, but it is a new day, and even though the towers may not be, America is still standing; it will clean up, rebuild and heal its wounds.

The scenes showing the nation's effort of "physical" restoration immediately after the attacks are also a form of repairing and "rebuilding" the collective American identity. If the American self-image and frontier mentality is one of progress, a vertical and horizontal movement of upward and onward development—such as expressed in the Manhattan skyline—the destruction of the towers and the leveling of this vision to a "ground zero" requires immediate recuperation. Indeed, it is not surprising that immediately after 9/11 there was a rush to clear the wreckage and return to life as "normal" and restore the American vision. Furthermore, the task of taming and "civilizing" this new wilderness of ruins at Ground Zero—which includes the rescue efforts—allows for the resurfacing of characteristics needed for survival in the frontier: pragmatism, initiative, ingenuity, self reliance and a general egalitarian working environment. Thus, in the final analysis, the physical restoration depicted in these scenes parallels the film's effort to restore the collective identity and enhance the nation's sense of strength and hope for the future.

Before the final sequence Stone presents a shot of Will and John at the hospital: the two men are seen in a hospital room, their beds are placed side by side, and their body and hands are positioned identically. The visual symmetry in this shot echoes the use of doubling throughout the film: the two men, like the twin towers, were hurt, but now they are alive; they have suffered but they have survived. Consequently, this shot functions to reinforce the idea that America will prevail.

This image fades and a title card appears informing the audience that it is "Two Years Later." The closing sequence begins with a wide shot of an open field with the Washington Bridge in the background. The camera is pointed toward a large crowd of people looking in the direction of the camera. The sun is shining bright and a banner over the crowd reads: "Welcome to the McLoughlin — Jimeno Thank You Bar. B. Q." Between the two names there is an American flag. On each side of the banner there is a column of yellow and white balloons all the way to the ground. The shot is rich with symbols: the two columns of balloons are symbols of the two men and by association the two towers. The bright and cheerful colors of the balloons contrast with the dark and gloomy scenes the audience has witnessed. The positioning of the American flag between the names of the two men translates as: Thank you John, America, and Will.

The bridge in the backdrop serves as an overarching symbol of connection: uniting these people under one banner, one flag. This scene is a visual expression of the fact that, in Erikson's words, "[i]t is the *community* that offers a cushion for pain, the *community* that offers a context for intimacy, the *community* that serves as the repository for binding traditions" (1995, p. 188).

Next, John and Will enter the scene and walk among the crowd of people who clap and smile as the sun shines on their faces. As John and Will hug, kiss, and shake hands with people a voice-over of John is heard: "9/11 showed us what human beings are capable of. The evil, yeah, sure. But it also brought out a goodness we forgot could exist. People taking care of each other for no other reason than it was the right thing to do. It's important for us to talk about that good, to remember." In this manner, the positive effects of the traumatic events are neatly summarized. These events have had a unifying effect on the people and they have brought out the courage and strength they never knew they had. Not only has the film demonstrated the importance of love and communality, but it has also functioned as an act of commemoration.

The final image that the audience sees on the screen is that of Will hugging his daughter Olivia who is laughing. Both the final sequence of ritualistic celebration and the final shot of Will and his daughter serve to provide closure and induce hope and optimism. As the film ends the screen fades out into light; completing the circle: the film had begun with the "sun coming up on New York City"—to quote from the lyrics of "Only in America"—and it ends with a sunny day. In between the audience witnessed chaos and suffering, but now order is restored and the future looks bright.

As a result, five years after the attacks *World Trade Center's* representation and recreation of the trauma of 9/11 presents a narrative of empowerment. The film, by depicting two men's heroic struggle for survival, their families' strength, and images of solidarity, unity, and collective resourcefulness presents a trauma that was faced with courage and resilience. These images work to heal the wounds inflicted on the American national psyche and to restore the American self-image and collective identity which was altered by the traumatic events of September 11.

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