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CHAPTER 12

Post-9/11 New York on Screen: Mourning, Surveillance, and the Arab Other in Tom McCarthy's *The Visitor*

Elizabeth Toohey

INVOKING A DIFFERENT HOLLYWOOD

When discussing 9/11, movies were invoked from the start by journalists and cultural critics alike, who referred to the attack on the World Trade Center as a spectacle "straight out of Hollywood" (Hedges). As Slavoj Žižek famously noted, "[f]or 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, the framing of the shot itself [was] reminiscent of spectacular shots in catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others" (11). Much was written, too, about action and disaster films that anticipated the Towers' collapse,¹ whether inspiring or simply intertwined with the visual nature of the attacks. The question of how Hollywood films would attempt to capture that day and its aftermath seemed intensified by the cinematic quality of the day's events. Ironically, *World Trade Center* and *United 93*, both films that built their

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stories around a celebration of 9/11 heroes, were criticized by Kristiaan Versluys as having the “generic quality” of any disaster movie (1), echoing *New York Times* writer Alessandra Stanley’s observation that *World Trade Center* had focused on a rescue effort that “could almost as easily have been about trapped West Virginia miners or mountain climbers buried under an avalanche” (qtd. in Faludi 3 and Versluys 195). By contrast, action films like *The Bourne Identity* (2002) and its sequels were more popular among viewers and critics, and far more critical in their portrayal of the American government as a corrupt power that uses “national security” to justify repressive and illegal acts (Dodds 23). The government-trained assassins in the Bourne trilogy, with their lack of personal agency and unwavering loyalty to a violent mission, bore a strong resemblance to the rising wave of zombie movies, another popular post-9/11 trend that explored the problem of grotesque and mindless destruction. Reflecting anxieties about contagion—the anthrax scare, the spread of fundamentalist Islam, urban lawlessness—some zombie films even incorporated 9/11 explicitly into their narratives, like Showtime’s *Homecoming* (2005), in which “Americans killed in Iraq rise from their flag-draped coffins and slaughter their way to the polling booths so they can vote out a war-mongering president” (Bishop 19).

What, then, does Thomas McCarthy’s *The Visitor*, a deliberately slow film devoid of special effects or the supernatural, have in common with these other products of post-9/11 Hollywood? When it was released in 2008, *The Visitor* garnered praise mainly for its star, Richard Jenkins, a successful character actor who was for the first time playing a leading man. Jenkins was lauded for his performance as the emotionally stunted economics professor Walter Vale, and the film was seen as the story of his journey from alienation to human connection and renewal.

What was largely overlooked was the film’s portrayal of post-9/11 New York with its attendant political tensions as a haunted urban space. Hollywood often paints New York as a capital of finance or culture that functions as a glamorous character itself, yet a number of filmmakers in the wake of 9/11 examined the city through a more political lens. Whereas the Bourne trilogy shows New York metonymically, as part and parcel of a repressive, corrupt State, *The Visitor* shows the city as existing in a state of tension with the national, political culture in the aftermath of 9/11.

McCarthy’s cinematography paints a picture of a city still recovering from the trauma of the Towers’ collapse and overshadowed by the

militaristic response of the State. Visual motifs—flags, the void above Ground Zero, security cameras, and glass barriers—capture the aesthetics of post-9/11 America, a set of visual preoccupations that appear increasingly in early twenty-first-century film and fiction. Camera angles, lighting, and the physical placement of his actors in *The Visitor* make still more provocative statements on how the political repercussions of 9/11 have infiltrated Americans’ lives.

The Visitor represents the ongoing effects of 9/11 through its storyline as well by depicting racial profiling and state surveillance, and exploring the process of mourning and the nature and boundaries of urban communities. Although the film centers on a white middle-class man (as is still Hollywood’s default), McCarthy’s portrayal of Muslim immigrants as relatable and sympathetic overturns stereotypes of the Arab as (male) terrorist or (female) victim, bringing to the screen more varied and fully realized representations of Muslim men and women. The eventual displacement of these characters signals a threat to a New York that is integrated, multinational, and multicultural. By contrast, the film’s protagonist, Walter Vale, is a professor of economics who studies capital but knows little of the human faces behind it. The trajectories of each of the major characters suggest that the greatest threat to post-9/11 America is not terrorism, but American exceptionalism, which expels certain bodies because they lack cultural and political capital, treating them as “visitors” in a country where they are made to feel they will never belong.

Rather than viewing *The Visitor* as another “white savior film”, or a film “in which the main character has been traumatized and made numb to life but is resurrected through a relationship or cause” (Vineberg 42), it should be considered as part of the genre of 9/11 films and fiction. In McCarthy’s motifs of mourning and surveillance, and in his portrayal of Arab and Muslim characters, we can see how his film fits into the landscape of 9/11 literature, as well as how it carves out new territory in this burgeoning genre. *The Visitor*, then, reflects a different kind of Hollywood as it expresses the affect of anxiety, mourning, and political ambivalence in the decade following 9/11. In the contrast between Walter, an economics professor who is financially comfortable but spiritually dead, and the three other major characters—Tarek, Zainab, and Mouna—who the State treats as valueless and even dangerous because of their ethnicity and religion, *The Visitor* offers a critique of Western capitalism itself.

MOURNING WORK

In broad strokes, *The Visitor* tells the story of Walter Vale's journey from the Connecticut suburbs to Manhattan, where he encounters two strangers—Tarek, a musician, and his girlfriend Zainab, an artist—living illegally in his West Village apartment. Walter allows the two to stay in his spare bedroom for a few days while they look for a new place to stay, and during this period, Tarek begins a friendship with Walter, though Zainab maintains a more wary distance. When Tarek is arrested in the subway for allegedly jumping a turnstile, the police discover that he is an illegal immigrant and hold him in a detention center. Soon after, his mother Mouna arrives to help, and we learn that Tarek's father was imprisoned in Syria for something he wrote, the motivation for Mouna and Tarek's emigration after his death. Zainab, also in the USA illegally, moves out of Walter's apartment and disappears. The film ends with Tarek's deportation to Syria, his mother Mouna boarding a plane to follow him, and Walter's frustration venting itself in playing Tarek's drum on a subway platform.

The film's opening establishing shot shows Walter at the window waiting for a piano teacher—the first of many “visitors” who appear in the film. Walter is recently widowed and his wife was a pianist. The piano embodies his grief—outsized, solitary, and impossible to master—reflected, too, in the non-diegetic music that plays in a minor key throughout the opening scenes. Haunted by his loss, Walter manages his grief by withdrawing from the world and self-medicating with wine. That he has withdrawn from work becomes clear through prickly interactions with students and colleagues, his recycling of old syllabi (which he revises by whiting out the date), and his eating alone in the campus dining room. When a neighbor who hasn't seen Walter in years asks after his wife, Walter relays the information of her death and then shuts down the conversation. Walter was likely a man of few words before, but his wife's death has rendered him incapable of communicating with others at all.

When Walter's department chair urges him to present a paper at a conference at New York University for a colleague who co-authored it, Walter reluctantly complies. Walter's disengagement communicates his mourning, but other filmic elements reinforce it as well. Though September 11 is never mentioned directly, it pervades the landscape of the city emotionally and politically in ways that reflect the larger iconography of 9/11 in literature and the media. The changing foliage of Washington Square around NYU evokes melancholy and mortality. The shots of the city in the warm days of early fall also call up the day of 9/11 itself for New York audiences, whom McCarthy has explained he had in mind when he made this “backdoor

look at New York” (“Richard Jenkins/Tom McCarthy Interview”). It is as though the mourning felt after 9/11 is merged with and addressed obliquely through Walter's personal grief. We see the city itself through this lens.

The film also makes visual references to the space where the Towers used to be, first subtly, then more explicitly. When Walter arrives at his long empty apartment, he unexpectedly encounters the young couple, Tarek and Zainab, who had rented his apartment, they thought, legitimately. After the two realize their mistake and leave, Walter watches them from his window as they linger on the corner. On the windowsill sits a snapshot of the couple in front of the Manhattan skyline, more or less where the Towers would be. When Walter descends to the street to return the picture, he overhears their failed attempts to find somewhere to stay and awkwardly invites them to use his guest room for a few days until they find another rental—and they become the next visitors in the film. The emptiness left by the Towers appears more vividly later in the film when Zainab invites Tarek's mother, Mouna, and Walter to take a ride on the Staten Island ferry, something she and Tarek loved to do. There, she points out the void in the skyline (Fig. 12.1).

Fig. 12.1 The void in the skyline

This image of a blank blue sky has become a motif in 9/11 literature, as though to counter the image of the Towers' collapse that looped for so many months on TV and showed the "real" disappearing into simulacrum, as Jean Baudrillard and Slavoj Žižek suggest ("The Spirit of Terrorism"). The blank sky appears as a physical and psychological space defined by an absence in the brilliant blues that became a popular design choice for the covers of 9/11 novels like *Falling Man* and *Netherland*, and cultural critiques like *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* by Kristiaan Versluys or *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* by Susan Faludi. This image of an eerily vast blue sky does double-duty as a reference to the cloudless weather that Tuesday and a signifier for where the Towers no longer are, an absence that is also a presence. As E. Ann Kaplan explains,

Their visual absence was traumatic: That is, it was impossible to comprehend that they were gone—that I no longer found the Towers in their place. Psychoanalytically, this gap or lack can be read in many ways—as Lacan's *petit objet 'a,'* castration (the Towers were huge, phallic), the infant's loss of the mother, a loss standing in for death, abandonment, and abjection. But while these underlying infantile emotions may have been unconsciously evoked, the gap was phenomenological as well as symbolic. (12)

It is significant, then, that Zainab, a recent immigrant (and a non-white one) is the one who points out this physical space. That she and Tarek are placed just in front of the gap in their photo, which was taken from the ferry, can be read as an image establishing the two as "real" New Yorkers or Americans, their presence filling, perhaps even compensating for, the absence.

The ghost of 9/11 haunts New York in more material ways as well, mainly through a proliferation of patriotic symbols: a "support the troops" sign on an overpass, murals of the Towers on governmental buildings, or flags that appear everywhere from the airport to the shawarma stand where Tarek buys Walter lunch. There is a rush to fill the emptiness left by the Towers, typically with visual images of them, as Kaplan notes, but also with other patriotic symbols, as well (13). McCarthy's filmic representation of the cityscape in the early years of the millennium captures this compulsion as Kaplan describes it:

A Radio Shack store juxtaposed three carefully arranged flags in the window on one side with an image of lovers (selling a cell phone) on the other. But

sitting in the doorway was a homeless man covered by an umbrella and cardboard boxes, while trash sat on the pavement awaiting pick up. That is, response to 9/11 is added onto normal New York life. A flag perched high up on the scaffolding of New York University's new Student Union was perhaps most eye-catching of all. (9)

How to read the flag-flying, however, was open to debate. For Kaplan, "flags were a way to indicate empathy for those who had lost relatives and friends, and a shared trauma about the shock to the United States" (9). Yet the patriotic imagery that sprung up took on a darker tenor for many other New Yorkers, and it is this side of the city that *The Visitor* captures through its linkage of flag murals and decals with Tarek's eventual arrest and expulsion.

However inconspicuous or integrated they may have initially seemed, displays of flags came to suggest a creeping xenophobia and compulsory patriotism, as much as they did empathy or unity. This residue of the attacks pointed to unhealed grief—a scar represented by a void and masked by patriotic symbols which evoked the USA's military aggression (and thus, its alienation of much of the world) and undercut the community it was purported to protect. Referring to this gap between the USA as a military force and as a set of actual communities, the French writer and art theoretician Luc Lang makes "a sharp distinction between what he refers to as 'l'empire You Esse Eie'", the French phonetic spelling of USA, "and on the other hand, the true America, which consists of, among others, those who died on September 11, to whose urgent and ardent voices we are tied by virtue of our common humanity" (qtd. in Versluys 7). This division is one McCarthy's film reflects through the characters of Tarek and Zainab, who constitute the actual diverse communities of New York, in contrast to the State, represented through its officials and bureaucracies. Kaplan voices a similar experience of this split between the city and the State, noting that the media presented "a construction of a consensus in a Eurocentric and largely masculine form", whereas,

On the streets, by contrast, I experienced the multiple, spontaneous activities from multiple perspectives, genders, race, and religions or nonreligions. Things were not shaped for a specific effect, nor apparently controlled by one entity. ...While a disciplining and homogenizing of United States response was at work through the media, on the streets something fluid, personal and varied was taking place. (13–15)

There exists a tension, then, between the ideology imposed from above—an ideology that advocated for a violent response and “heightened security”—and the messier mix of connection and expression (of grief, of an empathic impulse) generated more organically in the city itself.

Both Kaplan and the philosopher Judith Butler have pointed to Freud’s theories on unhealthy mourning as a way to understand the larger cultural and political reactions to 9/11, and *The Visitor* captures this troubling response in both its depiction of the city and through Walter’s own mourning of his wife. Freud characterized the early stages of mourning as a turning away from “the outside world—in so far as it does not recall the dead one” (165). The work of mourning 9/11 has in many ways taken this form of turning inward, whether in the narratives constructed in *The New York Times*’ “Portraits of Grief”, as analyzed by Nancy K. Miller, or the forceful turning away from vulnerability and toward violence described by Butler. There have been few models of mourning 9/11 as a turning outward to explore a “sense of political community of a complex order”, an opportunity that Butler suggests is furnished by this grief. Instead, what prevailed was an attempt to cover over vulnerability and restore an illusory sense of power and order through militarism (Butler 22, 29), what Kaplan describes as “a stiff, rigid, controlling and increasingly vengeful response—a response I only gradually understood as actually about humiliation” (15).

Even as the collective trauma of 9/11 haunts the film’s cityscape through the empty sky and the iconography of signs, murals, and flags, the narrative simultaneously carves out a different model of mourning through Walter’s journey from unhealthy mourning (mirroring that of the USA) to something closer to Freud’s concept of successful mourning. Walter’s fixation on the piano, which he retains while turning away from his colleagues and students, reflects the early stage of mourning. His intense unrealistic desire to learn the piano, to the exclusion of any normal social interaction or engagement with his work, represents his turning away from the outside world. The model of effective mourning work is suggested by Walter’s later movement from isolation to engagement, reflecting Freud’s theories on the need to move from a lost attachment to a new one—for Walter, from his wife to Tarek and Mouna.

Significantly, the alternative means of mourning 9/11 that *The Visitor* suggests is predicated on the rejection of violence. Walter’s initial meeting with Tarek threatens to culminate in a fight when the two encounter each

other unexpectedly in the apartment each believes is his own. When the men meet in the dark, narrow hallway outside the bathroom where Zainab is bathing, Tarek nearly chokes Walter, believing him to be an intruder and a threat to Zainab. This threat of violence between a white American and an Arab man resonates politically, coming in the midst of two wars between the USA and Arab nations. Defusing this violence, and its transformation into connection and cohabitation, may be a bit utopian,² but it is important in symbolically marking a different path out of mourning and a cinematic depiction of an Arab man who is, frankly, not a violent terrorist. Perhaps the interactions to come between Tarek and Walter capture something of a sense of community and connection that Kaplan describes. This side of the city is portrayed in stark contrast to the State—the aggressively bureaucratic structures that dominate the characters throughout the second half of the film.

THE ARAB OTHER

Like most Hollywood films, *The Visitor* is conventional in centering its story on an affluent white middle-aged man, much like many prominent 9/11 novels do—for instance Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*, and Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland*. More troubling is the question of whether *The Visitor* is a “white savior film”, a problem I touched on in the introduction to this essay. Many writers have identified this trope as a pervasive one in Western culture—Edward Said among the most prominent³—but Matthew Hughey’s *The White Savior Film* offers the clearest definition and most comprehensive analysis of these films’ features. The white savior film, then, is “the genre in which a white messianic character saves a lower- or working-class, usually urban or isolated, nonwhite character from a sad fate” (Hughey 1), one prominent recent example being *The Blind Side*, starring Sandra Bullock.

The Visitor has some of these trappings—notably the interracial friendship between men of different classes—but ultimately it resists this category. Walter does not, after all, save Tarek or by extension his mother Mouna, much as he tries; and Zainab ultimately is the one who saves herself by eschewing Walter’s “help” and disappearing. In fact, it is Walter’s inability to save Tarek that creates a critique of the greater political context of post-9/11 America—the very quality conspicuously absent from most white savior films. As Hughey points out, referring to a quintessential

white savior film, *Dances With Wolves*, “multicultural ideals and on-screen diversity seem to automatically or easily supplant the racial and imperialist prejudices of the setting and require little to no explanation or critique” (89). By contrast, the connection Tarek and Walter make in *The Visitor* (whether audiences find it believable or hokey) comes apart because of the “racial and imperialist prejudices of the setting”—here post-9/11 New York instead of the post-Civil War frontier.

Significantly, the academic conference on economics where we see Walter presenting his work and listening to other speakers is full of white faces. These brief shots offer a pointed critique of the dominant role Europeans and Anglo-Americans have taken in setting the terms for the flow of global capital, and by extension who and what is considered of value. The rarified and enclosed environment of the conference stands in contrast to the mix of nationalities and ethnicities in the city, and to Tarek’s and Zainab’s work and communities.

Contrasting Americans’ mourning over 9/11 with the media coverage of the casualties of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, Judith Butler raises an important question: “To what extent have Arab peoples, predominantly practitioners of Islam, fallen outside the ‘human’ as it has been naturalized in its ‘Western’ mold by the contemporary workings of humanism?” (32). *The Visitor*, despite centering on Walter, detours from this path through its treatment of the Muslim characters whose lives are disrupted by 9/11. In this sense, McCarthy’s development of Tarek and his mother Mouna as fully human and sympathetic is significant. Tarek’s detention and deportation, in particular, make visible and particularize the confinement, disappearance and erasure of an Arab life. Zainab is not an Arab, but as a Muslim from sub-Saharan Africa, she also constitutes a part of the world that is figured by the US media largely in terms of statistics or voiceless suffering—the reductive characterization of Africans as impoverished and primitive that Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has referred to as “the problem of the single story” (Adichie). McCarthy instead touches more fully on the particular culture of Senegal, a politically stable country and a center for music and fashion, and his dialogue coupled with Danai Gurira’s nuanced performance creates one of the rare, fully developed portrayals of a contemporary African woman on a Hollywood screen. Zainab also unsettles the stereotype that figures Islamic women as veiled and oppressed victims, and of course, Arab, rather than African. McCarthy thus draws viewers into sympathy with three Muslim “illegal”

immigrants during a time of particularly virulent culture wars and xenophobia, revealing the problems caused by their lack of cultural and economic capital, while still underlining their value as humans.

Tarek and Zainab, staying first illegally and then as guests at Walter’s apartment, are not simply homeless, but “unhomed”, to draw on the term coined by postcolonial critic Homi Bhaba (17). Considering such “transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees”, Bhaba advocates for “a focus on those ‘freak social and cultural displacements’ represent[ed] in [...] ‘unhomely’ fictions” (17). To be unhomed breaks down divisions between public and private spheres so that Tarek and Zainab occupy an intermediary space, making it difficult to “belong” anywhere. Their exile from Walter’s apartment, however brief, foreshadows Tarek’s deportation and reveals the tenuousness of his and Zainab’s place in the world, whether in an apartment or a country.

Ironically, though, Walter also functions much like a visitor, ill at ease as he is in his life, awkwardly staying in the apartment that Tarek and Zainab made more of a home than he ever did. Walter becomes a literal visitor, too, when he sees Tarek at the detention center. This motif of “visiting” brings to the fore the way particular spaces are delineated for certain bodies—especially bodies “labeled dangerous” (Dodds 23)—and the problem such bodies experience crossing borders, whether of countries, governmental institutions, or domestic spaces. Tarek, after all, is arrested as he tries to move through a subway turnstile and onto a train, something Walter does awkwardly, but without attracting attention from the police.

The emphasis on doors and windows as thresholds and barriers further raises questions regarding the boundaries of citizenship that the film’s title evokes. Walter perennially appears at windows at home and in his office. Security glass separates inmates from visitors in the detention center, and two scenes show Walter and Tarek communicating and drumming through the glass. A security officer is filmed through a glass barrier when he responds to Walter’s increasing outrage at Tarek’s deportation. Even Walter’s own eyeglasses nearly swallow his face, suggesting an emotional barrier between him and the world. (Soon after meeting Mouna, he begins to sport a smaller and more stylish pair—a sign of the gradual collapse of his emotional walls.) All this glass reinforces our sense of a world of barriers, both political and psychological, which effectively separates individuals and cultures from one another.

SURVEILLANCE

The sense of unhomeliness emerges more forcefully near the conclusion of the film after Mouna and Walter learn that Tarek has been deported. Mouna knocks on Walter's bedroom door late at night, another visitor crossing a boundary, here into a more intimate space. Curling up beside him in the dark, she confesses that she was notified years earlier of the denial of her citizenship application, but that on the advice of her friends, she threw it away. The camera shows a close-up of Mouna, but then cuts to a high angle of the bed for the last frame of the scene, as though we were watching from the upper corner of the bedroom, creating a strange transition and uncanny effect.

High angles appear in earlier scenes, but this is the first high-angle scene in the apartment. These angles are initially used in the detention center to represent security cameras. When Walter first visits, the camera records each step of the process he must go through to see Tarek, including checking in with the guard in the lobby and passing through a heavy mechanized metal door. While he waits for another door to open, the camera cuts to a long shot of Walter from a high angle (Fig. 12.2). Diminished, he looks directly at the camera, and McCarthy cuts to a shot of the security camera itself. These high angles occur regularly in the detention center where they are understandable, if unnerving. The detention center functions like Michel Foucault's analysis of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon: one may always be watched by a power that is diffuse and unverifiable. And the very diffusion of this power of the State leaves the characters "with not so much as a corrupt official to harangue" and always in danger of exposure (Gilbey).

To encounter this same high angle in the bedroom (Fig. 12.3) jars viewers more since it invites them to contemplate the filter for the gaze. This shot at the conclusion of Mouna's confession is followed by an establishing shot of the airport that centers its watchtower. Surveillance pervades the post-9/11 landscape. The illusion of a camera in Walter's bedroom suggests the intrusiveness of a State that monitors every corner of life and the collapse of distinctions between private and public spaces.

Personal voyeurism here exists on a continuum with state surveillance, and it connotes alienation and a lack of empathy. The film's opening shot of Walter's figure from the back watching from his living room window establishes his voyeurism, as does a shot of him watching students on the college green from his office above. He is positioned similarly after

Fig. 12.2 Walter at the detention center

Fig. 12.3 Surveillance at home

Tarek and Zainab first leave his apartment, where he watches them on the street below. These angles establish Walter's detachment by positioning him above others, and suggest a Western privilege due to his whiteness and gender. They also replicate his gaze down at others—a gaze that, notably, is separated by a wall of glass. The window that separates the voyeur from the object of his gaze conveys emotional distance and absence of human connection, a failure of empathy. What we see personalized in Walter in the early scenes of the film appears intrinsic to the system of the governing powers that monitor as a means to control. Lighting reinforces this message: the bright fluorescent light of the detention center looks jarring in contrast to the natural lighting in the apartment and outdoor spaces, underscoring Tarek's complaint that "they leave the lights on all the time".

In 2007, a German film dealing with similar themes of surveillance, personal voyeurism, and an unlikely connection between two men won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language picture. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* centered on a Stasi agent assigned the task of monitoring a playwright in Cold War East Berlin. Released in the USA a year before *The Visitor*, *The Lives of Others* also relied on a pattern of voyeurism to highlight the presence and power of the State—here a literal police state—and the isolation of the film's protagonist. In both films, voyeurism works on a continuum with a powerful state presence that uses surveillance as a means to "discipline and punish", as Foucault described the modern state's method of control (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*). The parallels between these stories set in two major cities—East Berlin of the 1980s and New York in the new millennium—is more than coincidental, echoing Žižek's darkly comic anecdotes about the GDR and other Eastern-Bloc countries that begin his essays on September 11, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002). While the joke Žižek opens with is meant primarily to point out the way our lack of freedom is obscured by the very terms of the political debate—for instance, the phrase "War on Terrorism" (1–2)⁴—it also draws an implicit parallel between the repressive regimes of post-war Eastern Europe and the post-9/11 USA. This analogy highlights the sense of encroaching state power in the post-9/11 USA—expressed through the censorship, surveillance, and detention of men and women at home and abroad—that begins to resemble the repressiveness of a police state like the GDR.

INDEFINITE DETENTION

If ubiquitous surveillance reflects life after 9/11, so does Tarek's arrest, which captures increasing public anxiety over both racial profiling at home and the reports of the indefinite detention of innocent men abroad. In this way, Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib haunt *The Visitor*, likely because news about them increased during the time when McCarthy wrote, shot, and prepared his film for release in 2008 (Guillén, "The Visitor"). Tarek is held in a "detention center" rather than a prison, but that distinction appears nominal. His internment there is of an indeterminate length. He can be moved at any moment without notice. His detention is short-lived only because Walter intervenes by hiring an immigration lawyer (another assimilated Arab-American character). Were it not for the lawyer's advocacy, the film suggests that Tarek would be "in there for years", like the other detainees.

The scandal around the release of photographs parading the torture of Iraqi prisoners by US soldiers at Abu Ghraib broke in 2004, just before McCarthy began writing his screenplay. The scrutiny following the release of these pictures revealed other problems with Abu Ghraib, including "innocent Iraqis [who] were wrongly being detained—indefinitely, it seemed" (Hersh, "Torture at Abu Ghraib").⁵ The problem of indefinite detention went hand-in-hand with the imprisonment of innocent men. Janis Karpinski, put in charge of military prisons in Iraq in June of 2003, was suspended eight months later during an investigation, and as Seymour Hersh noted, "Karpinski's defense [...] was that her superior officers 'routinely' rejected her recommendations regarding the release of such prisoners" (Hersh). Hersh reported, too, that, "Human Rights Watch complained to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld that civilians in Iraq remained in custody month after month with no charges brought against them". As Hersh concludes, "Abu Ghraib had become, in effect, another Guantánamo" (Hersh).

This was the political context in which McCarthy conceived *The Visitor*. Tarek's arrest touches on 9/11, not just as it sent out waves into immigration policies, but also by reflecting the public's growing unease with the American military practice of detaining alleged terrorists on slight evidence and delaying their trials or denying them altogether. For contemporary audiences, Tarek's plight alludes to these Middle Eastern men held indefinitely and invisibly at Guantánamo or Abu Ghraib. The terrorist body is racialized as Arab and gendered male, as shown by the shock

over the blond "Jihad Jane," Coleen LaRose, and the conviction that she—or any terrorist who is female and white—must be "crazy" (Hyde and Leonard).⁶ The fact that bodies like Tarek's are labeled dangerous by a government intent on expelling them is shown to be the real threat to the human connections and civil liberties that underlie New York. *The Visitor* in this sense is a realist version of movies like the Bourne trilogy, whose hero, Jason Bourne, is hunted down by US government in a "pre-emptive strike" because the government fears it cannot control him (Dodds 23). As different as they are, both films showcase security provisions as a rationale for imprisonment, expulsion, or elimination of a seemingly dangerous body.

A significant way in which *The Visitor* departs from the Bourne films, however, is in the absence of a villain who makes the wheels turn. Given the Hollywood rhetoric of good guys versus bad guys that dominated the political discourse following 9/11, this choice is striking. As McCarthy explained soon after *The Visitor*'s release,

I think it's important the police aren't bad guys, the guards in the detention facility aren't bad guys in this movie, it's really the system that needs to be looked at. And I think we were very careful in the performance, certainly in the scriptive element, in shooting the movie not to put the blame in any one place. (*Filmcatcher*)

Christopher Hayes in *the Nation* took the occasion of Bin Laden's death to call for an end to the phrase "bad guys", noting its Hollywood roots and that its widespread use among political figures ranging from Dick Cheney to Tom Friedman to Obama signaled "the ways the trauma [of 9/11] has warped our national character". His conclusion:

The phrase is self-consciously playful but also insidious. An adult who invokes it is expressing a layered set of propositions. What "bad guys" says, roughly, is this: "I'm an adult who has considered the nature of the moral universe we live in and concluded that it really is black and white. I've decided that my earliest, most childlike conception of heroes and villains is indeed the accurate one, which only later came to be occluded by nuance and wishy-washy, bleeding-heart self-doubt. I reject that more complicated, mature conception as false. I embrace the child's vision of the world." (Hayes)

In this light, it is interesting to consider more broadly the extent to which 9/11 has been addressed through genres such as catastrophe,

fantasy, or science fiction (Sánchez-Escalonilla 19) so much so that a drama like *The Visitor* is almost an anomaly. Though films such as the Bourne trilogy or *Minority Report* (2002) go a long way toward resisting the dominant national culture of unquestioning patriotism following 9/11, their stories still hinge on the presence of a bad guy—even if that bad guy is a corrupt government official or politician. *The Visitor* is unique and, I would argue, more nuanced, by virtue of its depiction of a national, political culture and system that harms through the unintended consequences of its political culture and bureaucratic systems when they are fueled by a culture of fear.

CONCLUSION

Like Amy Waldman's 2011 novel *The Submission* or Alex Gilvarry's 2012 *From the Memoirs of a Non-Enemy Combatant*, whose protagonists are also ejected from the USA, *The Visitor* suggests that the problem of post-9/11 America, far from being the threat of terrorism, is American exceptionalism, which expels certain bodies as threatening because they lack cultural and political capital. In the film's penultimate scene, which takes place at the airport where Mouna leaves the USA to return to Syria, we see women in hijabs, men in keffiyehs and yarmulkes, and soldiers in uniform, alluding to the two wars being fought by Americans on Middle Eastern soil: one in Iraq and the other in Afghanistan. An enormous American flag hangs on the wall of the concourse above an entryway. In the final shot, the camera zooms in on Mouna as she walks away from Walter and toward the gate, and then it tilts slowly upward so that the flag fills the screen before dissolving in a white-out. Even as the towers cast a long shadow, the actual events and the victims and survivors of 9/11 have been overshadowed by the symbolic calls to patriotism. In this scene, the flag works in tandem with the establishing shot of the watchtower, signaling the ubiquitous presence and power of the state, and these signs frame Mouna and Walter's painful leave-taking.

As one reviewer observes of *The Visitor*, "the film argues implicitly that the connections we make with one another represent our most robust defense against the powers that govern us" (Gilbey, "Keeping it Low Key"). Yet any heroics or sentimentalism evoked by the support Walter gives Tarek and Mouna is undercut by Walter's final inability to help them,

despite his social and economic privilege. The diffusion of governmental power leaves Walter with no clear enemy or battle to fight. In this way, McCarthy's screenplay, even as it argues for the importance of human connection, reveals the limits of humanism and empathy in the face of bureaucratic and militaristic systems. Walter does not get to play the role of the great white savior.⁷

The film ends instead with Walter descending into the subway with the djembe in hand. In this space where Tarek's arrest took place, Walter plays the djembe, as Tarek could not because of his fear of arrest. The artistic impulse cannot resolve the problems posed by the post-9/11 world, but playing the djembe, for Walter, represents growth beyond the internalized mourning that trapped him. It serves as a language to express his grief and rage about the loss of Tarek and Mouna, and it allows him to begin the process of moving beyond it.

Had it ended on this note, *The Visitor* might simply have predicated Walter's self-realization through music (notably "third world" music) above the other characters and their grimmer fates and thereby veered dangerously close to using Tarek as a "magical negro"—one of a host of racially other characters who "focus their abilities toward assisting their White lead counterparts" (Glenn and Cunningham). Yet the film avoids these clichés by fleshing out Tarek, flaws and all (Bolotsky, "Shyness, Unfairness and the Visitor"). When he is unjustly arrested and detained with no information about a trial date or any due process, he grows desperate and angry, touching pointedly on the emotional condition that the US government may be generating in many Arab and Arab-American men at home and abroad.

Walter, too, is far from magically transformed despite his underground drumming as a newfound means of expression and connection with others. The camera is positioned on the opposite platform, offering a long shot of him and a few casual onlookers waiting for a train. The rush of the subway interrupts Walter's drumming, blocking him from the audience's view. We catch a glimpse of him through the glass window of the train speeding by, but the final image is of a flag decal on the subway car blurred by the speed of the train—a realistic and symbolic touch that represents the intrusion of the State, its boundaries, and its crushing force. Regardless of the humanistic and artistic impulses of Walter's and, earlier, Tarek's drumming and their potential for communication or transcendence, the intrusion of the State, and the force and violence with which it moves, is the note on which we end.

NOTES

1. See Neil McDonald's "September 11 and the Hollywood Disaster Film", in which McDonald notes, "For moviegoers the television coverage of the events of 11 September in New York and the ensuing horrors were all too terrifyingly familiar. Just about every detail had been imagined and used in a string of thrillers and disaster films." Žižek discusses this phenomenon as well, referring to September 11 as "the stuff of popular fantasies long before they actually took place" in the title essay to his collection, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (17). In his graphic memoir, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, artist Art Spiegelman notes the irony of seeing a billboard for the Schwarzenegger film, *Collateral Damage*, with the billowing cloud of smoke from the Towers' collapse behind it.
2. Peter Rainer, in his review, criticizes the plot of *The Visitor*, in particular the idea that Walter would invite Tarek and Zainab to stay with him, as follows: "McCarthy is so intent on constructing his little fable of togetherness that he overrides the realities of big-city life."
3. In "The White-Savior Industrial Complex", Teju Cole also articulates how this narrative makes its way into not just Hollywood, but also the narratives of news outlets like *The New York Times*.
4. Here is Žižek's joke:

[...] a German worker gets a job in Siberia; aware of how all mail will be read by the censors, he tells his friends: "Let's establish a code: if a letter you get from me is written in ordinary blue ink, it's true; if it's written in red ink, it's false." After a month, his friends get the first letter, written in blue ink: "Everything is wonderful here: the shops are full, food is abundant, apartments are large and properly heated, cinemas show films from the West, there are many beautiful girls ready for an affair—the only thing you can't get is *red ink*." (1)

Žižek then offers this analysis of the joke's relevance: "Is this not the matrix of an efficient critique of ideology—not only in "totalitarian" conditions of censorship but, perhaps even more, in the more refined conditions of liberal censorship? [...] we 'feel free' because we lack the very language to articulate our unfreedom." (2)

5. This from a military report not meant for public release by Major General Antonio M. Taguba in 2004, obtained by *The New Yorker*. Hersh explains,

"The Taguba study noted that more than sixty per cent of the civilian inmates at Abu Ghraib were deemed not to be a threat to society, which should have enabled them to be released."

6. In news and editorials alike, LaRose's "mental stability" was questioned and derided. See Marina Hyde in *The Guardian* and Tom Leonard in *The Telegraph*. LaRose herself is reported to have "spoke[n] quietly as she admitted her guilty plea...confirming that she was of sound mind and had never been treated for mental health problems" (Sheehan).
7. In an interview with Guillén, McCarthy discussed the decision not to have Walter marry Mouna as a way to save the day—that is, to give her the status of a US citizen as well as a neat romantic conclusion: "Really, honestly, practically, that couldn't happen that quickly or that easily. Most importantly, in my mind, emotionally these two people aren't those type of people. They're not twenty-four."

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CHAPTER 13

Little Shop of ... : Intersections of the 9/11 Memorial Museum Gift Shop, Capitalism, and Journalism

Alison Novak

Thirteen years after the destruction of the Twin Towers, the 9/11 Memorial Museum opened its doors. Despite a strong opening and public interest in the museum, journalists covering its first days directed their attention to a different feature: the museum gift shop. Journalists and public alike were distraught over the commercialization of the space, citing the capitalist aims of the gift shop and the memorial aims of the museum as being at odds. Through a framing analysis of the most popularly posted and tweeted articles from the week following the opening of the Memorial Museum (May 19, 2014 to May 26, 2014), this study examines how the press framed the gift shop controversy and presented the debate over the memorial's capitalistic space. In particular, this chapter identifies five recurring issues, or affective responses, to the museum: disrespectful and deplorable, justifiable, confusion, comparison, and timing. These frames provide insight into the relationship between journalism, 9/11, and capitalism.

On May 15, 2014, President Obama stood in front of a solemn crowd of the first visitors admitted to the 9/11 Memorial Museum. The room

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