

# From Cloverfield to Batman v Superman: how did the 9/11 terrorist attacks change cinema?

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Robbie Collin

Feature

The influence of the 2001 World Trade Center attacks on Hollywood blockbusters is clear to see, says Robbie Collin

Cloverfield (2008)

**Robbie Collin 21 March 2016 • 7:00pm**

One day before the first anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the artist Damien Hirst said something that was both incredibly perceptive and gob-smackingly stupid.

“The thing about 9/11 is that it’s basically an artwork in its own right,” he told the BBC. “It was wicked, but it was devised in this way for this kind of impact. It was devised visually.”

[Hollywood superhero: how Ben Affleck took a beating and came back stronger](#)

He’s simultaneously right and wrong. Art can be about murder and terror and the propagation of foul ideologies – and it can (and sometimes must) depict these things in vivid, hellish detail – but it can’t actually *be* these things, in the same way it makes no sense to describe someone’s face as a portrait.

But what Hirst said next largely redeemed him. “I think our visual language has been changed by what happened on September 11,” he went on. “An aeroplane becomes a weapon – and if they fly close to buildings, people start panicking. Our visual language is constantly changing in this way, and I think as an artist you’re constantly on the lookout for things like that.”

For the past 15 years, cinema has been scrambling to adapt. The destruction of the Twin Towers became a psychologically burnt-in image as memorable as anything in cinema – which meant it was up to cinema to tame it. Many of us may have found ourselves thinking at the time that it looked like “something from a movie”. But, increasingly, movies came to resemble it.

This might sound odd, but films do it all the time. Think of the uptick in paranoid thrillers and eavesdropping-based plots following the Watergate scandal and the White House Tapes revelations of the early Seventies, or the flourishing of lightweight, feel-good British cinema under New Labour. In one way or another, a huge part of Japanese animation since the Fifties has been about coming to terms with the A-bomb.



So, we shouldn't be surprised that the most arresting image in the trailers for [Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice](#) (which opens on Friday) turned out not to involve either iconic superhero costume, but Ben Affleck's Bruce Wayne, in a waistcoat and suit trousers, dashing through the streets of Metropolis towards a billowing cloud of ash. It's the same ash we saw in the news images of New York City that September morning, creamy grey and snowstorm-thick, with skyscrapers looming on both sides like canyon walls. A second shot shows Affleck kneeling on the ground, surrounded by debris, holding a little girl close to his chest, and looking upwards in confusion. Again, we know the pose – and remember the feeling.

Image from the Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice trailer



By reflecting images of 9/11 back at us, Batman V Superman might allow us to understand them in a new way, even perhaps come to terms with them – or it might be a cynical recourse to deep-seated public fears that cheaply amp up the movie's thrill count. Its 2013 predecessor, Man of Steel, deployed 9/11 imagery in its destructive finale, in which half of Metropolis is demolished and presumably thousands of civilian lives are lost. The human toll of the sequence, and Superman's seeming indifference towards it, caused an outcry among fans that the film's director, Zack Snyder, is still addressing in interviews now.

Batman v Superman Dawn of Justice - Official Trailer 2 Play!  
03:00

[In defence of Zack Snyder: how the film community underestimated the Batman v Superman director](#)

Seeing realism in carnage of this scale is something new – and in many pre-9/11 blockbusters, similar scenes now ring jarringly false. In Roland Emmerich's Independence Day (1996), a fleet of flying saucers attack a number of world cities, including New York. But when the aliens' laser hits the Empire State Building, the structure doesn't collapse so much as vaporise on the spot.



[Batman v Superman: the burning questions](#)

There's also no ash-cloud to speak of: just a wall of flame that rolls down the streets like a fiery tsunami. Bystanders don't linger, but instantly flee, screaming their heads off. The rules of what counts as a safe space aren't clearly established either. In one scene, the wall of flame devours whole buildings as it goes. But in another, it's safely contained in a concrete road tunnel, allowing the film's plucky dog, Boomer, to leap through an access door to safety.

Back in 1996, most cinema-goers didn't have any visual references for this stuff, so could unquestioningly buy into Emmerich's vision. But today, the sequence looks absurd: not just outlandish (which is fine), but also illogical and phoney (which isn't). Its sequel, Independence Day: Resurgence, is released this summer. The trailer shows buildings collapsing slowly, and ash outweighing flame at a ratio of about 10 to one.

By 2006, the first major, studio-distributed September 11th films had arrived: Paul Greengrass's United 93 and Oliver Stone's World Trade Center. But both were beaten into cinemas by a blockbuster that processed the attack

allegorically, and with a wrenching power that's only grown with time.

On paper, Steven Spielberg's wildly underrated *War of the Worlds* was a new film version of the same 19th-century HG Wells novel that had already inspired countless adaptations, riffs and tributes – an Orson Welles radio broadcast and a Jeff Wayne concept album among them. But in spirit, it's a 9/11 movie through and through: an actively unfolding national crisis as experienced from a dirt-level perspective, stirring up nerve-zappingly contemporary feelings of chaos and incomprehension.

With its images of shattered, half-submerged New York skyscrapers – though with the World Trade Center itself largely intact – Spielberg's *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* seems to eerily prefigure the attacks (it was released in the US in July 2001). But in *War of the Worlds*, the allegory is detailed and deliberate.

### Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*

Again, ash blankets everything. As Tom Cruise's Ray Ferrier flees the tripods, he's coated with the powdered remains of human beings caught in the aliens' death-beams – and in an astonishing, loaded close-up, he stares at himself in the mirror and realises even the survivors are tainted with death.



Spielberg also borrows – and inverts – one of the most unshakeable images of the attack: the 200 or more World Trade Center employees who leapt to their deaths. Tendrils drop from the tripods' undercarriages, wrap around the legs of human survivors, then hoist them upwards, their bodies tumbling through space in the same arched pose as the jumpers from the World Trade Center. That same image was also brilliantly developed in the otherwise forgettable 2010 alien invasion film *Skyline* – if ever a great title deserved a better post-9/11 film, it's that one – in which inhabitants of Los Angeles are sucked up into spacecraft that loom above the city.

In a sense, everyone in *War of the Worlds* is suspended mid-fall. Onlookers don't instantly run for cover, but mill around, take photographs, and gaze upwards in curiosity and confusion. Janusz Kaminski, Spielberg's cinematographer, shoots the action so naturalistically, we could almost be among them.

Crucially, our first clear look at the attack comes via the viewfinder of a camcorder which Spielberg's own camera finds lying on the ground, dropped in the crush to escape. The rise of eyewitness footage was making the apocalypse a small-screen spectacle.

### Image from Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*

Spielberg's protégé, JJ Abrams, had also realised this – and helped mastermind Matt Reeves's allegorical monster movie *Cloverfield* (2008), in which a giant, subaquatic creature's attack on New York is captured on camcorder. In one astonishing sequence, the footage shows the collapsing Time Warner Center – another Manhattan twin tower complex – leaning on itself for support.



The split second of the 9/11 attack itself – a hijacked aeroplane piercing a skyscraper's gleaming side – has unsurprisingly proven to be the single most durable blockbuster motif. In *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011), Michael Bay penetrates a Chicago tower block with an enormous, serpentine robot called Driller. His camera cuts



between the human-scale panic inside and static shots of exterior spectacle, which gaze up at the carnage while debris rains down like mirror-shards.

### 'Driller' in Michael Bay's Transformers: Dark of the Moon

In *Star Trek Into Darkness* (2013), JJ Abrams slammed the hijacked USS Vengeance into the centre of San Francisco: more billowing dust-clouds, more slowly crumbling edifices, more stunned onlookers. Even bright, sparky Marvel Studios is hooked on the image. *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (both 2014) all feature large airships or spacecraft hurtling towards buildings. *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) upped the ante, and turned a city into an airship, before smashing it back down to earth.



### Chris Evans as Captain America in The Avengers (2012) Credit: Rex

Perhaps no film has reworked the moment of impact more chillingly than Christopher Nolan's 2008 *Batman* sequel, *The Dark Knight* – which is now widely recognised as the definitive 9/11 blockbuster. It opens with the camera itself gliding silently towards the glittering flank of a Gotham City skyscraper. You find yourself bracing for impact in your seat – all the more so if you're watching in IMAX, where the vertiginous drop to the ground is queasily apparent. Nolan's film is about the way terror gets into a city's bones, and he begins with a first-person view of its arrival.



Heath Ledger's *Joker*, the villain of the piece, is terror personified. His actions are unpredictable and inexplicable. What motivates him isn't power or personal gain, but ideology.

### Heath Ledger as the Joker in Christopher Nolan's The Dark Knight Credit: Rex

"It's not about money," he says, casually torching bales of Mafia cash he's previously gone to great pains to procure. "It's about sending a message. Everything burns."

The *Joker's* reign of terror sets many things ablaze: buildings, vehicles, money, even Aaron Eckhart's face in grimacing close-up. But Nolan takes care to show us the aftermath too. After almost every attack, there's a shot, or at least an acknowledgement, of the emergency services' clean-up: police officers securing the crime scene; firefighters pulling survivors from the rubble and bringing the flames under control.



The heroism of emergency workers is also central to Brad Peyton's disaster movie *San Andreas* (2015), in which much of the United States' west coast is chewed up by earthquakes and floods. The film's hero, played by Dwayne Johnson, is an air rescue pilot from the Los Angeles Fire Department – trained in Afghanistan, no less – who ends

the movie staring across the wreckage and vowing: "Now, we rebuild." It's either optimistic or perilously blinkered, but the message is clear. America has the power to move on.

Dwayne Johnson in *San Andreas* Credit:  
Warner Bros

Barely a scene of *San Andreas* goes by without a tower block collapsing in a sickening, slow-motion slump familiar from footage of the original attacks. But not every floundering skyscraper need be made of steel and cement. In 2009, James Cameron's *Avatar* staged the destruction of the Na'vi aliens' towering Hometree more or less as Pandora's 9/11, with splintering beams, tumbling debris, and low, upward-gazing camera work. One loaded shot even features two distinct plumes of smoke rising from the attack site, just in case you weren't catching the subtext.



The destruction of the Hometree in James Cameron's *Avatar*

Cameron's film allows the noble Na'vi their revenge, and the human colonists are expelled from Pandora in disgrace. But a few filmmakers have used 9/11 imagery as revenge in itself, reclaiming everything we associate with the attack as symbols of optimism and hope.



Take Gareth Edwards's 2014 *Godzilla* remake, in which the 350ft lizard itself becomes a kind of living, roaring World Trade Center surrogate. When *Godzilla* finally collapses in the ruins of San Francisco after seeing off its monstrous foes, it looks uncannily like a fallen skyscraper, its bony back-plates jutting up from the wreckage like mangled structural beams. But then hours later, it slowly climbs back to its feet, the film gets its happy ending – and us a vision of architectural resurrection.

A scene from Robert Zemeckis's *The Walk*

Which also happens to be a perfect description of *The Walk* (2015), a film that invokes 9/11 more movingly than any other blockbuster on this list – without so much as mentioning it once. Robert Zemeckis's dramatisation of Philippe Petit's legendary illegal tightrope walk between the World Trade Center towers redeems the buildings – first by rebuilding them, in meticulous 3D computer graphics, and second, with Petit's stunt, by turning them back into symbols of ingenuity and hope.



A scene from Robert Zemeckis's *The Walk*

'*Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice*' opens on Friday

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