

The Unruly *Avengers*: Marvels of Terror and the End of History

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The September 11th attacks prompted a shift toward films that were more violent, more spectacular, and more fantastical. Yet, Hollywood studios long refrained from setting massive scenes of catastrophe in New York City. Instead, “post-9/11” films set destruction elsewhere, avoiding the direct representation of sights, sounds, and threats wedded too closely to the event (Pollard; Birkenstein, Froula, and Randall; Bragard, Dony, and Rosenberg). Following *Cloverfield* (2008) in returning the disaster film to New York City, Joss Whedon’s *The Avengers* (2011) directly incorporates the shocking imagery and iconography of 9/11. Fire rains from the sky, rubble tumbles to the streets, crowds run for cover, an airplane crashes, and jet-sized dragons hurtle into buildings, uncannily embodying the day’s monstrous terror. Whedon’s film also draws on the subsequent “war on terror,” bringing air raids, roadside explosions, gunfights, dismemberment, corpses, and all-out urban warfare to the streets of Manhattan. Ambiguously collapsing the 9/11 assaults into their several military reprisals, Whedon reworks the political logic of the era, literalizing monstrosity, compressing historical events, twisting causality, and imagining resolution for an ongoing international crisis. Crucially, however, Whedon also subjects his story to a subtle but radical critique, ironically reflecting not only upon our fantastic narratives of terror and vengeance, but also upon the larger medium of the disaster film.

For a decade scholars have explored the cultural, social, and political engagement of Whedon’s productions, documenting his persistent reliance upon both fantasy and irony (Wilcox, Lavery, and others). This project locates *The Avengers* not only in the context of Whedon’s artistic *oeuvre*, but also in the larger historical context of the decade-long “war on terror.” Drawing also upon recent work by scholars of Romanticism (Simpson, Redfield, Pyle), it argues that both the film’s artistry and its political rhetoric work within the legacy of romantic aesthetics.