

## REFLECTING ABSENCE, MEDIATING 'THE REAL': OBLIVION AS A REQUIEM FOR 9/11

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### Abstract

In the opening scene of *Oblivion* (Kosinski 2013), the viewer is placed in the internal world of the dream and memory of the film's protagonist, Jack Harper. Harper's dream / memory, taps into the viewer's own memory through images of New York City and its inseparable connection with 9/11. In his dream, Jack sees the observation deck of the Empire State Building. The film uses this setting and architecture to set the scene for an underlying trauma which is crucial for understanding the film in psychoanalytic terms.

*Oblivion* is more than a memorial to 9/11. It is an allegory of America's fascination with its own apocalyptic fantasies. It is a requiem to all that is and was America – in the dream of itself, where nothing but a 'reflected absence' remains. To understand the complex nature of the film this article will argue that *Oblivion* is a screen memory with an embedded subtext for the trauma of 'the Real' of 9/11. The ruins of the Empire State Building are a metaphor for the Twin Towers and of the crumbling of the American dream. The narrative and images of apocalyptic fantasies that are depicted in *Oblivion*, remediate the trauma of 'the Real' into a reflected absence, a requiem for 9/11.

Psychoanalysis, being focused on trauma, will form the basis for my article. I will particularly draw on Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek and Todd McGowan to consider the cinematic medium as a dream.

### Introduction

In the twenty-first century, reality is dominated by mediated images of apocalypse on the internet, in cinema, and on television; one example of this apocalyptic genre in film is Joseph Kosinski's *Oblivion*. However, *Oblivion* is not just an example of an apocalyptic film, it harbours a subtext of a traumatic encounter with death and 9/11. It is the story of a drone repairman, Jack Harper (aka 'tech 49' played

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by Tom Cruise), who lives on a desolate earth and is haunted by dreams and visions of an 'earth before the war'. Through the narrative we encounter three iterations of Jack Harper (Jack Harper: Astronaut and pilot of the Odyssey mission; Jack Harper: tech and clone 49; and Jack Harper: clone and tech 52) who embody Lacan's three registers. These three registers, as Slavoj Žižek explains in *How to Read Lacan* (2007), are "three intertangled levels: the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real" (8). Žižek situates Lacan's registers model for psychoanalysis as a "return to Freud" (Žižek 2007, 4).

Freudian psychoanalysis is an attempt to alleviate a patient's symptoms – symptoms generated by an unconscious, traumatic event. Freud practiced psychoanalysis by interpreting signs, words, images, dreams, and stories that the patient told him in the clinic. This led to his psychoanalytical technique being known as the 'talking cure' (Žižek 2007, 4).

The extrapolation of Freudian psychoanalysis from a clinical setting into a hermeneutic of social and aesthetic discourse has been a powerful tool for cultural critique. This applies, in particular, to the use of psychoanalysis in cinema studies. This includes work by cinema scholars such as Christian Metz (1984), Laura Mulvey (1975), Žižek (1989, 1991, 2002, 2006) and Todd McGowan (2003, 2004, 2007, 2011) – who all use Freud and Lacan to analyse films.

I will draw on these methodologies, to analyse *Oblivion*. Reading the film through psychoanalysis must consider that Lacanian film theory is a contested space where critics diverge as to how adherence to Lacan might 'look'. McGowan claims that: "the critique of cinematic fantasy focuses only on the relationship between fantasy and ideology (fantasy and the symbolic) rather than the relationship between fantasy and the gaze (fantasy and the Real)" (2003, 39). As Žižek claims 'the Real' is "the fissure within the symbolic network itself" (2006, 72). Science fiction film is a way to explore the fissure, gap or break in the symbolic order through cinema's ability to lead the viewer to an encounter with the Real, as in *Oblivion*'s representation of the traumatic Real of death. In cinema there are films like *Oblivion* where these varying treatments of fantasy/symbolic and fantasy/Real are in contest. Clearly as McGowan states: "ideology and the symbolic order are haunted by this 'real'" (2003, 40). This is because the Real resists closure and the 'happy ending' of symbolic representation.

The Real, as described by Žižek, is found in representations of an "anamorphosis, a 'shadow of nothing'" (2007, 70). Žižek uses as an example of how the Real functions using Shakespeare's play of *Richard II*. He argues that the Real is an absence within the King's symbolic identification because he

is the 'Death figure' as exemplified by the hollow of his crown: but he considers this as "not simply death, but the subject reduced to the void" (2007, 70). This is why Lacan considered the Real as impossible, Dylan Evans explains that the Real: "Is impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the symbolic order, and impossible to attain in any way. It is this character of impossibility and of resistance to symbolization which lends the real it's essentially traumatic quality" (1996, 160).

In this paper I focus on a 'new' conception of the gaze which Žižek and McGowan have developed through applications of Lacanian psychoanalysis to cinema. In this case, the gaze is not on the side of the viewing subject, nor is it the gaze of the camera; it is on the side of the 'object'. Lacan's Imaginary stage introduces the subject to the act of looking and the illusion of mastery. In later human development, we can perceive ourselves as objects to be looked at. This is how some psychoanalytic film theorists, such as Mulvey, explore the gendered gaze. However, the gaze of the object of cinema is a disturbance for the viewer and not a matter of the pleasure in looking according to McGowan, again, contradicting Mulvey's unilateral understanding of the gaze. In *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan*, McGowan makes the following important revelations concerning the subject and the gaze: "the gaze is not the look of the subject at the object, but the point at which the object looks back" (2003, 28-29). McGowan clarifies his arguments about this experience of the gaze and its importance in a psychoanalytic interpretation of cinema, he states: "Lacan comes to conceive of the gaze as something that the subject (or spectator) encounters in the object (or the film itself); it becomes an objective, rather than a subjective gaze" (2003, 5). The experience of watching film makes us oblivious to the technology employed in its mediation, producing the object or the film. However, disruption can occur in the viewer due to "an object that disturbs us because it is outside the visible" (McGowan 2007, 28). This understanding is crucial for unpacking films like *Oblivion* that attempt to mediate the Real of traumas such as 9/11.

In *Oblivion*, an engagement with the viewer's memory results in a collision between Kosinski's apocalyptic cinematic dream, his fantasy production, cinematic history, historical trauma in the '9/11' event, and how the viewer is caught in the Real. This kernel of the Real, the point at which the symbolic order breaks down, can be perceived in the object, the film as object, a subject as object, a gap, a rupture, a void, and particularly in the New York skyline after '9/11' – absence. What looks back at the viewer in film is Lacan's *objet petit a*. This has been applied to film theory, particularly by McGowan (2007, 10, 178) and Žižek (2007, 66-67) in their discussions of desire, the impossible object; and how desire thrives on absence and lack.

Kosinski's subtext is an attempt to represent an unconscious trauma, the Lacanian Real, that is screened as a techno-dystopian apocalyptic vision set in New York City. This is a fitting requiem to 9/11 as an allegorical remediation. The main protagonist, Jack, encapsulates Freud's work on historical violence, memory, dreams, and repetition in the aetiology of the traumatised subject.

## **Psychoanalysis, Cinema and Film Theory**

Psychoanalysis, and cinema, both emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. The ability to 'see' into the mind and the invention of the viewing screen were powerful developments in the construction of human reality. Just as Freud constructed or reconstructed narratives for his patients, film-makers constructed images and narratives that could be analysed.

A breakthrough in the application of psychoanalysis to film theory was the work of French structuralists, particularly the work of Metz. This is particularly true in relation to Metz's development of 'the gaze'. However, McGowan claims that Metz and Mulvey's psychoanalytic film theory incorrectly uses Lacan's work. Metz and Mulvey concentrated on Lacan's early work on the mirror stage (Metz 1982, 55-57, Mulvey 1975, 10). From this, they derive the notion of the 'subjective gaze' and the 'gaze of the spectator', particularly associated with Mulvey. Her work centred on how male pleasure is constructed through Hollywood cinema by producing the female subject as an 'object' to be looked at onscreen (1975, 77-78). Mulvey's cinematic mirror is an insistence on a gendered binary which limits Lacanian encounters with the Real that cinema produces. Early Lacanian film theory, such as that advocated by Mulvey, calls maintaining critical distance to resist the film's apparent manipulation. McGowan claims that this critical distance is a means for avoiding "the real of the gaze" (2007, 14). These early applications of Lacan to film theory, McGowan argues, were more a turn to Nietzsche and Foucault who consider that it is power that informs our desire; this theory considers that the cinema viewer has power over the object onscreen as the subject is concealed in the dark (2007, 8). McGowan considers that Lacan's concept of desire was an object's resistance to the mastery of vision, the gaze is what is lacking in the image, because the viewer's desire distorts what is seen (2007, 11).

## **Sigmund Freud – the Dream**

Freud's psychoanalysis centred around unconscious trauma and how the patient screens or reveals such trauma. Screening films engages viewers in a dream-like experience where desire and fantasy

could be constructed or in Lacanian terms, how the Real could be confronted. Freud considered and reflected on how trauma might be revealed to the patient through the clinic.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922), Freud contemplates the individual's fixation on trauma and the compulsion to repeat when he supposed the obverse would be true. He states:

The physician makes it his concern to limit the scope of this transference-neurosis as much as he can, to force into memory as much as possible and leave as little as possible to repetition. The relation established between memory and reproduction is different for every case. As a rule the physician cannot spare the patient this phase of the cure; he must let him live through a certain fragment of his forgotten life, and has to see to it that some measure of ascendancy remains, in the light of which the apparent reality is always recognised as a reflection of a forgotten past (1922, 18).

In *The Origins of Religion: Totem and Taboo, Moses and Monotheism and other Works* (1958), Freud outlines this forgotten past in the return of the repressed traumatic, what Lacan would refer to as the Real, through irruptions of the trauma of historical violence. However, it is in Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1971) that his work comes closest to describing the experience of the cinema. We could understand a film such as *Oblivion* as a dream and as producing a psychoanalytical engagement with trauma.

Freud did not limit his study on psychoanalysis to violent history, trauma, or symptoms. He discovered an unconscious that speaks the language of desire and trauma articulated through dreams. He analysed dreams to understand what Lacan would later call the Real, in particular the dream as harbouring the Real of desire. In the dream of the burning child, Freud analyses the dream of a father whose child had died, the body is laid out in an adjoining room and there is someone to watch over his son's body while the father sleeps. A candle falls over on the child's body while the father sleeps. Simultaneously in the dream the child takes the father by the arm and speaks the words, "Father don't you see I'm burning?" (Freud 1971, 509) Lacan considers this moment which he quotes as "Father can't you see..." (misquoting Freud's "don't you see") as a solicitation of the gaze in the absent object (1977, 70). This traumatic encounter is what makes the father wake up. According to Freud the father overlays unconscious desires with sensory experience, and the desire of extending the life of the child by prolonging his dream (Freud 1971, 509-511). The dream is revealing the trauma of loss and the wish for reanimation of the lost object or cause of desire.

Freud's dreamwork also encountered what he called 'Absurd Dreams'. One of these is the case of a patient who dreamed that his dead father was alive and did not know he was dead (Freud 1971, 426-427). This strangeness of the persistence of trauma, the excess, the desire for reanimation, beyond death, the excess of life – the undead urge, and what Lacan saw as a type of indestructible essence he called the lamella. Žižek explains:

As Lacan puts it, the lamella does not exist, it insists it is unreal, an entity of pure semblance ... This blind, indestructible insistence of the libido in what Freud called the 'death drive'... also the Freudian name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis: for an uncanny excess of life, an 'undead' urge that persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, generation and corruption. Freud equates the death drive with the 'so-called 'compulsion-to-repeat' an uncanny urge to repeat painful past experiences that seems to outgrow the natural limitations of the organism affected by it and to persist even beyond the organism's death. (2006, 62-63).

### **Lacan's Development of Freudian Psychoanalysis and 'The Real'**

Lacan's development of Freudian psychoanalysis generated his concept of 'The Real'. Like Freud's studies on trauma, Lacan considered in his theory, the Real as "the traumatic event [the] gaps in the universe of meaning [or] the Thing that intrudes into the social body and disturbs its balance" (Žižek, 2007, 74).

Through representation, Hans Holbein's 1533 painting of 'The Ambassadors' – with its anamorphosis, can illustrate the Real as a blot on the Symbolic identification of the young men in the painting. This encounter with the skull at the bottom of the painting can only be perceived by looking awry (Žižek 1991). Lacan referred to this traumatic encounter as the Real (Lacan 1977, 92). Lacan explains:

In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it that is what we call the gaze (1977, 73).

This transmission of the gaze is the trauma associated with the Real that reveals itself in gaps in human experience. Lacan's development of Freudian psychoanalysis therefore expands on trauma; its repetition and return.

Lacan's theory in relation to Freud's study of the 'Dream of the Burning Child' allowed for more than an extension of the child's life. It harboured a reproach to the father spoken by the dead child that must be escaped through waking up (Lacan 1992, 57-58). This is what Lacan refers to as "the missed reality" (1992, 58). Lacan explains the traumatic dream that bears the subjects desire in the following:

The trauma reappears, in effect, frequently unveiled. How can the dream, the bearer of the subject's desire, produce that which makes the trauma emerge repeatedly (Lacan 1992, 55)

Lacan believed the dream was "an act of homage to the missed reality" (Lacan 1992, 58). It can manifest as the traumatic return of the Real that keeps repeating. In Lacan's theory of the gaze and the dream he states:

[I]n the so-called waking state, there is an elision of the gaze, and an elision of the fact that not only does it look, *it* also *shows*. In the field of the dream, on the other hand, what characterizes the images is that *it shows* ... our position in the dream is profoundly that of someone who does not see. The subject does not see where it is leading, he follows. (1992, 75)

In this sense, the dream is like the experience of cinema, it allows for an encounter with the Real that is an omission or an elision. However, cinema can also turn from the Real, but this turn shows by constructing a fantasy of being whole in our Symbolic representation, like the anamorphosis at the feet of the Ambassadors in Holbein's painting and Shakespeare's *Richard II*.

### **Žižek – The Dream, The Death Drive and the Real**

Žižek considered cinema as playing with the unconscious Real of desire, and the dream (1991, 16). In his psychoanalytic engagement of *Woman in the Window* (Lang 1944) a man wakes and can "say to himself with relief it was only a dream" staging a turning from the Real, Žižek considers this as "classic cinema's attempts to evade an unhappy ending" (1991, 16). This repression of the Real is how everyday reality is constructed. Žižek explains that:

In the opposition between dream and reality, fantasy is on the side of reality, and it is in dreams that we encounter the traumatic Real – it is not that dreams are for those who cannot endure reality, reality itself is for those who cannot endure (the Real that announces itself in) their dreams. (2007, 57).

Žižek considers this as Lacan's lesson from Freud's work on the dream of the burning child. The father wakes to avoid the Real like the murderer in *Woman in the Window*. The essence of Lacan's ethical task is that true awakening from sleep does not release us from fantasy. Žižek claims that for Lacan "the spell of fantasy ... controls us even more when we are awake" (2007, 60).

### **McGowan – The Cinema as the Dream**

McGowan argues that the cinema opens up the possibility for an encounter with the Real Gaze. He says:

The priority of the death drive relative to the pleasure principle entails a revision of the theory of dreams that Freud himself never works out. If the death drive structures the psyche, then the dream is not simply the fulfilment of a wish but the repetition of a trauma. Though not every dream traumatizes the dreaming subject, every dream does bring the subject back to the loss-and lost object-that originates subjectivity... a hidden repetition of loss. (2011, x).

...

When cinema lulls the subject into its dreamy, fantastic netherworld, it may insert the subject into ideology, but it may also open up the possibility of an encounter with the traumatic real that disrupts the power of ideology... A genuine psychoanalytical film theory advocates fully immersing oneself in cinematic fascination and focusing on the points of rupture where the gaze emerges. (2007, 15).

This analysis, that an encounter with the Real or the gaze in cinema can cause disruption, aligns with Lacan and furthers Žižek's claim that "social reality is then nothing but a fragile, symbolic cobweb that can at any moment be torn aside by an intrusion of the real" (1991, 17). McGowan reveals the gaze is tangled with our desire, he explains this as "an absence that can be made tangible within the film through an object that stands in for this absence" (2007, 71).

These psychoanalytical theories and their development and influence on cinematic theory are the basis for an exploration into the film, *Oblivion*. When the gaze is aligned with fantasy and the lost object (McGowan 2007, 23-24) the viewer is entangled in the narrative for trauma that the film *Oblivion* constructs. This human odyssey is an encounter with the Real of death, revealed through the main protagonist Jack Harper.

### **Inside the Cinematic Dream – Opening Scene of *Oblivion***

*Oblivion* opens inside Jack Harper's dream on the viewing deck of the Empire State Building. A pair of coin operated binoculars is in the foreground and the New York City skyline forms the backdrop. The shot is carefully positioned overlooking where the World Trade Center Twin Towers once stood. This black and white shot is conspicuously devoid of people. The monochromatic film is like old documentary news footage. The off-screen musical theme will be Jack and Julia's accompaniment to their love story. The voiceover during this sequence is Jack Harper / tech 49, narrating his dream / vision of 'earth before the war'.

From the top of the building the scene changes to street-level. Jack sees a woman, further narrating the dream he says: "I know you, but I don't know your name ... I know I am dreaming, but it feels like more than that, it feels like memory".



## Inside the Dream: Earth Before the War ... New York

*Oblivion* begins with an invitation to 'see' both through a camera lens and the object of the binoculars that reveals a psychoanalytic engagement with the film's subtext. As Jack narrates his dream sequence, he tells the audience what we are seeing is earth before the war, New York. This shot on the Empire State Building are Jack Harper's memories and so tech 49's dream is external from his subjective experience, he sees Jack and Julia Harper walking on the viewing deck. This same shot is seen in flashback by tech 52 when he sees Julia, it is the memory of the original Jack Harper. When Jack / tech 49 wakes from his dream he narrates an assembly of images of devastation, emblematic of the film's American apocalypse.

Visions and dreams are features of apocalyptic discourse and film. These images of apocalypse and post-apocalypse are disorientating. We are lost in these images, but the voice of Jack agrees with our God-like glimpse of the earth in the opening sequence, a cosmic war has taken place leaving the earth in a chaotic state. Conversely the vision of Jack and Julia (Olga Kurylenko) is a fragment of nostalgic images of our own reality flashed before our eyes. The experience of watching the film's flashbacks, and the apocalyptic vision which it presents, taps into the viewer's apocalyptic memory.

*Oblivion* is screen memory and history revealed through the main protagonist, Jack Harper. The film relays Jack's dreams as memory the "historical flashbacks... telling an absorbing personal story against a background of great historical events" (Landsberg 2004, 12). Kosinski's deliberate placing of his film in cinematic history and specifically New York City is a thought-provoking exploration into the science fiction genre. Feldman states:

There is an imaginary disaster history of the New York skyline in which the eschatological destruction of the city has been rehearsed in a series of Hollywood, science fiction and disaster films, *Planet of the Apes*, *Escape from New York*, *Independence Day*, to cite a few recent examples (2004, 33).

It is worth noting that Kosinski's choice of tropes, or markers, in *Oblivion* support this same cinematic history of New York City; The Empire State Building in *An Affair to Remember* (McCarey 1957), or the torch of the Statue of Liberty used so effectively in *Planet of the Apes* (Schaffner 1968). Kosinski also taps into the cinematic history that shows technology as a malevolent force by the similarity in appearance of the eye of Sally to the eye of HAL from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick 1968). However, the gaze of Sally's eye hides an absence, the elision of a mystery of who attacked the earth.

## **The Dream as Memory: The Freudian Talking Cure and Re-Interpreting (Our) Jack's Narrative**

In the film, *Oblivion*, it is revealed that the NASA mission to Titan was tasked to intercept an object detected in deep space, this object is 'The Tet' an alien space ship. The crew includes Jack Harper and Victoria Olson, as pilot and co-pilot of the *Odyssey* spacecraft. Jack's wife is one of the crew, housed in a sleep pod. As they are drawn in to The Tet, the alien spacecraft, Jack ejects the sleep module programmed to enter earth's orbit, saving his wife, Julia, and the crew. The object, The Tet, captures Jack and Victoria. Jack and Victoria encounter the Real of death which is off-screen and not revealed or known in the film. Their DNA is copied, and these clones then inhabit the Sky Towers (although the viewer only sees two towers, 49 and 52), however the clones do not know they are not authentic subjects. The alien invader becomes known as Sally, an appropriation of the NASA mission controller's voice and image. Sally is enacting apocalyptic destruction by taking earth's sea water through tasking the clone teams and drones, to protect the Hydro-rigs. These missions are a parody of their roles as astronauts. This sets up a symbolic order for the Jack and Victoria clones that appropriates their human qualities for the alien invasion of the earth. Sally names the earth survivors Scavs, constructing them as an alien presence, however Jack Harper 'tech 49' finds out they are human, breaking from Sally's lies. The Scavs bring down the *Odyssey* spacecraft which Jack goes to investigate, and he sees the woman of his dreams. Julia helps Jack to understand the truth (on the ruins of the Empire State Building) but they both find out, when their ship crashes in the desert, that he is not the only Jack Harper through meeting another clone, 52. Likewise, when Jack Harper / clone 52 glimpses Julia, he has flashbacks of the Empire State Building which begins his awakening from the symbolic order of Sally.

The extension of the eye and the act of seeing is portrayed in the binoculars on the Empire State Building. Jack / tech / clone 49 and Julia Harper, after earth's destruction, return to the ruins of the Empire State Building and are able to walk onto the observation deck. The object encountered in the opening scene – the set of binoculars – is still on the building. Julia is framed with her hands on the binoculars and turns to look at Jack. Jack has more fragmented flashbacks. He asks Julia "Who are you?" She replies: "It was here Jack, it was right here". Using the binoculars and the setting she begins her 'talking cure' to restore his narrative.

To break through Sally's screen story (that Jack Harper is just a repairman fixing drones, as 'tech 49'); Julia, in the ruins of the Empire State Building, re-enacts and reawakens the full story of their

engagement. This is the world of Jack and Julia Harper's 'earth before the war'. The film repeats the opening scene of the viewing deck of the Empire State Building, Jack's dream. However, when Julia restores his memory the shot is in colour, instead of black and white. The scene is complete with people and another object: an engagement ring. The scene moves back to the present day and Julia shows Jack / tech 49 the engagement ring thus reaching the fragments of the real Jack Harper. This staging of the psychoanalytic cure reaches into Jack's "repressed ... fragment[s] of the past" (Freud 1922, 18). However, this is only the beginning of these interruptions and another traumatic encounter with the Real is waiting for Jack Harper, in the desert. Jack Harper, who believes he is tech 49 meets tech 52. They are both clones. This traumatic encounter is with the Real of death. They are DNA copies for which there is no original subject, clones, and not authentic subjects. However, clone 49 is a simulacrum that finds a fragment of his humanity (Haywood 2016, 6).

### **Tropes of 9/11 in *Oblivion***

Kosinski's science fiction film *Oblivion* follows the hero's journey of sacrifice; Jack Harper's human odyssey; his dissolution into DNA. This evokes the parallels of a carefully embedded historical trauma. Like the first responders on 9/11 who never returned from the Towers, the authentic Jack Harper never emerged from 'The Tet' saving Julia and the other astronauts on the Odyssey mission. The first responders who went into the Twin Towers sacrificed themselves to save others. In the process they became heroes. Their dissolution into DNA occurred literally when the Towers collapsed, and they were turned to ash. In the film, this subtext of an unconscious trauma aligns with the images of apocalyptic destruction that captures the viewer's memory of 9/11 by using New York City as a setting. Kosinski has created a narrative for the trauma of the Real of death, and the Real of desire in the return of the dead (the reconstitution of DNA). The viewer is alerted to this connection with the 9/11 event through flashbacks of Jack and Julia's connection and authentic memory that has architectural significance using the viewing deck of the Empire State Building. In the film, the viewer sees 'absence': The World Trade Center Twin Towers are missing from the New York skyline. The binoculars evoke a reproach, "can't you see I'm burning?", as in the dream of the burning child. The viewer's memory of the burning towers: the ash, the smoke and the Real of death and the hope of finding the lost. This is the film's Gaze of the Real that haunts the New York skyline and is reflecting the absence of the Twin Towers.

Various images in *Oblivion* also remind the viewer of 9/11 by reimagining and re-contextualising the apocalyptic vision that resulted from the attack. In the film, the viewer sees the metaphoric transmission of the 9/11 event in the desolate earth; buildings in ruins; and iconic images of America after an alien attack. These images are the same encounters with 9/11 that were seen on our screens that was, “as real as death” (Redfield 2007, 56). This irruption on 9/11 was the undercutting of Western society’s narrative and identity as invincible and superior striking at the “process of symbolization itself” (Redfield 2007, 56). American exceptionalism was ruptured, replaced by death and the Real. Jack Harper is the embodiment of this entanglement with the Real as the myth of the hero: his sacrifice, and DNA cloning as Western society’s illusions of immortality.

As well as dreams, Jack has flashbacks that intensify his symptoms of an underlying trauma. Significantly, this trauma is revealed as loss and the tragedy of separation. His visions are of a meeting with a woman he recognises but does not know by name. The flash-back to the Empire State Building is importantly “the memory of a once-proper humanity” (Colebrook 2016, 148), the importance of memory, place, and architecture in New York City.

What is revealed in the restoration of Jack’s memory, is that before the Odyssey mission Jack asked Julia to meet him and he would take her to the “top of the world” (the name of the observation deck on the south tower of the World Trade Center). This inclusion marks Jack’s dream memory as aligning with tropes and signs of the subtext of 9/11 as ‘Earth before the war’. The narrator, Jack Harper’s, memory is being represented here in the gaze of the subject that makes us aware of “the Real of the Gaze through absence” (McGowan 2003, 36). When his memory is restored in full, the scene plays for the audience by staging the Real of Jack’s desire for Julia. These opening scenes and the return to the Empire State Building, enact an initiation into the Lacanian mystery of the Real, through architecture and memory, with an iconic building and the New York skyline.

### **Screen Memory / Cinematic History / Disaster and Apocalypse**

*Oblivion* is a requiem for 9/11 that places it in a narrative. The flashbacks of earth before the war are contrasted with the vision of an apocalyptic earth where Jack narrates the accompanying images. This highlights images and intimations of the underlying narrative of 9/11 as well as its metaphoric transmission. Images of Washington D.C. and the Pentagon are shown as ruins in a slurry of debris – the architectural targets of that day. Jack describes the upheaval in nature that was the result of the destruction of the moon. These descriptions, and the accompanying images in the film, of earthly

upheaval in nature, are signs of the second coming and part of the apocalyptic genre. These are well established traditions, tropes, and signs in both Biblical narrative and film. Apocalypse is also a protest narrative against imperial power (Keller 1996, 39). The film is reflecting an absence of power over the Real. Or is it that Hollywood had predicted / pre-empted or transmitted a pre-trauma future: an apocalyptic revelation centred in imagination?

The attacks on the Towers of the World Trade Center manifest an apocalyptic vision for viewers. The ruins of ash and dust transformed the site to oblivion. Unmediated, the effect was a science fiction of its own, the scenes of destruction described as a moonscape.<sup>1</sup> In *Oblivion*, the layering of the memory of the architectural wholeness, before the war, is contrasted with the ruins or remnants of New York during the war. Jack's dreams and memories are the historical rendering of a metaphor for before and after 9/11. *Oblivion's* requiem for 9/11 consists in engaging with direct analogies and metaphoric transmissions that work as iconic cinematic flashbacks. Karen Armstrong considers apocalyptic images as "icons of the twenty-first century" (2001, p. vii), but it began in the twentieth century; the result of our technological ability to portray on screen dystopian futures.

Cathy Caruth describes "intrusive images and thoughts ... [as a] possession of the past" (1995, 151). Unlike the Holocaust where, as Žižek explains, we need to "integrate the trauma of their death into our historical memory" (1991, 23), 9/11 is one of the most viewed images of the twenty-first century. Spiegelman reports that images from that day are "burned into the insides of my eyelids" (2004, ii). Karen Engle in *Seeing Ghosts: 9/11 and the Visual Imagination* quotes the report by David Levi Strauss that "On September 11<sup>th</sup>, more people clicked on documentary news photographs than on pornography for the first (and only time) in the history of the internet" (2009, 3). She also considered the viewing of these images is the repetition compulsion identified by Freud in his studies on trauma (2009, 3).

The World Trade Center Twin Towers were the symbolic order of American world domination in architecture and the symbolic collapse of that order. Jean Baudrillard places the terrorist attacks on 9/11 within a discussion of the global effects of their destruction; in *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays* he says that "The September 11 attacks also concern architecture, since what was destroyed was

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Greenberg (2003) discusses a doctor who rushed to ground zero on 9/11, to help. He described the journey south: "the scene became progressively stranger and then you come to the moon" (30). Greenberg adds "The moon. We had never been to this New York before".

one of the most prestigious of buildings, together with a whole (Western) value-system and a world order” (2003, 37). Importantly this domination involves New York and the New York Skyline as a staging or centre for views that tie into historical cinematic visions. The 9/11 event involves a transgression against architecture from that skyline, resulting in a spillage from the solid of the architectural building into a residue.

E. Ann Kaplan gives a personal account of the architecture of the Twin Towers saying that “for those nearby, the towers functioned phenomenologically as part of people’s spatial universe” (2005, 100). Kosinski uses architecture, in the dream and flashback sequences, to convey a sense of the object, memory, nostalgia, and direct experience. He uses the ruins of the Empire State Building to intensify their functioning as a type of embodiment of personal loss for Jack and Julia Harper, and the subtext of the loss of the Twin Towers.

Kosinski translates this experience – the images and place of New York – into a fantasy that gives trauma a narrative. He is therefore opening the space for this journey into the Real. As McGowan states when the “spectator’s safe distance” in cinema is undermined, this causes “a traumatic encounter with the Real” (2003, 29). It is through these intimations that the Real of death is encountered in the overlapping of Jack’s oblivion and the film *Oblivion*. It is in Jack Harper / tech/clone 49’s opening admission that “the dream feels like memory” that establishes the link between the cinematic image, the dream, and the viewer’s memory.

### **The Mediation of Memory and History – a human odyssey**

The film’s opening scene contains the dream sequence of Jack’s memory, but when he wakes up, into what the viewer considers his ‘real’ life, he gives a background story narration of how the earth was destroyed. Images of destruction are Jack’s retelling of the mediated, remediated, and premediated story, that was given to him by Sally, and not his memory. Against this constructed narrative, told by Sally, are Jack’s dreams. In psychoanalytic terms, Jack’s dream, and his indestructible lamella, persist despite Jack’s death. The dream memory and flashbacks of loss are trapped in the unconscious of all the clones that keeps repeating a traumatic return to the Real. Jack’s memories, shown in the dream sequence and in flashback, are his own. In a real sense his memories are frozen in time. Analysing *In the Shadow of No Towers* and the event of 9/11, Richard Glejzer identifies a similar trauma for Spiegelman. Trapped in Spiegelman’s memory is “the problem of the Towers having never completely fallen for him; for him, they and he are stuck in the moment before the fall, before the action is

complete” (Glejzer 2008, 110). In Jack’s inner life, his dreams and memory are stuck in a repetition of his meeting at the Empire State Building. Like the repetition of cloning that reconstructs his DNA.

### **Mediating ‘The Real’ Through Embodiment and Architecture – The Sky Tower**

Jack and Victoria are the products of cloning encountered in the twin towers of 49 and 52. The Sky Tower embodies Baudrillard’s description of the Twin Towers, a type of architecture “like the system ... merely a product of cloning, and of a changeless genetic code” (2003, 40). The metaphoric transmission of Baudrillard’s claims are represented, reinterpreted and translated in Kosinski’s film, in the Sky Towers that are part of the subtext of 9/11. Jack and Victoria in the Sky Towers represents a Symbolic order set up by Sally, but how they came to live in these towers overseeing an apocalyptic earth reveals a gap in the viewer’s attempts to understand the narrative.

In *Oblivion*, the clones embody the symbolic order, as they are living a parody of American culture and the particularity of American cinematic apocalyptic genres (Žižek 2002, 16-17). In *Oblivion*, this simulated life in the Sky Tower, overlays with a destructive game of world domination and endless production that results in earth’s destruction – destruction by an unknown alien force. Jack and Victoria are company clones in the symbolic order to oversee this destruction. The Sky Tower is at once a domestic space and a hub for military operations or ‘missions’. The film encapsulates this American dream-home and lifestyle that exists side by side with the Scavs struggle to survive in the apocalypse brought about by superior technology. This world created for the clones stages a fantasy as Victoria plays the role of Jack’s wife, although it is a corporate arrangement. The Real of her desire is caught in an alien simulation constructed from fragments of their real lives. As the teams of Victoria and Jack clones continually break down, it is Jack’s failure to obtain the Real of his desire for Julia that causes their destruction.

The film tries to attain the Real, however, in Jack’s repetitive drive to capture the Real (all his clone manifestations) it becomes clear that this is an impossibility. Ultimately the film stages the failure to capture the Real – all it offers are fantasy constructions which are torn away because they are revealed to be fantasy constructions or simulations.

### **Fantasy Constructions, ‘The Real’ in Lacanian Film Theory – the contested gaze**

Lacanian film theory is a contested space offering discussion on the viewer’s escape from, or encounter with, the Real (McGowan 2003, 39). The viewer can read the ending of *Oblivion* as an escape from the

traumatic real that aligns fantasy and ideology (the symbolic). Todd McGowan claims in *Looking for the Gaze: Film Theory and its Vicissitudes*, that films can “employ[s] both desire and fantasy to enact an encounter with ‘the Real’ of the gaze” (McGowan 2003, 40). While he is examining two of Spielberg’s films, *Duel* (1971) and *Schindler’s List* (1993), this is what I claim is happening at the end of *Oblivion*. In the coming of Jack as clone / tech 52 to the lake, some years after the death of tech 49, it is, as Žižek argues, that behind a mediation sits the Real that fails attempts at representation (1989, 175). However, it is in this failure to represent the death of Jack Harper that the clone as “failure in representation, is the only way to represent it adequately” (Žižek 1989, 175). In a sense these arguments encapsulate the dichotomy between theories in which the symbolic order mediates a turn from this gaze preventing an encounter with its trauma. Jack as clone 52, at the lake, can be the cinematic mirror, Mulvey’s theory in its turn from the gaze.

The theory of the symbolic / fantasy can combine to enact an escape from the gaze deflecting “its trauma” (McGowan 2003, 38). This reading would consider the coming of Jack as clone / tech 52 to the lake as a ‘happy’ ending: a fantasy escape of the original Jack, from his death in The Tet to be reunited with Julia and the child in a new Eden. This scenario is a typical Hollywood formula. It fulfils the return to Eden which is “a state of union with the mother... in a condition of plenitude and the absence of all lack” (Lapsley & Westlake 1988, 73). However, the film does not supply one ending or encounter with a closure, like the event of 9/11 where closure was often impossible. These narratives give the viewer a choice. To choose the symbolic fantasy is what Kaplan describes as a “protective shield” that “articulates the desires of the socius” (1990, 116); the desires of the symbolic order.

I consider what we have in this closing scene is something more monstrous; a terrifying realization that Jack Harper is dead in what the viewer can comprehend beyond the image, even beyond the visual field. One choice of the viewer is to confront it directly, as an encounter with the Lacanian Real in the impossible object of Jack Harper. However, as Žižek claims that “The excess of the Real, the terrifying abyss of what is in the image beyond the image; either one confronts it directly, or one mediates it through the symbolic order” (2003, 62). This terrifying abyss is the apparition of Julia’s dead husband, his mirror image (suggested by the lake) that reflects an absence of the authentic human subject. This is the choice of the viewer of *Oblivion*: you either accept the screen of fantasy attached to the symbolic order or traverse the fantasy to ‘the Real’ that is the death of Jack Harper.



## **The Traumatic Embodiment of ‘The Real’ of Desire and Lacan’s Three Registers - the return of the dead as absent object**

Just as there are three registers of human reality in Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real, there are three incarnations of Jack Harper. In the imaginary stage is tech / clone 52’s return to the lake. This imaginary stage represents wholeness, the wholeness of Eden and plenitude (Haywood 2016, 3) like Mulvey’s theory of the cinematic mirror (1975, 10). The symbolic aligns with clone 49, and particularly the controlled paradise of the Sky Tower. This is a manifestation of the symbolic order itself. On the Blu-ray commentary of the film *Oblivion*, Kosinski describes it as “a world created for Jack”. He is speaking about the Sky Tower, The Tet and its branding. However, Jack / tech 49 is subsumed into another symbolic order, when he is captured by the human survivors of earth called Scavs. Jack / tech 49 becomes a Christ-figure following the Father-Figure of Malcolm Beech and their sacrifice when they blow up a bomb in the Tet. They kill themselves and eliminate the alien known as Sally. This is the repetition in the hero’s journey which began when Jack Harper, as leader of the Odyssey mission was taken into The Tet. This ‘real’ death is the last of Lacan’s three registers of human reality: this off-screen death is mediating the Real. Psychoanalytically the film is a procession through these three registers that is translating the reality of death and the agonising absence of the missing.

Jack clone / tech 52 searched for Julia for three years before finding her at the house ‘he’ (as clone 49) built. Jack tech / clone 52 is the impossible object gazing at Julia across the lake (McGowan 2003, 40), because her husband is dead. The final scene at the lake is where the viewer is confronted by Jack’s death (and whether they can accept it), his desire for Julia and the death drive. This dimension of the undead that will search for Julia, is the Real of his death and desire. This scene is narrated by Jack, (as a type of spiritual essence of all the ‘Jacks?’), his desire for Julia and the love that they shared, is, as Jack says, “undimmed by time and unbound by death”. This makes the scene a sentimental resurrection story in an attempt to turn from the Real. However this undead clone also represents a monstrous encounter with the Real – the possibility of the transference of trauma.

Miller points out that closure is the opposite of trauma’s pathways (2003, 44). If we can accept that the ending of the film represents the Real in the traumatic history of 9/11, (the trauma of loss and separation) then the intrusion of the Real must be against some symbolic order. Embodied in the main protagonist, Jack Harper – and particularly in the casting of Tom Cruise – is the American dream of itself: invincible, powerful, successful, wealthy, and exceptional. Jack is iconic in the sense that he is

an emblem of American self-image. He is an astronaut, an icon of the twentieth century's obsession with conquering space and the flowering of America's achievements.

The subjective gaze of Jack Harper would grant the film a happy ending – a closure. Like the event of 9/11 itself, there is no way to construct a transcendent fantasy reality or narrative out of the symbolic order if the viewer must confront the Real. In fact, the symbolic order fell with the towers, and is a ruin, a fragment, expressed as “cultural trauma” that requires “remediation of the future” (Grusin 2010, 34).

An analysis of the ending of the film reveals a cascade of trauma's pathways. Jack Harper, as tech / clone 52 – and his arrival at the lake – embodies trauma in its “afterlife, persistence, reoccurrence and attempts to find a narrative” (Miller 2003, 44). Those left behind (mostly women) after the attacks on the World Trade Center longed for a remnant, hoping for the identification of loved ones. Jack, as clone 52, is a DNA clone of Jack Harper. He is some part of Julia's husband that is an image like the photo by Clark and Flowers “From Dust to DNA” (Mitchell 2008, 188). Jack Harper is miraculously restored to their dream life together by the lake.<sup>2</sup> Mitchell writes about 9/11 as the “desire for literal biological reanimation” which he refers to as “the reverse of the funerary liturgy ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust’” (Mitchell 2008, 188). Jack / clone 52 is the literal manifestation of “the dream of us”, the Real of desire for the return of the missing dead. The image by Clark and Flowers is the longing for traces and relics of the victims of 9/11, the reverse of which, Mitchell claims, is the bizarre logic of a cloned resurrection from the DNA (2008, 188). The realisation of this cloned resurrection finds its mirror image in *Oblivion* in the lake scene: a reconstituted Jack Harper / clone 52, who affirms “I am him, I am Jack Harper and I am home!” This is opposed to Jack Harper clone 49 who affirms, “I am not him, I know that now”, after his desert revelation coming face to face with clone 52.

## Conclusion

I use psychoanalysis to contend that the film *Oblivion* taps into the viewer's memory of the trauma of 9/11. Following McGowan's theory that cinema harbours the Real through an encounter with the Gaze, the film *Oblivion* is infused with, and draws on the 9/11 experience. This is seen in the intertextuality and resonances in apocalyptic destruction, ruined architecture, the specific architectural

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<sup>2</sup> The story of Patricia Flounders seems to mirror this situation. Joseph and Patricia had built their dream home together but sadly she lost her husband in the Twin Towers when he did not leave immediately, staying to help a distressed colleague (Miller 2003, 43-44).

targets of the attacks (New York City, the Pentagon and Washington), the hero and Victoria's death in the Sky Tower – the falling ash and DNA. Embodied in Jack Harper is the Real – that is, his death. The ending of the film thus demonstrates Lacanian film theory's contested space. McGowan's claims concerning Metz and Mulvey are that they consider the effect of the cinematic experience as the illusion of mastery, the mirror. If the viewer follows this early Lacanian theory then in the film the clones are just the screen (fantasy) for an absence that hides the Real behind an image: the imaginary stage; or the return of Jack Harper as tech 52 – the happy ending. Žižek critiques this as a theory which works only when referring to classical Hollywood cinema (1991, 16-17). Reading *Oblivion* in this 'classical' way is a turning from an encounter with the Lacanian Real, by overlooking the realization that Jack Harper is dead, and refusing to see the 9/11 subtext revealed through the film's gaze – a traumatic encounter with the Real of death and absence. This realisation works against a narrative of closure, using Jack / clone 52, as the image of the returning hero finding wholeness at the lake. The attempt, to reinsert Jack Harper / tech 52 into the symbolic order, in an Eden with Julia, is an attempt at a cinematic turn from the Real. To engage fully with Lacan and Lacanian film theory, the role of the Real and the Gaze in the cinematic experience must be considered. McGowan claims that like the gaze of the skull in Holbein's painting, the cinema becomes the potential space for a traumatic encounter with the Real (2003, 29).

*Oblivion's* narratives are a pre-trauma regression into origins: from the apocalyptic to pre-fall, Edenic nostalgia (Haywood 2016, 1) as a response to the "techno-dystopia" (Groes 2016, 148) that is produced by twenty-first century warfare, terrorism, global destruction, and the technology of the cinema harboring the Real of apocalyptic destruction. After living so close to death can this story bring about some sort of narrative for trauma that allows the dead to be buried? Uncannily, it was Jack and Julia Harper's fantasy to be "buried by the lake" together, but in the film, it is not possible to have that closure, thus mirroring the plight of the 9/11 families. The film echoes these complications in the 9/11 disaster, Engle says of the victims of 9/11: "The dead are not only not buried; in some cases, they are not even recognized as dead" (2009, 18).

Redfield writes that "the event called September 11 or 9/11 was as real as death, but its traumatic force seems nonetheless inseparable from a certain ghostliness" (2007, 56). Jack is the death drive, the "undead". Because he was not given a proper burial, he becomes "the spectral presence" (Žižek 2002, 19). This is the strange experience that dominates the end of the film. It must be considered more carefully using psychoanalysis and the later Lacanian Real, to understand how this film attempts to

mediate the Real of 9/11. The symbolic Real or simulacrum of the reconstituted DNA of Julia's dead husband for which there is no remains or remnants, and is not buried, returns to "the dream of us" and finds Julia at the lake. This is where the Real Gaze is harboured because *Oblivion* resists closure; mimicking trauma and the death drive. In the opening scene, the viewer is on the observation deck of the Empire State Building where we experience the gaze. Therefore, *Oblivion's* dream sequence begins with an image that is reflecting absence and mediating the Real in both history and cinematic history. It is harbouring the Real of the viewer's memory, the encounter with the trauma of the absence of the Twin Towers. With regard to an encounter with the Lacanian Real this registers as an unconscious trauma through Kosinski's subtext because, as McGowan states, that "consciousness allows no room for what is missing in the field of vision. The very structure of consciousness cannot admit absence" (2007, 13). However, this is revealed through an engagement with psychoanalysis and cinema as a way of 'seeing', that the viewer sees this absence to which the film refers. This is delivered through an absence in image; the Twin Towers are no longer in the New York skyline. The film begins and ends with absence and loss. In *Oblivion*, the final scene involves "entering more deeply into the real... [Jack is] both lost object" (Freeland 2013, 229) and, standing at the edge of the lake, is reflecting absence.

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