Journal of American Studies, **45** (2011), 4, 835–851 © Cambridge University Press 2011
doi:10.1017/S0021875811000983

September 11 as Heist

HAMILTON CARROLL

This article examines two films, James Marsh's *Man on Wire* and Spike Lee's *Inside Man* in relation to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. It looks at both films as examples of the heist genre and explores the ways in which genre conventions enable the production of meaning about the terrorist attacks. The conventions of the heist film, it argues, help make sense of September 11 by producing a different set of relations to time and space that draw on the uncanny, rather than the traumatic, nature of the events. Narrating stories of transgression, both films place the horrors of September 11 in another context. Through the genre conventions of the heist, each film offers a view of New York in which the events of September 11 and the destruction of the World Trade Center stand as the center. Not yet complete in one, already destroyed in the other, the Twin Towers haunt these films. As *Man on Wire* and *Inside Man* each attempt to make sense of the world in which the city of New York is marked most powerfully by a profound absence, it is in their uses of the heist genre that they find a representational space in which to mourn the World Trade Center and the victims of the attacks.

In this essay I discuss two films, James Marsh's *Man on Wire* (2008) and Spike Lee's *Inside Man* (2006). Despite their manifest differences – Marsh's film is a documentary account of a real-life event and Lee's is a fictional crime thriller – I read both films as symptomatic responses to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In particular, I examine how each film makes recourse to the thematic and formal conventions of the heist genre to work through post-September 11 cultural anxieties. The conventions of the heist film, I argue, help make sense of September 11 by producing a different set of relations to time and space that draw on the uncanny, rather than the traumatic, nature of the events. The heist allows a different point of access to the events of September 11 that moves beyond the representation of trauma, thereby producing new meaning for the events by placing them in a different set of psychological and emotional contexts. They do not ask, as much post-September 11 culture does, how the events can be represented. Rather than locating September 11 outside narrative, each film mobilizes a particular form of narrative contextualization for the events. Recasting the events of September 11 as uncanny, rather than traumatic, these films move beyond questions of representability and place the events within history.

Hamilton Carroll, School of English, University of Leeds. Email: H.E.M.Carroll@leeds.ac.uk.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875811000983 Published online by Cambridge University Press

As a cinematic genre the heist film contains features of the uncanny that are evident in its formal structures, recurrent tropes, and plot devices. With antecedents dating back to the earliest days of narrative cinema in the United States, the genre gains its current form with the noir films of the 1940s and 1950s. Classic heist films include *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950; dir. John Huston), *Bob Le Flambeur* (1956; dir. Jean-Pierre Melville), *Rififi* (1955, Jules Dassin), and *Ocean's Eleven* (1960; dir. Lewis Milestone). More recent examples include *Reservoir Dogs* (1992; dir. Quentin Tarrantino), *Ocean's Eleven* (2001; dir. Steven Soderbergh), and *Heist* (2001; dir. David Mamet). Usually revolving around an elaborate plot to steal something, heist films typically follow a three-act formula: preparation and planning, heist, aftermath. While the genre typically follows a three-act formula with a clear temporal progression of before, during, and after, it also relies on troubled or confused spatial, temporal, and interpersonal relationships. The crime that stands at the center of any heist film is frequently the work of a group of criminals (rather than of a single individual), inter-group tension is a common feature, and the double cross is a frequent plot device. In both its spatial and its temporal representations, the heist further reflects the uncanny in its representation of complex psychological drama in which doubling is a constitutive feature. The heist's uncanny aspects frequently reflect or allegorize the transformed relationships of the human subject with the social, technological, and cultural conditions of late modernity.

As the singular transformations of modernity have radically altered subjective perceptions of both time and space, the uncanny has become a mode of perception. In his foundational essay on the uncanny, Freud suggests that the term "applies to everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open," and he wonders "under what conditions the familiar can become uncanny and frightening?"[1] The relationship between these two aspects of the uncanny – the familiar rendered unfamiliar, the unfamiliar discovered at the heart of the familiar – produce what is perhaps the most uncanny effect of all: its ambivalent and mutable nature. "*Heimlich*," Freud suggests, "becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym *unheimlich*."[2] What was presumed familiar is revealed to be – or transformed into – the unfamiliar. These two central aspects of the uncanny – the familiar made strange and the hidden being revealed – correspond to the key plot devices of the heist film: the elaborate planning of the heist, on the one hand, and the collapse into uncertainty that

[1] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *idem*, *The Uncanny* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 132 and 124. [2] Ibid., 134.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875811000983 Published online by Cambridge University Press

inevitably follows its execution, on the other. The one thing the viewer knows as she sits down to watch a heist film is to expect the unexpected. Because the unexpected is couched within the confines of a clearly recognizable set of genre conventions and is thus familiar (even expected), the heist film also produces a complicated relationship between the known and the unknown. What is familiar frequently becomes unfamiliar, what is unfamiliar becomes familiar, and the double and the double cross are constitutive devices of the genre. It is this uncanny relationship between the known and the unknown that makes the heist a particularly rich genre for the cinematic representation of post-September 11 anxieties in US culture.

The uncanny is most clearly manifest in the heist film in relation to fraught spatial and temporal relations. Problems of proximity and of the fraught relationship between the inside and the outside, the near and the far, haunt the heist film and account for many of its uncanny aspects. Anthony Vidler calls the uncanny "a dominant constituent of modern nostalgia" and "a significant psychoanalytical and aesthetic response to the real shock of the modern."[3] Refracted through the miniaturizing lens of an elaborate bank robbery or "one last job," the heist film provides a location for the working through of cultural anxieties about spatial and temporal relations. A frequent feature of the heist genre, for example, is the act of gaining access to a building by subterranean means, and the successful execution of the heist often involves approaching the target object by tunneling under, through, or around buildings. Much of the action typically takes place underground, underwater, or inside enclosed spaces. The criminal act is typically one of attempting to gain access to a forbidden space (the bank vault, the safe, the locked display case, the bedroom dressing table). Time, moreover, is always of the essence and the heist almost always takes place against the clock. A race against time, the heist is a representation of the conflict between movement and stasis. Confinement is both a temporary working condition for the criminal and, with the risk of capture and imprisonment, a potential future condition.

In its penetration of forbidden spaces, the heist draws on one of the constituent features of the uncanny: fear of invasion, and of the home in particular as a violable space. Displaced to the bank vault or the jewelry store, the genre draws on fears of domestic invasion and anxieties over the porous relationship between the public and the private. Vidler argues that the "favorite motif" of the uncanny is

> precisely the contrast between a secure and homely interior and the fearful invasion of an alien presence; on a psychological level, its play was one of doubling, where

[3] Anthony Vilder, *The Architectural Uncanny* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), x and 9.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875811000983 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the other is, strangely enough, experienced as a replica of the self, all the more fearsome because apparently the same."[4]

The uncanny not only names the disquieting intrusion of the foreign into the domestic that has become a pervasive feature of modernity but also names the radical transformations of domestic space itself. Viewed in this way, the uncanny aspects of the September 11 terrorist attacks become clear. As a series of attacks on public buildings, the events were uncanny precisely because of their nondomestic locations. The home was palpably absent on September 11. This is why, at least in part, the events of September 11 were such a shock: separated from the realm of the domestic in almost every way, they refused the sorts of sentimentalization that typically undergird responses to disaster. As the almost immediate reclamation of the term "homeland" in US discourse after September 11 shows, the domestic was a vital symbolic location for the production of meaning about the events. Thus what many responses to September 11 attempt is to transform the scale of the attacks into something manageable, legible, or comprehensible. Their incomprehensible scale is collapsed through a process of domestication.[5] The heist film enables this transformation by reframing the events within the contours of a familiar cinematic genre, thereby enabling a working through of the events' uncanny aspects. As *Man on Wire* and *Inside Man* each attempt to make sense of the incomprehensible, to represent the unrepresentable, it is in their uses of the heist genre that they find the representational space to make such transformations possible.

MAN ON WIRE

In its nostalgic representation of a spectacular event, recast as a heist, *Man on Wire* reclaims the symbolic space of the World Trade Center from the space of terror as it constructs a useable past from the extraordinary act it documents. A joint production of Discovery Films, the BBC, and the UK Film Council, and directed by British filmmaker James Marsh, *Man on Wire* takes as its subject matter Philippe Petit's famous high-wire walk between the north and south towers of the as-yet-unfinished World Trade Center on 7 August 1974.[6] Adapted from Petit's memoir of the event, *To Reach the Clouds* (2003),

[4] Ibid., 3.

[5] For more on this subject, particularly in relation to the figure of the firefighter in US culture after September 11, see my *Affirmative Reaction: New Formations of White Masculinity* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011), chapters 1 and 2.

[6] Petit's act also serves as a plot device in Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), winner of the National Book Award, and is the subject of Mordecai Gerdstein's Caldecott

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875811000983 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the film comprises a mixture of interviews with Petit and his fellow conspirators, archival film footage and photographs, and dramatic reenactments. Following the artist's own descriptions of the event, *Man on Wire* presents Petit's act as a daring heist and constructs a tense and compelling account of the planning, execution, and aftermath of the event. As Annie Allix, Petit's former girlfriend and accomplice, suggests, part of the appeal of the wire walk was its illegality. "It was like a bank robbery," she points out in the film, "and that pleased him immensely." Using the three-act formula typical of the heist genre, in particular a long planning and preparation sequence, the film provides tension and a sense of the unexpected to an event whose outcome is already well known. The audience of *Man on Wire* knows from the start how events turn out: Petit's wire walk is successful, he is arrested and then freed, he does not die in the attempt. The audience knows what; it is given a version of the how and the why.[7] The film stages a relationship between the known and the unknown that is cut through with uncanny resonances that form a central part of its meaning-making apparatus. Recast as heist, a minor historical event gains meaning through its uncanny resemblance to the historical events that took place in the same location almost thirty years later. Although *Man on Wire* does not directly reference the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the film nevertheless draws a clear series of parallels between that event and Petit's earlier transformative act. The parallels produce the film's meaning as the evocation of September 11 provides the film with a powerful set of contextual references. At the same time, the story of Petit's act is reclaimed in order to make sense of the present.

Finding a symbolic origin point for the World Trade Center in Petit's act, the film attempts to counteract the uncanny status of the Twin Towers as the "shock of the modern" by humanizing them. For, if the attacks of September 11 were unimaginable, the building itself was no less difficult to comprehend.[8] The Twin Towers of the WTC were always already uncanny

---

Medal-winning children's book *The Man Who Walked between the Towers* (2003), which was made into an animated film narrated by Jake Gyllenhaal.

[7] In this way, the film bears comparison to Paul Greengrass's extraordinary film *United 93* (2006), which sets out with careful precision to document – and where necessary imagine – the events that led up to the crash of the fourth hijacked plane, United Airlines flight 93, in a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

[8] There is, even in such attempts to describe and discuss September 11, an already complex terminological tension: is it the event or the events? The attack or the attacks? Is the World Trade Center and the Twin Towers a building or the buildings? The singular and the plural are in constant and irresolvable conflict. Any decision in the name of consistency leaves out as much as it clarifies, not least the attack on the Pentagon and the plight of United Airlines flight 93, each of which have been all but excised from the public perception of the day.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875811000983 Published online by Cambridge University Press

objects, provoking fear, awe, and a sense of time and space out of joint with human cognition. They were latter-day examples of the technological sublime that features so prominently in twentieth-century American life and culture. The uncanny nature of September 11 is often tied to the buildings' disturbing double nature. Twins, doubles, mirror images, the Twin Towers already evoke the uncanny. Their overwhelming proportions further unsettle. Even before September 11 the World Trade Center was a contested site at which the relationship between the human inhabitants of Manhattan and the increasingly inhuman scale of modern life came into conflict. Vast in scale and doubled in number, the Twin Towers dominated the New York skyline and refused the human by existing out of all proportion to human scales of perception.[9] That after September 11 the signature buildings of the World Trade Center were transformed from the Twin Towers to Ground Zero merely confirms their already uncanny status: a monstrous double, endowed with the mythic force of an origin point at the moment of its destruction, the World Trade Center transcended the limits of human cognition while also signifying the triumph of human endeavor.

A eulogy of sorts, *Man on Wire* uses its celebration of Petit's "coup" not only to memorialize the Twin Towers but also to rescale them for human consumption. Because Petit's act took place at the moment of the Twin Towers' creation, it serves as a symbolic bookend and inaugurates the thirty-year-long life of the World Trade Center as a signature feature of the Manhattan skyline and of the tourist life of the city of New York. Petit, the film suggests, "introduced" the Twin Towers to the city and the world. Through an extraordinary act of daring, bravery, and superhuman physical prowess, Petit performed the magical act of transforming the inhuman scale of the towers into something altogether more manageable for the citizens of Manhattan and of the world. By stringing a wire between the two towers, he made them one. Joined and conquered, the Twin Towers were reduced to a human scale and their uncanny doubleness was transformed into an irreducible singularity. As two became one, the World Trade Center became a familiar, and therefore mournable, object.[10] The film manages this

[9] Nicholas Royle suggests of September 11 that "the appalling apparent accident of a plane flying into a skyscraper [which he calls an "extraordinary double-building"] was followed minutes later by its uncanny repetition, another plane crashing into the other skyscraper, immediately disconfirming (and yet, still, in that moment, incredibly) any sense of the mere 'accidental'." Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), vii.

[10] On an episode of *Larry King Live* that aired in October 2001, Paul Goldberger, architecture critic for the *New Yorker*, claimed of Petit and WTC climber George Willig, "I thought both George and Phillipe did something wonderful, which is they put some of the romance

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875811000983 Published online by Cambridge University Press

transformation through its mix of interview footage and reenactment, which gives human scale to the buildings by placing them within the familiar confines of genre. As Petit and his accomplices provide information about their heist in the form of filmed interviews, the events they describe are illustrated on screen. Moving from documentary footage shot by an early accomplice to reenactments using actors, the action sequences of the film split the mammoth undertaking into a series of vignettes that emphasize the criminal aspects of the undertaking. Shot in grainy black and white, the reenactments seamlessly blend with the film's archival footage and photographs. They show Petit and his accomplices planning the heist, practicing the various skills they will need to carry it out successfully, acquiring the necessary tools and equipment and, finally, carrying out the coup.

The heist that *Man on Wire* describes constitutes a criminal act conceived as a public spectacle. Petit's act was described as the "artistic crime of the century," a naming that can now only invite comparison with the crime of the century that was September 11 and that Karlheinz Stockhausen called the "biggest work of art there has ever been."[11] The relationship between art and criminality often is a central feature of the heist. The genre typically elevates the criminal act to an artistic one and the criminal is frequently likened to an artist or, at the very least, a craftsman. The skills required to carry out the heist are often shown in loving detail and the criminals, each with a particular specialization, come together to form the perfect team. At the same time, these characters often are presented as artists as well and the skills required to break into a bank are often the same as those required to repair watches or build antique sailboats, for example. Such legitimate skills often serve as a front for the criminal enterprise, but they also serve to humanize and build sympathy for the criminal and to blur the distinctions between criminal and

---

into the towers that the architects had left out. These were – these were not always the most exhilarating buildings. We were proud of them. We believed in their height, we believed in the ambition that they represented, but there was a certain dullness to them, and it was only with Phillipe Petit and then later George Willig did their extraordinary things that these towers became actually objects of romance and excitement to so many people." Transcript can be found at http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0110/27/lklw.00.html.

[11] Petit, one might say, was at the forefront of the now common relationship between corporate power and the culture industries. After his arrest and subsequent release following his wire walk, Petit was rewarded with a lifetime pass to the observation deck of the World Trade Center. He was, in effect, paid for his transformative act. In this way, Petit's own spectacular act fused the still-developing global economy (to which the World Trade Center was intended to be a monument) and the spectacle of art. It was corporate sponsored art *avant la lettre*. Transcript of Stockhausen's interview, in German, is available in *MusicTexte*, 91 (Dec. 2001), 69–77.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875811000983 Published online by Cambridge University Press

legitimate enterprise. The film finds in Philippe Petit a perfect example of the criminal as artist. A young man in 1974, Petit is presented in *Man on Wire* as an artist whose amazing physical dexterity and sense of showmanship gave him the ability to rebel against the conventions of a staid society in spectacular ways and to offer the citizens of Manhattan a superhuman spectacle beyond their wildest imaginations. In Petit's performance, however, art and spectacle transcend criminality.

By encoding Petit's criminal act in the confines of the heist genre, the film mobilizes a series of conventions through which criminality can be recoded. Narrated as a magical tale of youthful transgression by the now-old participants of the original event, Petit's actions are placed in a nostalgic frame. As a work of nostalgia, the film is about time and the transformation of the past into a usable fiction in order to make sense of the present. After September 11, the nostalgia that the film promotes stands as a form of memorialization in which the later act becomes encoded in the former. When, in an interviewed clip given early on in the film, Petit says of his nascent desire to join the Twin Towers, "the object of my dream doesn't exist yet," the audience cannot but be reminded that they exist no longer. Petit's desire for a future moment, the completion of the Twin Towers, is recast in the face of a now-past moment, that of their destruction. While the film's meaning derives from two past events, Petit's wire walk and the terrorist attacks of September 11, Petit's original act only gains its full meaning retrospectively. After September 11, its time has finally come and its proper meaning is made clear. *Man on Wire* offers the viewer an alternative answer to the common question asked about September 11, articulated by Slavoj Žižek in the rhetorical question, "Where have we already seen the same thing over and over again?"[12] While for Žižek, as for many others, the answer to this question is in that other staple of Hollywood genre cinema, the disaster film, *Man on Wire* provides a different answer: in Petit's sublime performance. The suicidal fantasy of the disaster film is replaced by the awe-inspiring spectacle of Petit's performance. What *Man on Wire* represents in its performance-as-heist is an act of giving and not an act of theft. Nevertheless, when Petit plays down the risk of death inherent in his feat, his almost boastful claim – "if I die, what a beautiful death. To die in the execution of your passion" – is voiced after September 11 and with full knowledge of the terrorists who *did* die in the execution of *their* passion, and of the innocent victims who died with them. As the spectacular collapse of the Twin Towers – which could not have been planned by the terrorists but which must have fulfilled their

[12] Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002), 11.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875811000983 Published online by Cambridge University Press

wildest fantasies – instantly turned an act of terrorism into a global media event, Petit's earlier transformative act gains meaning retroactively as it signals a birth, the proper meaning of which only becomes clear after the towers' destruction and symbolic death.

When the film transitions to the execution of Petit's act after a long planning and preparation sequence the resonances with September 11 become clear. Looking at the still photographs and the brief snatches of black-and-white film footage of the crowds standing on street corners in lower Manhattan in 1974, stunned into awesome silence as they crane their necks to get a better view of the spectacle that unfolds before them, it is impossible not to see the parallels between that morning and its horrific corollary a quarter of a century later. Photographs of the event, such as one in which Petit is seen walking across the wire suspended between the two towers and a small commercial jet plane can be seen in the upper left-hand corner of the frame, provide an unsettling reminder of events to come.[13] Situating Philippe Petit's playful and mischievous act in implicit comparison to the events of September 11, *Man on Wire* simultaneously recalls the moment of the Twin Towers' inauguration as American icons and rewrites the historical comparison between August 7, 1974 and September 11, 2001. Petit's assault on the Twin Towers both substitutes for September 11 and is its uncanny double. It is the uncanny familiar that rewrites the later event. Viewed in light of *Man on Wire*, the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center becomes a doppelgänger, a monstrous restaging of Petit's earlier act, which is itself rendered uncanny by the comparison.

So striking is the correspondence between Petit's act and that of the September 11 hijackers that it constitutes an example of what Harold Bloom calls, in another context, "*apophrades*, or the return of the dead." The term *apophrades*, Bloom explains, comes from "the Athenian dismal or unlucky days upon which the dead returned to reinhabit the houses in which they had lived." For Bloom it names the moment in a great poet's career when

> the poem is … *held* open to the precursor, where once it *was* open, and the uncanny effect is that the new poem's achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor's characteristic work.[14]

[13] Such is the power of this image that it was chosen for inclusion in Petit's memoir of the events. See *To Reach the Clouds* (London and New York: Faber and Faber, 2004), 189.

[14] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 15–16, original emphasis. Nicholas Royle devotes useful attention to this passage from Bloom in his discussion of the uncanny nature of being buried alive in *The Uncanny*. See Royle, 146–48.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875811000983 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The "uncanny effect" described by Bloom in relation to the art of poetry is the stunning transformation of the original into the copy. In just such a way, Philippe Petit's wire walk in August 1974 – despite its originary status – becomes, retroactively, a copy of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 which so fulfils the "object of [Petit's] dream" that it replaces it. What *Man on Wire* attempts to do is reclaim that dream from terror. The film transforms the terror of September 11, 2001 into the sublime wonder of August 7, 1974.

If Petit's triumph is that he did *not* die in the fulfillment of his dream and the terrorists' triumph is that they *did*, then *Man on Wire* attempts to return life to the site of death. The film performs the ideological work of reclaiming a sense of American innocence, what Amy Kaplan has called "a narrative of historical exceptionalism," that offers an image of what was that can be celebrated.[15] In its presentation of the moment of the Twin Towers' symbolic birth, the film offers a nostalgic vision of a forgotten history rendered familiar by its uncanny resemblance to another event. Presenting the audience with the spectacle of a band of foreigners invading New York in order to carry out a criminal act, but offering the spectacle of art not of death, the film performs a recuperative function as it memorializes the absent Twin Towers and those that died within them. The past becomes a possible future as the film substitutes the awesome sublimity of Petit's spectacular performance for the act of terror. The film's utilization of the heist situates Petit's benign spectacle in relation to a series of genre conventions that manage the uncanny correspondence between art and terror. Freud suggests that "we can also call a living person uncanny … when we credit him with evil intent … realized with the help of special powers."[16] In *Man on Wire*, Petit is presented as the antidote to the uncanny figure of the terrorist, bent on harm. Intent on transporting the spectator to a realm beyond the everyday, Petit transforms the crime into an artistic act. The criminal becomes an artist, the crime a spectacular performance. As the space between life and death is shown to be infinitesimal, *Man on Wire* reclaims the narrative of the World Trade Center from the terrorists as it tells the story of an event that becomes uncanny in its familiarity.

INSIDE MAN

If the links between *Man on Wire* and September 11 are clearly apparent (albeit left implicit in the film itself), *Inside Man* bears a less obvious

[15] Amy Kaplan, "Homeland Insecurities: Reflections on Language and Space," *Radical History Review*, 85 (Winter 2003), 83.

[16] Freud, "The Uncanny," 149.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875811000983 Published online by Cambridge University Press

relationship to the events. Nevertheless, as *Man on Wire* produces a usable past through which the events of September 11 can be understood, *Inside Man* also uses the heist genre to work through post-September 11 anxieties. The film was marketed and reviewed as a conventional crime thriller and, propelled by a cast of well-known actors including Denzel Washington, Jodie Foster, Clive Owen, Willem Dafoe, and Christopher Plummer, it was a critical and commercial success. Taken by audiences and critics alike to be a straight genre film, it was not seen as a "Spike Lee film" but merely as a piece of entertainment cinema.[17] However, like *Man on Wire* the film utilizes the familiar trappings of genre to singular effect and the conventions of the heist allow the working through of more serious subject matter. The film produces a dialectical relationship between the known and the unknown, the familiar and the foreign, through which the events of September 11 and their effects can be explored.

The plot of *Inside Man* bears many of the hallmarks of the conventional heist film. In it, a team of bank robbers, led by Dalton Russell (Clive Owen), besieges a Manhattan bank and holds a group of bank employees and members of the public hostage for a number of hours. The film opens on a bright and sunny morning in downtown Manhattan as the bank robbers make their way to Wall Street and the fictional Manhattan Trust Bank. The strikingly clear blue skies and early-morning timeframe of this opening sequence recall to the viewer's mind, as does the timing of Philippe Petit's wire walk in *Man on Wire*, that the events of September 11 also unfolded as New Yorkers awoke to cloudless skies on a perfect early-fall day. As the opening credits end, the viewer follows the criminals' nondescript panel van as it parks behind the bank and, with a quick cut, the audience is placed inside the bank foyer, as a crane shot captures from above a view of the early-morning patrons of the bank who are, as yet, unaware of what is about to transpire.[18] In this opening scene, the film's complex production of disorientation becomes clearly apparent. While the first-time viewer has no reason to believe that anyone other than the boilersuit-wearing criminals are involved in the heist, later events in the film make clear that easy distinctions

[17] *Inside Man* was Lee's most commercially successful film to date, grossing $88.5 million domestically with total global box-office receipts of $184.3 million (realized from a production budget of $45 million). These totals put the film ahead of the year's two explicitly September 11-themed films, *United 93* (2006) and Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006), whose domestic grosses totaled $70 million and $31.4 million respectively. *Inside Man* was also far more commercially successful than Lee's previous film, *25th Hour* (2002), which grossed a mere $13 million (albeit from a production budget of only $5 million).

[18] In *Man on Wire*, too, the criminal accomplices, driving a panel van, gain access to the subterranean WTC parking garage by masquerading as construction workers.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875811000983 Published online by Cambridge University Press

between victim and perpetrator are unsettled from the very outset. Characters who appear to be victims turn out to be gang members, and the everyday frictions between strangers cast together side by side in a line at the bank become far more sinister. The criminals' target is a cache of diamonds in the possession of bank owner Arthur Case (Christopher Plummer) that are stored in a safe-deposit box in the bank's vault. The plan for the theft calls for Russell to be hidden behind the wall of a storage room in the basement of the bank and for his accomplices to be set free by the police alongside their victims. After things have died down, Russell frees himself and leaves the bank by the front door with the diamonds. It is this eventuality that the hostage taking is designed to facilitate. The diamonds that Russell and his accomplices steal from Case are the remaining spoils of the banker's dealings with the Nazis during World War II, crimes of which Russell has evidence. Because Case does not wish for his own history as a war criminal to become public knowledge, he does not reveal to the police that he has lost anything during the robbery and attempts to have the investigation halted. The film ends with Russell and his accomplices at liberty and the police investigation all but dead. The film's use of the uncanny conventions of the heist genre is clear: doubling, internment, hidden knowledge, and uncertainty are all constitutive aspects of the film's plot.

The criminals execute their heist through a cunning use of subterfuge and obfuscation: they force their hostages to strip down to their underwear and to don dark-blue jumpsuits, white facemasks, and dark sunglasses identical to the ones that they themselves wear; they refer to each other only using variations of the name Steven – Steve, Stevie, Steve-O; they fake the execution of a hostage; they bug the police command trailer and deliberately mislead the police; and they appear to all leave the bank mingled amongst the hostages when the police storm the building. In their execution of a hostage taking that is in reality a piece of theater designed to enable another criminal act to take place unnoticed (Russell's internment and subsequent theft of the diamonds), the criminals produce a fake or a double of the real event. The spectacular event disguises the actual crime and the film stages a conflict between the real and the unreal. A crime has taken place, but it is not the one that the police believe has been perpetrated or that the film's audience has watched unfold on the screen before them. As it becomes clear that the criminals have orchestrated the whole event and have repeatedly manipulated the police, questions arise about who is watching whom, and for what reason. Such questions are made explicit in the film as the hostage crisis immediately produces an audience of onlookers, who are shown standing behind police sawhorses and eager to see how events will unfold. Describing

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875811000983 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the filming of one of these crowd scenes, Lee points out that there is also a second level of audience visible on the film: the crowds of real New Yorkers watching the filming take place. Television news crews film the events and they are broadcast live on air. There is in these displacements a doubling, almost a tripling, of the order of spectacle and performance. Real New Yorkers watch fictional New Yorkers watch a fictional hostage crisis develop. As *Man on Wire* does when it shows images of the crowds watching Petit walk between the Twin Towers, Lee's film foregrounds the staging of spectacle and repeatedly calls up the uncertain status of the real. In both films, a spectacular and theatrical event precedes a real crime, which is itself a work of spectacle.

In *Inside Man*, the relationship between the real and the spectacle is also evoked in the film's narrative framing. The film utilizes a double time frame that shifts between the events of the hostage taking and interwoven scenes, set after a siege of the building by the police, in which detectives Keith Frazier (Denzel Washington) and Bill Mitchell (Chiwetel Ejiofor) interview the survivors. Because of the success of the criminals' subterfuge, the police are unable to tell criminal from innocent victim. The triumph of the robbers' plan (and, to a lesser extent, of the film's plot) lies on the success of this subterfuge. Neither the police nor the audience know who is a criminal and who is a victim and, in the confusion, the criminals are able to disguise the fact that they have left one of their own concealed in the basement of the bank. Because the later scenes are inserted within the action of the heist, the audience knows almost from the outset that all is not right, but does not know precisely how or why. Part of the pleasure to be derived from watching the film is that of trying to solve the riddle of who is who. While at the end of the film the audience finally sees all of the criminals together and out of disguise, and is thus given the satisfaction of a neat resolution, the police, pressured by Case, have concluded that there is no crime to solve. What is known to the audience remains unknown to the police. These breakdowns in distinction between criminal and victim, between crime and performance, reflect the uncanny status of the known and the unknown, the inside and the outside, after September 11. Like the suicide bomber trained in US flight schools and living in suburban Florida, *Inside Man*'s representation of criminals hidden in plain sight reflects post-September 11 anxieties of proximity.[19] At the same time, the film's staging of crime as carefully

[19] As Jean Baudrillard suggests, "Adding insult to injury, they even used the daily banality of the American way of life as a mask: these people were two-faced. Sleeping in the suburbs, where they read and studied, with wife and kids, until one day they sprang into action, like time bombs. The faultless mastery of this clandestinity is as practically terrorist as the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875811000983 Published online by Cambridge University Press

orchestrated spectacle mirrors the September 11 attacks and the news media's live reporting of the collapse of the Twin Towers.

Inside Man is a film about seeing. Nowhere is this clearer than during the film's opening sequence in which New York is represented as a site in which what is absent gains an uncanny and destabilizing presence. As the opening credits of the film begin to the accompaniment of the hypnotic and compelling beat of the song "Chaiyya Chaiyya" by famed Indian film score composer A. R. Rahman, the viewer watches the members of the criminal gang make their ways, first individually and then together, to Wall Street and the bank in which the heist takes place. The audience travels with the criminals through the outer districts of New York, from Coney Island to Brooklyn Heights, across the Brooklyn Bridge, through Chinatown, and finally to the intersection of Wall Street and Broadway where they park behind the fictional Manhattan Trust Bank building and, disguised as painters, begin to unload their supplies. In this opening sequence, the audience is given the familiar sights of the city, but it is a familiarity that is now marked by an uncanny absence: that of the Twin Towers.

Offering a virtual tour of the city, the sights of New York and Manhattan that the film establishes here are already familiar to the audience from other films, television shows, and tourist visits: the Coney Island Cyclone roller coaster, Chinatown, the view of lower Manhattan from Brooklyn Heights, the Statue of Liberty, the sweeping expanse of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, the towering pillars and immense suspension cables of the Brooklyn Bridge, the stone gargoyles of Wall Street, and, in a reminder of the film's post-September 11 context, the massive stars and stripes now suspended from the external facade of the New York Stock Exchange. In this opening sequence, Lee creates a tourist's-eye view of Manhattan and the outer boroughs. The easy familiarity conjured by the New York City sights that appear onscreen, however, is belied by the various shots of the Manhattan skyline in which the absence of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center still, five years later (at the time of the film's release), serves as a stark reminder of their destruction. The serialization of New York tourist attractions and signifiers is haunted by the absence of the Twin Towers, which remain startlingly present in their absence.[20] Radically transformed, the broken

spectacular act of September 11, because it throws the cloak of suspicion on any individual. Jean Baudrillard, "L'espirit du terrorisme," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101, 2 (Spring 2002), 409–10.

[20] It is interesting, in this regard, that Lee does not choose to include the Empire State Building in this whirlwind tour, perhaps simply because none of the film's criminals come from that far up the island.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875811000983 Published online by Cambridge University Press

skyline of Manhattan symbolizes loss, and its representation at the start of the film contextualizes the action that follows.

The heist that the elaborate hostage taking is designed to obfuscate – the interment of Dalton Russell behind the wall of a storage room in the bank's basement and the subsequent theft of Case's diamonds – calls to mind what is perhaps the most uncanny aspect of September 11 and the thing that most haunts the site of Ground Zero: the absence, indistinguishability, and unrepresentability of human remains. Freud points out that "to many people the acme of the uncanny is represented by anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits, ghosts."[21] He further elaborates that "some would award the crown of the uncanny to the idea of being buried alive, only apparently dead."[22] Buried alive, Russell calls forth the specter of the absent presence of the victims of September 11, innumerable because they literally could not be counted, but – as dust – everywhere in the air of lower Manhattan in the weeks following the attacks. Russell is the double both of the members of the terrorist sleeper cell, poised in waiting for their moment of action, and of the absent victim's body. The victims of September 11 were nowhere and everywhere at once, beyond representation because both invisible and all too present: buried in, and constitutive of, the rubble of the World Trade Center; fragmented and atomized into the air of lower Manhattan; excised from media portrayals of the event like the falling man of Richard Drew's infamous photograph. If, as Vidler suggests, the uncanny is an "intimation of the fragmentary, the morselated, the broken," then *Inside Man*'s representation of the buried subject performs a doubled refraction.[23] An "inside man," Russell stands as both the known and the unknown, the proximate and the foreign. At once criminal and victim, thief and agent of justice, Russell becomes an example of the extimate, that which inhabits both the inside and the outside. An uncanny double, Russell, like Petit, haunts the site of mass death.

Russell's interment, moreover, is symbolic of the hidden history of violence in lower Manhattan in relation to which the attacks of September 11 become not singular, but part of a series of events reaching back to the turn of the century. While the film explicitly locates itself in a post-September 11 world of US anxiety and global military adventurism, it traces the roots of that world much further back than 2001. Staging a heist at the center of Wall Street, *Inside Man* conjures up the history of the interrelationship between global finance and violence in lower Manhattan that long precedes the events of September 11. As Eric Darton points out in *Divided We Stand*, his cultural

[21] Freud, 148. [22] Ibid., 150. [23] Vilder, *The Architectural Uncanny*, 70.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875811000983 Published online by Cambridge University Press

history of the World Trade Center, lower Manhattan had been "visited more than once by acts of horrific violence."[24] Linking the failed attempt to blow up the World Trade Center on February 20, 1993 to the explosion on September 16, 1920 outside J. P. Morgan's recently completed bank at 23 Wall Street, Darton excavates a history of violence that also resonates through *Inside Man*'s recasting of terrorism as criminal heist.[25] For, if lower Manhattan and the financial and corporate interests that reside there have been the victims of violence before, they have also, as *Inside Man* suggests, been its perpetrators. Questions of criminality here are brought to light by, and in relation to, the film's representation of crime as performance. Moreover, while the global economic collapse of 2007, precipitated by the US subprime mortgage fiasco, came in the wake of the film's release, its shadow falls on the film and informs subsequent viewings.

Linking the terrorist attacks of September 11 to a longer history of terrorism in lower Manhattan, routed through an excavation of the links between global capital and violence, *Inside Man* tells the story of a heist in order to problematize the relationship between criminal and victim and to historicize contemporary fears. What the film offers is a representation of loss. That which is hidden is brought to the surface, in the form of guilty secrets, prior histories, and buried men. Couched in the formal and visual pleasures of a familiar cinematic genre, *Inside Man* produces a spectacle of confusion and obfuscation in which the presence of absence is a constant concern. Hidden deep in the basement of a building that guards its own half-hidden secrets, Dalton Russell stands as an uncanny remainder – that which was thought buried returned to the light of day. That his story is told against the backdrop of absence and the gaping hole where the Twin Towers once stood transforms the film's representation of spectacle into a form of memorialization. Keyed to loss, the film gives absence an uncanny and concrete presence.

[24] Eric Darton, *Divided We Stand: A Biography of New York's World Trade Center* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 5.

[25] On 16 September 1920, J. P. Morgan's bank located at 23 Wall Street (only completed in 1914) was extensively damaged by a massive explosion. Forty-eight people died and over 150 were injured. The blast caused two million dollars worth of damage to the exterior of the building, much of which is still visible today, and to its interior. The explosion was blamed on anarchists, with some claiming that it was a response to the indictment of Sacco and Vanzetti some days earlier. The cause of the explosion was never confirmed, however, and it has also been suggested that the explosion might have been an accident. See Darton, 4–7; "Havoc Wrought in Morgan Offices," *New York Times*, 17 Sept. 1920; and Beverly Gage, *The Day Wall Street Exploded: A Story of America in its First Age of Terror* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875811000983 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The protagonists of *Man on Wire* and *Inside Man* each recast the criminal act as spectacle, one high in the air, suspended between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on a filament of wire almost invisible from the ground, one interred in the bowels of a building at the heart of the financial center of the globalized world. Uncanny doubles – of each other and of the September 11 terrorists – these two men, and the films that tell their stories, encapsulate the events of September 11, 2001 in a longer history. Narrating stories of transgression, both films place the horrors of September 11 in another context. Through the genre conventions of the heist, each film offers a view of New York in which the events of September 11 and the destruction of the World Trade Center stand as the center. Not yet complete in one, already destroyed in the other, the Twin Towers haunt these films. In both films, the conventions of the heist provide a way to come to terms with loss. The psychological structures of the uncanny that underpin those genre conventions provide a different mode of understanding. Freed from the questions of representation that typically frame the events as traumatic, these films offer an alternative way of seeing. Placing the events of September 11 in longer histories, both films move beyond trauma. Seeing the present in relation to a usable past, they each, in their own ways, situate the destruction of the World Trade Center in a history of Manhattan that does not deny the horror of that event, but situates it within a different context. Through the uncanny conventions of the heist, the towers are reclaimed. Revenants, the Twin Towers are exhumed in order to be laid to rest; given a past, the towers themselves are made history.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875811000983 Published online by Cambridge University Press