Constructions of US National Identity in Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006): Back to the Same Old Story?

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The terrorist attacks suffered by the United States on 11th September 2001 have recently inspired and shaped a number of film narratives. This paper explores a well-known film belonging to this newly-set, 9/11 filmic trend, namely, Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006). Marketed to be consumed domestically and internationally, this US production is analysed here as a patriotic, ideologically-charged attempt to recreate and reassert specific representations of US national identity post 9/11. As this paper argues, 'Americanness' in the film seems mainly constructed as multiethnic, Christian, and as working through collective agency and the family unit. This paper also explores to what extent constructions of national identity in *World Trade Center* differ from long-established, traditional, discourses on US national identity.

Keywords: 9/11 terrorist attacks; discourse; World Trade Center; patriotism; 'Americanness'.

Los ataques terroristas sufridos por los Estados Unidos el 11 de septiembre de 2001 han inspirado y dado forma en los últimos años a un buen número de películas. Este artículo analiza una película muy conocida perteneciente a esta recién inaugurada saga de 'películas del 11 de septiembre': se trata de *World Trade Center* (2006), del director Oliver Stone. Pensada y promocionada para su consumo doméstico e internacional, esta producción estadounidense se presenta aquí como un intento patriótico e ideológicamente cargado de recrear y reafirmar ciertas representaciones de la identidad estadounidense post-11 de septiembre. Se argumenta que la identidad estadounidense de la película aparece construida como multiétnica, cristiana y materializada a través de la acción y participación colectiva, así como a través de la unidad familiar. Este artículo también examina hasta qué punto las construcciones de identidad nacional presentes en *World Trade Center* difieren de discursos tradicionales sobre identidad estadounidense.

Palabras clave: ataques terroristas del 11 de septiembre; World Trade Center; patriotismo; identidad nacional estadounidense.

The 11th September, 2001 attacks caused tragic loss of human life in the US: around 3,000 people died as a result of the terrorists' actions, without mentioning the massive symbolic damage caused by the attacks. As different schools of thought have shown (e.g.: feminist and Marxist theories of building-design criticism), architecture is not ideology-free, but is often "implicated in regimes of power" (Morton 2006: 15-16, 20). This was clearly the case with the buildings targeted in the 9/11 attacks, namely, the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the Capitol—although terrorist plans for the

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destruction of the latter ultimately failed. The importance of these buildings is not only practical and economic (for the normal development of some key US institutions), but also, and perhaps more importantly, symbolic. The Pentagon is the headquarters of the United States Department of Defense and, as Kellner notes, a symbol of US military power (2005: 25). The Capitol Building in Washington D.C. shelters the United States Congress, the legislative branch of the federal government. As such, it has always been perceived as an emblem of democracy. But perhaps the most important symbol of all, without doubt due to their complete disappearance in the attacks, is that embodied by the Twin Towers. As Morton notes, "few tall buildings have achieved such iconic status as the World Trade Center" (2006: 16), internationally recognised, as they were, as the nerve-centre of global capitalism and of US economic liberalism and imperialism (Baudrillard 2002: 44; Kellner 2005: 25; Morton 2006: 18). By extension, these emblematic US buildings have often been seen as hallmarks of the US way of life and identity. As such, their destruction was logically interpreted as a direct attack on US hegemonic power, values, way of life and, ultimately, sense of self. Furthermore, the 9/11 terrorist attacks proved overwhelming because they demonstrated the unforeseen vulnerability of the US, the world superpower (Kellner 2005: 25).

Al-Qaeda's real (physical) *and symbolic* attack on US citizens and key institutions has not gone unnoticed in the realm of culture. Mostly in the world of cinema, the 9/11 tragedy has been either overtly or more latently addressed in a myriad of often US-made films and documentaries. In fact, it could be said that, in the aftermath of the tragedy, a specific genre of films and documentaries has emerged, all dealing in various, differing—and sometimes contradictory—ways with the 9/11 disaster. It is within such a budding tradition that films and documentaries like Barrie Zwicker's *The Great Deception* (2002), Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), David Priest's *The Untold Story of Flight 93—A Portrait of Courage* (2006), Paul Greengrass's *United 93* (2006), Jeff Renfroe's *Civic Duty* (2006), or Dylan Avery's *Loose Change Second Edition* (2006), to name just a few, can be understood.

Perhaps one of the most popular '9/11 films' available up to date is Oliver Stone's super-production *World Trade Center* (2006), which seems to owe part of its international popularity to its director's long pedigree in the filmmaking industry, as well as to the worldwide publicity campaign launched before the release of this big-budget film.[1] *World Trade Center* deals head-on with the collapse of the Twin Towers on 11th September 2001, and recreates the story of survival of two real-life Port Police Officers (John McLoughlin and Will Jimeno, played by Nicolas Cage and Michael Peña, respectively) who volunteered in the evacuation of the buildings and got trapped underneath the Twin Tower rubble.

My interest in this world famous, filmic text is grounded on two related factors: first on its global reach, and secondly, on the fact that films, and media culture more generally, often shape people's views of the world, values and social behaviour (Kellner 1995: 1). Thus, as a popular film screened worldwide,

[1] The production of Stone's *World Trade Center* cost approximately $63,000,000, a figure that has been surpassed by the benefits it obtained: in October 2006, the box office gross for this film reached $70,236,496 in the U.S., £4,596,644 in the UK, and over €267,976 in the Netherlands. "As of December 2006, the global box office for this film was $161,735,806". Information available at *The Internet Movie Database: World Trade Center,* <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0469641/business> [Accessed: 20 August 2007].

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World Trade Center might have helped shape the views of a (wide) international audience on the Twin Tower attacks. Moreover, as different scholars note (e.g.: Collier 1991: 239; Glassner 2000: 20) media culture is especially influential on US society, as the defining measure of "what is good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil" in the US context (Kellner 1995: 1, 2). In fact, as the prevailing means of entertainment and information, media are, particularly in the US, a crucial "source of cultural pedagogy: they contribute to educating us how to behave and what to think, feel, believe, fear, and desire—and what not to" (Kellner 1995: 2). Hence the importance of analysing popular cultural products such as *World Trade Center.*

On a more concrete level, popular culture products are potentially important and influential because they often play a crucial role in the construction of national identity. As Smith stresses, nations, national identity and nationalism are not simply "an ideology or form of politics" (1991: vii). These categories are frequently incorporated in different cultural practices and texts (Gramsci 1988: 57, 70, 367; Hobsbawn 1994), and this is often done in a "banally mundane way … [in] the familiar terrain of contemporary times" (Billig 1995: 6). In fact, "cultural activities may or may not be explicitly political or make reference to identity and nationalism. Even where they do not, they continue to shape national identity by framing the issues and interpreting daily life [within a national context]" (my addition) (Keating 2001: 11).

The idea that "media culture … provides the materials out of which many people construct their sense … of nationality" (Kellner 1995: 1) seems especially adequate in the analysis of Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center*. In fact, the reassertion and reconstruction of US national identity seems to be the core of this film's intentions. This paper will therefore make use of textual analysis and historical contextualisation in an attempt to show that Stone's *World Trade Center* could be interpreted as a patriotic reassertion of US national identity in the aftermath of 9/11. Such a national identity is characterised as multiethnic, Christian, and as working through collective agency and the family unit. As I will try to show, this 'Americanness' is partly explicitly "flagged" through examples of what Billig calls "banal nationalism" (1995), and seems a literal *and symbolic* response to the literal and symbolic damage caused by Al-Qaeda in the US in 2001. I will therefore examine to what extent the constitutive elements of US national identity shown in *World Trade Center* are a response to the historical needs and challenges prevailing at the moment in which the film was created and released. To this end, I shall explore the degree to which the film's discourses on national identity rely on innovative or conventional elements and, if tending to the latter, to what extent (if at all) these old constituents are approached in new ways.

Billig's notion of "banal nationalism" is helpful in eliciting some constructions of national identity at work in Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center*. Billig notes that in established Western nations such as the US, "there is a continual 'flagging', or reminding, of nationhood … However, this reminding is so familiar, so continual, that it is not consciously registered as reminding" (1995: 8).[2] This continual and apparently innocent token of nationhood is what

[2] As Billig asserts, "daily, the nation is indicated, or 'flagged', in the lives of its citizenry. Nationalism, far from being an intermittent mood in established nations, is the endemic condition" (1995: 6).

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Billig calls “banal nationalism” (1995: 8, 9)—“not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion” but a “flag hanging unnoticed on the public building”.

This commonplace, clichéd ‘flagging’ of the US nation is recurrently present visually, verbally and thematically in *World Trade Center*. Thus, at the beginning of Stone’s film a flag of the United States appears embedded in the New York landscape, almost unnoticeable, but in a scene whose colourful and peaceful beauty seems to ennoble the city. Other unsophisticated US identity emblems are likewise ‘sprinkled’ throughout the story. For example, one of the trapped policemen’s sons frequently wears a NY cap (as does his uncle), and a “Yankees sweater”. ‘Americanness’ is also underlined through the man who finds the protagonist John McLoughlin under all the rubble left from the Twin Towers, for he keeps on repeating that he is an “American marine”. In the same manner, the conversations held, while trapped, between Port Police officers John McLoughlin and Will Jimeno make constant references to US characters—and by extension to US lifestyle and culture. Their allusions to the film *G.I. Jane,* (1997) starring Demi Moore, and to the heroes Starsky and Hutch should be understood in this light. The same could be said about the presence of an improvised hot dog stall apparently set up by the police (and symbolically placed right on top of the debris!) to feed those emergency services staff that have rescued McLoughlin and Jimeno.

However uncontrived, these recurrent traits of “banal nationalism” are significant, especially if perceived and understood as examples of those “ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced” (Billig 1995: 6). As such, they are elements by which “nationhood … can still call for ultimate sacrifices” (Billig 1995: 8). In other words, by means of such reminders as the wearing of a NY cap or references to media heroes such as Starsky and Hutch, the nation, “its symbols and assumptions are flagged” (Billig 1995: 8-9). The importance of intimations of the kind is not merely circumstantial, as may seem at first sight, but also symbolic: the NY logo could be seen as a patriotic sign of proud national-belonging and self-assertion. Similarly, US TV characters Starsky and Hutch, who are sentimentally and almost nostalgically remembered by the character played by Michael Peña (i.e.: Jimeno), could be said to carry a baggage of complex meanings, popularly associated with the US people (e.g.: their concern with and particular approach to law and order) and which seem to work in *World Trade Center* as positive embodiments of US values and way of life.

In *World Trade Center* the US nation is also constructed in other less apparently ‘banal’ ways. For instance, there is a marked emphasis on showing the heterogeneity and ‘averageness’ of US citizens. Despite the presence of well-known stars: Nicolas Cage, Michael Peña, Maria Bello (Donna McLoughlin) and Maggie Gyllenhaal (Allison Jimeno), all of whom, it is interesting to note, incarnate very ‘earthy’ characters, as the exploration of their lives prior to 9/11 suggests, *World Trade Center* introduces a wide number of secondary actors and extras who give life to those average US women and men—young, middle-aged and older individuals, slim and big, nice looking and physically unbeautiful citizens—who actually lived through 9/11.

Heterogeneity in the film is especially significant and recurrent in ethnic terms. Thus, although ‘Americanness’ seems mainly embodied by whites, a great number of Latin Americans also appear, as well as Blacks/African-

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Americans and a few Asians. Official sources such as the *U.S. Census Bureau* suggest that, statistically, the film's demographic profile of New York City in 2001 is well grounded.[3] Despite this apparent all-inclusiveness, there are a few notable absences. For instance, all the Asians represented in the film seem to be of Japanese or Chinese origin, the consequence being a marked *non-appearance* of Pakistani or Indian Asians, in spite of the fact that, in New York State, Pakistan is one of the ten largest states of origin for modern immigration or that in the early 2000s almost 4% of the population living in New York City came from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka (Barnes & Bennett, 2002). One can only wonder whether the Muslim background of many inhabitants of these Asian countries might be related to their entire absence in *World Trade Center*.

Leaving aside the potentially problematic issue of selective 'omissions' (which suggest that *World Trade Center* cannot be said to be 'all-inclusive' in terms of ethnic representation), the film nevertheless opens up important spaces which acknowledge the existence of some ethnic difference in positive terms (i.e.: Whites, Latinos, Blacks and Chinese Asians). Such an affirmative rendering of heterogeneity is especially important if the actual social context in which it is embedded is considered. Just a few years before the 2001 attacks took place, scholars such as Merelman (1995: 257) and Wright (1996: 568) still complained that ethnicity remained a crucial issue in the United States and that "few would deny that racial discrimination still separates the dominant Anglo-Bourgeois whites" from the rest of the groups (Wright 1996: 568).

While it could be argued that some inequality is suggested in *World Trade Center*, for example, by the fact that most chief police officers at the Port Police Center are White (e.g.: McLoughlin), while most of their subordinates are either Latino or Black, this does not seem problematic since the film treats them all as equals and/or colleagues on friendly terms well before the attacks take place. In fact, it seems that, on the whole, rather than being presented as an issue, ethnic difference as comprising Whites, Latinos, Blacks and Japanese and Chinese Asians is normalised and shown to be unproblematic. Significantly, many of the policemen presented at the beginning of the film are of Latin American origin. With the exception of McLoughlin, the other men who volunteer to enter the towers: Rodrigues, Pezzulo, and Jimeno, are all Latinos. This suggests that these 'newcomers' are fully integrated in their community as part of the law-and-order-system at work in the United States. Furthermore, they are represented positively, as courageous and eager to help in the evacuation of the Twin Towers. The harmonious filmic representation of the intermarriage between Will Jimeno and Allison is also relevant in showing concord and unity among ethnically *different* individuals: they are a close couple, evidently deeply in love in spite of their patently different ethnic origins—while he is a Latino, she and her family look very white and of Anglo-Saxon origin. Interestingly enough, however, the real-life Allison Jimeno is dark-haired and dark-skinned and also looks Latina. This particular case is thus especially interesting because it suggests that, although the film is conceived

[3] *U.S. Census Bureau*, <http://www.census.gov/main/www/cen2000.html > [Accessed: 27 November 2007]. As of year 2000, the statistics for ethnic groups in New York City were the following: White: 44.7%; Hispanic or Latino: 27%; Black or African American: 26.6%; Asian 9.8%.

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and presented as a “true story”, it is nevertheless trying to create realities which did not exist in real life for the sake of showing concord and unity among ethnically *different* individuals.[4]

Another device used in the film is the reliance on personal, individual drama invoked through heroes and, to use Smith’s term, “successful figures” (1998: 10). A good example of this individual heroism is provided through the character played by Michael Peña: while badly injured and almost delirious under the rubble, Will Jimeno complains aloud about his unbearable thirst. He soon has a dream which spectators are invited to share: he sees Jesus Christ approaching him and offering him a bottle of water. This dream gives him the strength to endure the remaining hours under the wreckage in a heroic, Herculean manner. In this respect, the almost all-pervading use of dramatic music is especially important throughout the film since it serves to enhance Jimeno’s and McLoughlin’s heroism in a melodramatic way, thus triggering the spectators’ sense of alertness and their sympathy towards these characters. The narrative emphasis on McLoughlin’s and Jimeno’s individual stories is also recreated out of a number of flashbacks, all of which offer an insight into the two characters’ inner thoughts and reveal the protagonists’ relationship with their respective families. These episodes, which clearly assert each man’s personality, could be read as a remnant of the individualism that has traditionally characterised the US character and national identity (e.g.: Luedtke 1988: 28; Merelman 1995: 259).

This said, there is nevertheless a need to nuance these allusions to McLoughlin and Jimeno as the main characters in *World Trade Center*. Although they are presented as heroes, and in this sense, as the typical figures used in the construction of US national identity, their ‘heroism’ is of a type not easily found in most US films: however strong mentally, their physical agency is greatly limited underneath the rubble—the recurrent close-ups of their faces and the invisibility of their bodies buried under the wreckage masterfully suggest their physical vulnerability. To such a point is their immobility emphasised that some viewers are likely to be left with the sensation that they are not the only protagonists in the story; perhaps not even the main ones. From this perspective, another important characteristic of the film, namely, the presentation of multiple protagonists, needs some attention. In fact, while heroic individualism is stressed through the figures of McLoughlin and Jimeno, on the whole, it is the sense of group and community solidarity that is highlighted above all throughout the film. It could be therefore suggested that the US national identity proposed in *World Trade Center* entails a new emphasis on group and collective action, rather than on ‘superhuman’ individuals and individual agency, as was often the case in many traditional cultural discourses on national identity in the United States (Ray 1985: 64, 65).

Cooperation and emotional unity thus prove crucial in the film at different levels. For example, Stone pays great attention to how Jimeno and McLoughlin support each other psychologically while immobilised, seriously injured and trapped in the wreckage. The excruciatingly difficult moments are highlighted in such a way as to suggest that the two officers managed to survive thanks to the

[4] “True story” is the phrase used in the original film trailer <http://www.wtcmovie.com/ > [Accessed: 4 October 2006]. For a photo of real-life Allison Jimeno see also <http://www.wtcmovie.com/ > (Section “In their own words”).

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strength they received from one another—"if you die, I die", they tell one another. On a broader level, the film also shows how help was provided by people from states other than New York, the presence of one of them (Dave Karnes) actually being crucial in the rescue of McLoughlin and Jimeno. In a similar fashion, the film emphasises the fraternal presence of volunteer policemen, firemen and paramedics, for example. Equally symbolic is McLoughlin's wife's behaviour as she holds a Black woman whom she has just met in hospital as both wait for some news about their loved ones: empathy, solidarity and a sense of community fill the atmosphere.

As Ray notes (1985: 168, 169), straight after World War II, Hollywood films often "emphasized the necessity of cooperation", while in later years they enhanced individualism once again. In this sense, *World Trade Center* probably needs to be read as a defence mechanism; as showing the need to return to older values which, linked to patriotism, could provide an effective answer to the exceptional historical circumstances of a frontal attack against the United States on its own soil. In other words, the film seems to suggest that, by acting together, the citizens of the United States can find the strength to surmount the new challenges and enemies they are faced with. From this perspective, it is clear that the actual focus of the film is not accidental: *World Trade Center,* based on real-life characters and a real plot line, is a story of survival, of rebirth from ashes (literally and symbolically) thanks to collective action.

The US nation is thus presented as a big, united family. But this large scale, community effort is also shown to work at a micro-scale through the actual family unit. In fact, in *World Trade Center,* McLoughlin's and Jimeno's families are central to the narrative. These characters serve to emphasise the validity of the long-established concept of 'family', which Hareven (1988: 241, 254) considers has been a traditional "linchpin of the social order and the basis for stable government", led by the stereotype of the 'ideal family' and based "on the middle class nuclear model". In fact, although the film touches on some of the tension experienced by McLoughlin and his wife Donna prior to the attacks, on the whole, the story clearly nurtures the myth of the happy, traditional western family, to the point of sometimes reproducing traditional gender roles—e.g. Donna is presented as a devoted, full-time mother and (house)wife who never questions her allotted role. The McLoughlin and the Jimeno clans (especially the latter) are certainly represented as exemplary prototypes of the happy, traditional family-unit.[5] Hence perhaps Stone's decision to focus on Will Jimeno's and John McLoughlin's love relationships so conspicuously: both couples are good embodiments of the 'typical' nuclear family; they know of no previous marriages, and their relationships seem to be founded upon genuine conjugal love—the type that has traditionally been characterised by its procreative nature. Thus, following hegemonic discourses, *World Trade Center* textually idealises and reasserts the nuclear family while silencing the existence of divorce, separation and alternative notions of family, which nowhere appear either in the protagonists' lives or in those of their extended families, in spite of the fact that, statistically, all these realities are recurrently and increasingly present in US society today (Wright 1996: 569)

[5] On this reading, it appears that Allison and Will's idyllic relationship is romanticised to the point of almost being converted into a fairy-tale fantasy.

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Christianity also features in *World Trade Center* as a very important constituent of US national identity. The Christian faith is visually and verbally (thematically) present throughout the narrative—its recurrence acquiring undeniable symbolic significance. Careful attention to the mise-en-scène reveals, for example, that crosses and crucifixes are frequently incorporated in the settings as 'casual' reminders of the inhabitants' Christian identity. Allison Jimeno, for instance, wears a small cross, and so does her sister-in-law, although hers is bigger in size. Likewise, two crucifixes are visibly hung on the front-wall of Mr and Mrs Jimeno's house, and a huge cross appears by the altar of the Protestant church visited by Dave Karnes, the real-life ex-Marine whose help as a volunteer in the 9/11 crisis proved crucial in the rescue of the two stranded men. Cameras also momentarily zoom in to the crucifix worn by one of the members of the rescue team who enters the amalgam of debris and risks his own life to help John. This recurrence of the Christian symbol *par excellence* may be read as a metaphoric reminder of Christ's ultimate sacrifice, one that invites a comparison between Jesus's death at the cross and US citizens' dedication to something much more important than their own, individual selves. Such a comparison allows Stone to enhance New Yorkers' victimisation: just as the holy figure of Jesus Christ was a victim of unjust assassins, so are US citizens. Like Jesus Christ's, theirs is a sacrifice (in this case, perhaps for defending 'American' people's values and way of life?); they are victims undergoing extreme pain and suffering just as Jesus did, the film seems to suggest. In fact, the Christian dimension of US national identity shown in the film seems to work in the production of 'American' *values*, for Christianity is often directly or indirectly linked to positive principles such as solidarity, selflessness, courage, heroism and, ultimately, patriotism: in *World Trade Center* those wearing crosses or praying often act according to the values of their Christian ethos and work to help relieve others from their suffering, often risking their own lives in the process.

Thematically, Christianity is also rendered palpable through Jimeno's intimate recital of *The Lord's Prayer* as he enters the World Trade Center to help in its evacuation, and before the buildings collapse. Later in the film, the Christian religion again proves crucial for the actual psychological survival of John and Will: trapped and unable to move, their chorus delivery of *The Lord's Prayer* seems to ease their sufferings and fear (as noted earlier, Will Jimeno even dreams of Jesus Christ offering him a bottle of water). For their part, the protagonists' nuclear and extended families pray extensively for the well-being of their loved ones. The Catholic background of Will Jimeno's parents, for example, is highlighted in the scene showing his mother saying the rosary on her knees as she waits for some news about her son's fortune. The much less baroque version of Christianity embodied by Protestantism is also represented through the figure of Dave Karnes. In his visit to a typically Protestant, sober church with no religious images or artwork, he speaks to a reverend and tells him of his urge to follow God's call and help those affected in the Twin Towers attacks: "I've got to go down there [to New York]. I spent my best years with Marines … God gave me a gift: to be able to help people, to defend our country. I feel Him calling on me now for this mission". In openly showing his belief that God has *chosen* him so save his compatriots, Karnes is revealing his Protestant ethos—as Merelman notes (1995: 294), American Protestantism, highly influenced by its Puritan roots often boasts that "God had given America[ns] a

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special, divine mission" to fulfil. Furthermore, Karnes's mixing of (a divine-mission-driven understanding of) Christianity and militarism deserves some attention, especially as a subtle reminder of many of Bush's speeches. Karnes's first reaction when he hears of the World Trade Center attacks, while working in what seems to be an office, is utterly belligerent: "I don't know if you guys know it here, but this country is at war". In fact, the similarity between Bush's and Karnes's discourses is visually enhanced in the film through mise-en-scène by having Karnes watch TV news on two occasions before reaching Ground Zero. As the camera focuses on his face, he nods at Bush's assertion that "the resolve of our great nation is being tested. But make no mistake, we will show the world that we will pass this test. God bless you".[6] This said, considering Stone's well-known progressive stance and background, generally far removed from Bush's politics, it is interesting to note that while Karnes's saviour-like behaviour is magnified to the point of making some audiences feel detached from him, he is not textually treated as a religious fanatic or with irony. On the contrary, he is characterised with utter respect.

What can be deduced from the analysis provided in the previous paragraphs is that *World Trade Center* seems to welcome religious variety as long as this stays within Christianity (i.e. Protestantism and Catholicism)—other faiths being conspicuously absent in the film, in spite of the fact that immigration has contributed to the spread of other creeds (e.g. Judaism, Buddhism, Kabala, Islam). The enhancement of Christianity, so evident in Stone's film, is not a new phenomenon in mainstream US constructions of national identity.[7] As Norton notes, the Christian religion had already been converted into "a matter of patriotism in the mid 40s" (1998: 837). Protestantism becoming particularly well-rooted in US society (Wright 1996: 31, 32), and Puritanism providing the idea that the US was a nation "under God" (Marty 1988: 302) which had been granted a transcendental, divine mission to fulfil (Merelman 1995: 294)—an ideology that the film seems to uncritically reassert through characters such as David Karnes.

Bearing in mind all the issues discussed above, two final considerations need to be briefly made. The first one considers chronology. The representations of national identity present in the film are constructed as concurrent with 9/11, as already at work when the US was attacked on 9/11, 2001. However, rather than as a faithful recreation of 'Americanness' as it was deployed in New York City on September 11th, 2001, the film should perhaps be analysed as a post 9/11 exercise of US national identity *re*assertion and *re*construction triggered by the destructive and traumatic nature of the 9/11 real and symbolic terrorist attacks. To put it differently, while many of the characteristics presented here as typical of the US character (courage, solidarity, religious fervour) may be historically grounded, that is, seen as

[6] In fact, real-life Karnes took Bush's words literally and, as the unfolding texts at the end of the film show, he "re-enlisted in the marines and served two tours of duty in Iraq". In contrast to the president who, as broadcast on the TV breaking news embedded in the film, is escaping from the attacks ("for security reasons we cannot say where the President is going to fly"), Karnes acts at grass root level and goes to Ground Zero to help others.

[7] What is perhaps a fairly new phenomenon is its positive representation of Catholics (i.e.: Will and his family), who are often approached with a very critical eye in US cultural representations (e.g.: in *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007), by director Shekhar Kapur, in *The Da Vinci Code* (2006), by filmmaker Ron Howard, or in Coppola's "The Godfather" (1972)).

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congenital to the US nation well before the September 11th attacks, the film tends to overemphasise certain aspects to the point of rendering them difficult to believe—unless these are seen through the prism of a US post 9/11 need for identity reconstruction and self-assertion. This is especially so in its presentation of an 'all-too-good', unified/single picture of US citizens' response to the attacks. It is hardly credible, for example, that "the trapped cops never curse their fate, and [that] every American behaves honourably" (Travers 2006). Even the alcoholic who calls himself a paramedic towards the end of the film helps in the rescue work and no trace of his serious addiction seem to cause difficulties to his task. In fact, in a rather unbelievable fashion, the narrative suggests that this alcoholic's rescue-work has had an immediately cathartic—almost magical—effect: he feels self-redeemed, in control of his drinking problem and able to start a new, meaningful life as a valid member of the US community.

This melodramatic 'overdoing' leads the argument towards the second aspect of the film that I wanted to finally mention here. *World Trade Center* seems somehow at odds with Stone's previous work which, on the whole, was controversial and susceptible of raising heated debate in its questioning of US official discourses (e.g. his representations of the Vietnam war, his depiction of US 'enemies' such as Fidel Castro, and/or his approach to prickly issues concerning domestic politics such as Kennedy's death). In fact, "although Stone's films have their limitations, taken cumulatively", works of his such as *Salvador*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Talk Radio*, *JFK* and *Heaven and Earth* have invariably presented "something of a left-progressive intonation within the voice of US media culture" (Kellner 1995: 122). In *World Trade Center*, however, this "left-progressive intonation" is so muted that Stone seems in some ways to fall victim to some of the official discourses on 'Americanness' that he so problematised in the past in such films as *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) or in *Platoon* (1987). Too patriotic and uncritical, *World Trade Center* is a product of its time whose "narrowcast view" "uneasily echoes the myopia of the American public, reasserting U.S. exceptionalism by remembering our disaster, our tragedy" (Rich 2006: 16).[8] As a native New Yorker, perhaps Stone found it difficult (perhaps he deliberately did not want) to detach himself emotionally from the attacks that his own city suffered on 11th September 2001. In fact, given that sensibilities are (reasonably) still very vivid in the US partly because of the recent nature of the attacks, the film's ideological position in this respect seems an attempt to play on the safe side. A more critical approach might have hurt many US citizens' feelings and susceptibilities and might have jeopardised the film's (economic) success.

To conclude, although presented as a faithful re-enactment of the September 11th attacks in New York City, *World Trade Center* can be analysed as an exercise of *post 9/11* national identity self-assertion and reconstruction. The film thus characterises 'Americanness' as multiethnic, Christian, and as working through collective agency and the family unit. On the whole and leaving aside some laudable exceptions (e.g. the inclusion of Latinos, Blacks and Chinese and Japanese Americans in his representation of 'Americanness'), Stone's recreation of US national identity uses rather hyperbolic, too positive,

[8] As Rich notes, *World Trade Center* "seek to transport its audience back to a moment of relative innocence", "to a time before the U.S. government destroyed world sympathy with its invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq" (2006: 16).

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long-established qualities and elements 'typical' of traditional discourses on 'Americanness' in rather non-original ways. His uncritical, general compliance with such discourses in this respect might have been grounded on Stone's desire to 'cuddle' U.S. citizens' aroused sensitivities, achieving, let it be said, considerable popularity and economic profit in so doing.[9]

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