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Penetration in *Shortbus*: Trauma, Representation, and 9/11

This essay considers *SHORTBUS* (John Cameron Mitchell, 2006) from the perspective of Trauma Studies. The author advances the argument that *Shortbus* responds to the events of 9/11 in progressive, if provocative, ways, and that this response is at odds with the response of more typical Hollywood fare.

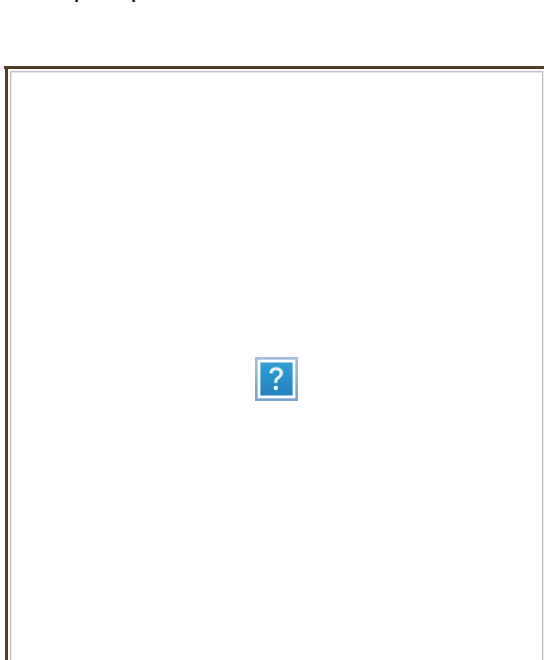
Trauma Studies is an interdisciplinary form of scholarship that engages with the manifold dimensions of human suffering and its repercussions and representations. Trauma is typically considered an individual experience, but trauma scholars argue that it can also be a shared, collective one; indeed, their model proposes a tight integration of individual and collective experience. [1] Traumatic events are powerful enough to disturb, even reconfigure, the social body, [2] which may partly account for the fact that Trauma Studies first emerged out of a revitalized historical discussion of the Holocaust. [3]

Any event that resists assimilation into the psychic economy, whose resulting affect is so overwhelming that its cognitive registration is incomplete or distorted, can be characterized as traumatic. [4] Put another way, a traumatic event resists comprehension, resists the process whereby it is assigned meaning. Trauma, in this sense, is a pathology, one with a physiological explanation: the cerebral cortex, which is responsible for integrating new information with past experience, shuts down during moments of trauma—it simply ceases to make sense of incoming sensation and emergent perception.

There is no cure for trauma. Instead, the goal for both individuals and the social body is to “work through” its effects, a process whereby the traumatic event is integrated into the psychic economy and finally granted meaning. Trauma scholars argue that assimilation can be achieved via a variety of mechanisms, but all agree on the critical importance of translating the traumatic experience into a representation—only through the mediating force of representation can what is initially unimaginable enter the realm of imagination. In the case of 9/11, making collective sense out of the attacks required a representational intervention on a mass scale, a task for which Hollywood cinema is eminently suited.

Hollywood solved 9/11’s rather recalcitrant representational problems through recourse to its timeworn technique of displacement. In practice, this meant a re-staging of those infamous images—the collapse of buildings; the fleeing, panic-stricken, and dust-covered citizens; the shock and awe of military retaliation—within allegories of alien invasion. [5] The terrorists of the Middle East, already alien and unintelligible to a Western audience, were re-conceptualized by Hollywood as hostile creatures from another planet come to wreak destruction.

The two most successful films in this vein (successful both commercially and as representational interventions) are *CLOVERFIELD* (Matt Reeves, 2008) and *WAR OF THE WORLDS* (Steven Spielberg, 2005). Both films succeed primarily because of a calculated strategy to limit their narrative perspectives to the ordinary (non-military, non-governmental) citizens on the ground: regular folk who are completely bewildered and shocked by the events in which they find themselves caught up. The resulting images are strongly evocative of 9/11 footage, the bulk of which was captured from much the same perspective.



Promotional image for *Cloverfield* (2008)



September 11, 2001

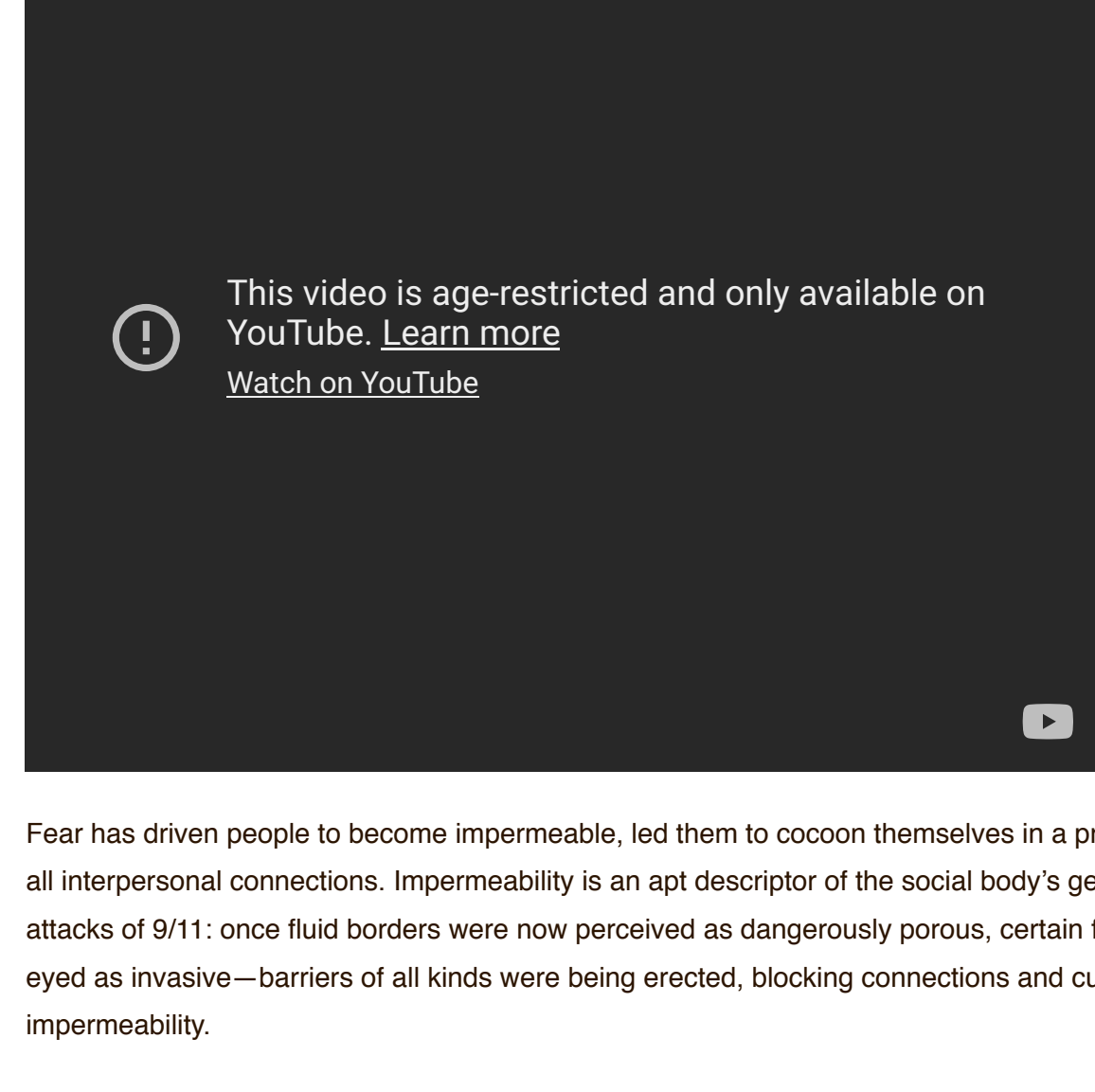
The argument can be made that films like *CLOVERFIELD* and *WAR OF THE WORLDS* participate in the working through of the trauma caused by 9/11 since such films translate the experience into representation and thus domesticate the anxiety associated with the attacks. But representational interventions of this sort come with a price, for in rehearsing the tragedy of that day so faithfully, they do nothing to mitigate the destructive impulses unleashed by those events. Films of this sort traffic in fear, hostility, prejudice, malice, and other assorted horrors, ensuring the continued circulation of these impulses in the psychic economy.

But imagine a film that offers an alternative to the representational solutions advanced by mainstream Hollywood. Imagine a film that tries, however obliquely, to break the cycle of destructive psychic energy kept in circulation by films like *CLOVERFIELD* and *WAR OF THE WORLDS*, and that seeks to funnel these energies into a more benign, and decidedly erotic, channel. *SHORTBUS* provides this alternative. It too takes on the trauma of 9/11, but in contrast to mainstream Hollywood, its representational intervention eschews images of death, destruction, and retribution in favour a utopian mix of sex, pleasure, and conviviality.

Although we are never privy to its root cause, trauma seems to be a pervasive affliction in the post-9/11 environment of *SHORTBUS*. The character of Sofia, for example, has been searching in vain for her orgasm her entire life, a dilemma apparently grounded in an uncomfortable experience with her voyeuristic father when she was young. There is also James, who has suicidal tendencies that are the result of his past experiences as a young hustler. But trauma is not restricted to mere characters in *SHORTBUS*. The city of New York itself suffers throughout the narrative from periodic brownouts—the luminous spark for which the city is widely acknowledged has unaccountably dimmed.

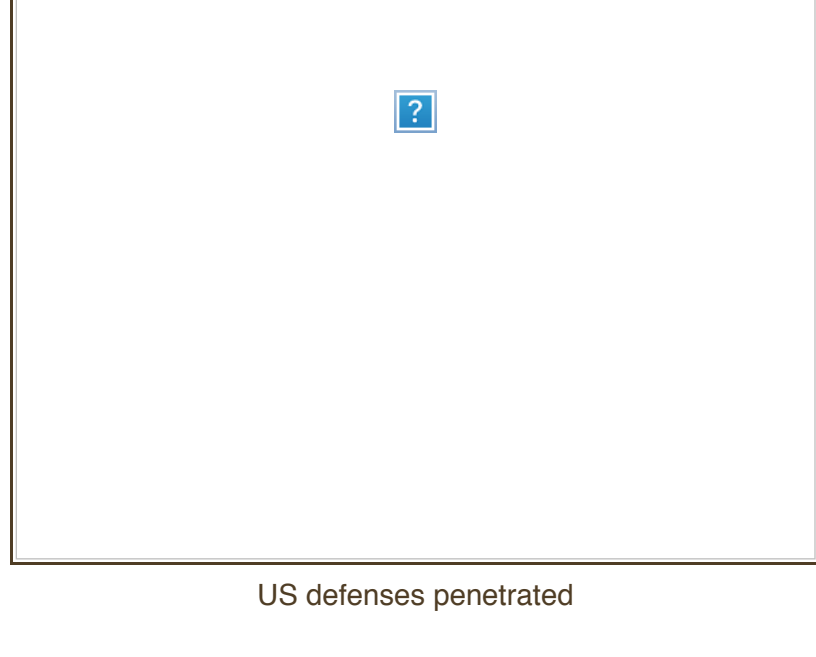
A link is thus established between the individual struggles of the characters on the one hand and the societal affliction is affecting the city as a whole on the other. It is at this intersection of the personal and the social where a collectively shared experience of a singular traumatic event is registered. We are never privy to this event. All we are presented with is its aftermath, still unresolved and thus still inducing anxiety.

The clip below introduces a character who claims to be the former mayor of New York. Watch how he explains the nature of the shared trauma afflicting the city and its citizens. Pay special attention to the notion of permeability he raises, and how this notion relates to fear and redemption.

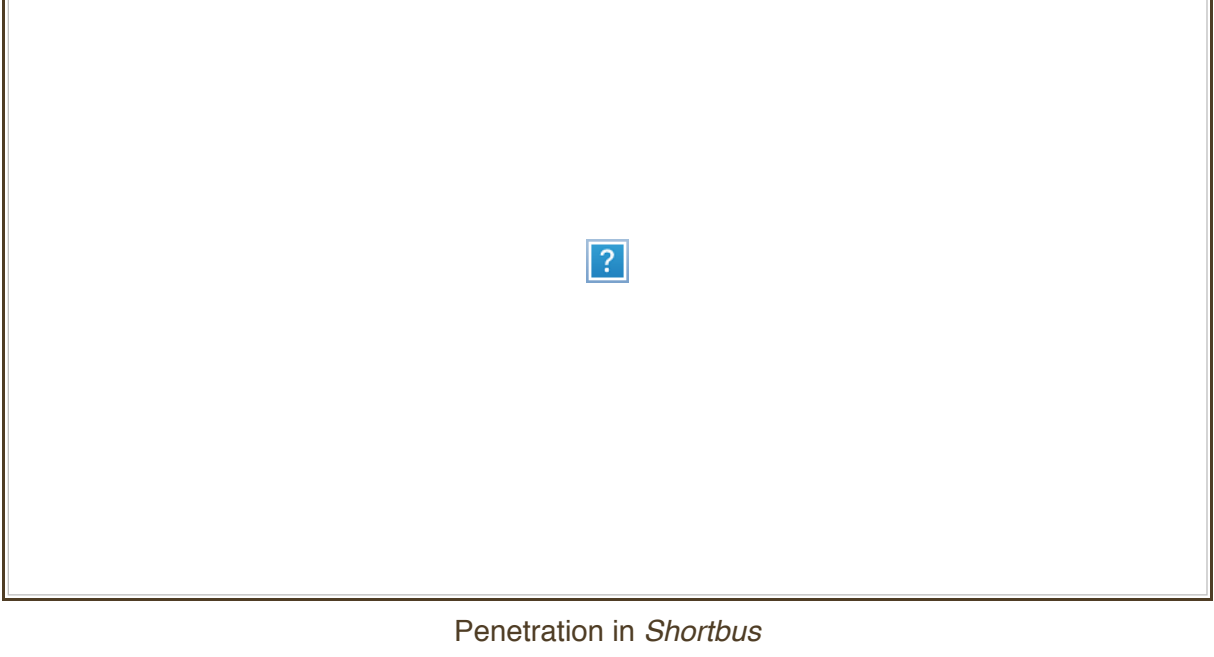


Fear has driven people to become impermeable, led them to cocoon themselves in a protective shell that blocks all interpersonal connections. Impermeability is an apt descriptor of the social body’s general response to the attacks of 9/11: once fluid borders were now perceived as dangerously porous, certain foreign nationals were now eyed as invasive—barriers of all kinds were being erected, blocking connections and cultivating a culture of impermeability.

A fear of penetration—the consequence of having had a permeable orientation that was then easily exploited—prayed on the psychic economy of the social body. Consider the following images:



US defenses penetrated



Penetration in *Shortbus*

What does the image of a plane being deliberately driven into one of the nation’s most recognizable landmarks suggest if not foreign bodies penetrating the nation’s defenses, infiltrating its porous, permeable borders?

In *SHORTBUS*, the surging fear of permeability brought about by the attacks is re-articulated on the level of social connection, especially on the level of sexual contact. For example, suicidal James refuses to allow himself to be sexually penetrated by anyone. James equates sexual penetration with emotional penetration, and his fear of the latter manifests a fear in the former. In reference to the adoration showered on him by his partner, James says: “It stops at my skin. I can’t let it inside me.”

In *SHORTBUS*, the solution to this trauma is to overcome the fear of penetration, to risk the dangers posed by permeability in order to cultivate the interpersonal connections necessary for a healthy social body. Elements that hinder or otherwise obstruct direct contact between people are presented in *SHORTBUS* as unwanted barriers. Masturbation—sex with one’s self—is frowned upon in the film: James breaks down into tears after reaching orgasm alone; Sofia repeatedly fails to masturbate her way to orgasm. The film also presents technology as a mediating force that only isolates individuals, keeping them separated from one other—cameras, vibrating eggs, even a social networking PDA used to facilitate hook-ups only exacerbate interpersonal distance. Permeability can be achieved neither through masturbation nor through recourse to technology.

James overcomes his trauma only after confiding in the stranger who prevents his suicide attempt. James opens up emotionally to this person in ways he never allowed himself before, preparing the way for a sexual encounter in which James finally allows himself to be sexually penetrated. This act, which registers James’ new-found permeability, lifts him out of depression, securing his relationship to his partner.

The married and monogamous Sofia is, in her own way, also impermeable. Her inability to achieve orgasm is hampered by her steadfast refusal to be unfaithful to her husband, a person with whom she is sexually incompatible. The character Justin Bond, impresario of the *Shortbus* club, casts Sofia’s problem to connect in terms of electrified circuitry: “Think of it” he says to her, “like a motherboard filled with desire, that travels all over the world, that touches you, that touches me, that connects everybody. You just have to find the right connection, the right circuitry.”

It is at the *Shortbus* club where permeability is encouraged and may be sought without fear of recrimination or rebuke. At its core, *Shortbus* is a sort of sex community, and the explicit orgy scenes that take place there reinforce the notion that the road to permeability—to living sanely and without fear—goes through uninhibited sexual congress. Sofia finally finds her orgasm at *Shortbus*, in a three-way sexual encounter that does not include her husband.

The trajectory of the narrative travels from an initial point of despair, melancholy, and alienation, through various false remedies and solutions, and lands squarely on an orgasmic point of restoration, rejuvenation, and reintegration. Punctuating this return to vitality is the sudden emergence of New York from a city-wide power outage. As the lights spread over the city at the close of film, we are assured that it, like its citizens, indeed *through* its citizens, has finally discovered the right circuitry. This utopian finale, which is celebrated in a communal sing-along at the club, suggests the successful working through of the traumatic experience.

Whereas *CLOVERFIELD* and *WAR OF THE WORLDS* reinforce the instinct for impermeability, *SHORTBUS* rejects it. Instead of promulgating a fear of invasion, *SHORTBUS* celebrates the act of penetration. The film makes the case that closing borders, like closing off oneself, is no solution to the anxiety unleashed by events like 9/11. *SHORTBUS* demonstrates how the health of the social—and, in turn, individual—body depends on cultivating a sense of permeability, on seeking out the right circuitry, and allowing oneself to be penetrated.

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Footnotes

¹ For a full account of how trauma has been theorized in the Humanities, see Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) and E. Ann Kaplan’s *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005.)

² I am using the term “social body” to designate the collective awareness shared by a given society’s members. This collective awareness is specifically constructed through the transmission of culture. For an example of this concept in action see Mary Poovey’s *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). A analogous concept is Émile Durkheim’s “collective consciousness,” which is thought throughout his works as the abstract space wherein the shared beliefs, customs, and values of a given society circulate. Both concepts designate the ground that unites a group socially, a ground that is forged in part through the expansive reach of mass media, including cinema.

³ This discussion culminated in the publication of Michael Rothberg’s *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

⁴ For a good account by cognitive scientists of the physiological mechanics of trauma see Joseph LeDoux’s *The Emotional Brain* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

⁵ Recall how Cold War paranoia was displaced in movies like *THEM!* (Gordon Douglas, 1954) and *INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS* (Don Siegel, 1956) of the 1950s.

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Filmography

SHORTBUS (John Cameron Mitchell, 2006)

CLOVERFIELD (Matt Reeves, 2008)

WAR OF THE WORLDS (Steven Spielberg, 2005)

About the Author

Dino is a PhD student in the Film and Moving Image Studies program at Concordia University. His research interests include pop culture, film theory, and film genre.

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