EUP: Your new book *The 'War on Terror' and American Film* proposes that certain post-9/11 films can be seen as reactions against cultural trauma. Can you provide a brief outline of your argument?

**Terence McSweeney:** It is clear to see that both 9/11 and the 'War on Terror' were profoundly affectual cultural traumas which had a significant impact not only on the United States of America but countries all around the globe. *The 'War on Terror' and American Film* attempts to interrogate how these events became represented in American cinema in the ensuing decade. While popular film is often derided with the epithet "It's only a movie", this book contends that in the wake of resonant political events, it is popular cinema that becomes one of the defining cultural battlegrounds for competing meanings and values, not only for those who live at the time, but, perhaps, even more importantly, for future generations. Like many cultural traumas, whether it be the Second World War, the Vietnam War or the Cold War, 9/11 and the 'War on Terror' saw itself replayed, recreated and refought on the cinema screens. The majority of these films repeated what some have called the 'master narrative' of 9/11 and in doing so promulgated conservative political paradigms (see films like *United 93* (2006), *World Trade Center* (2006), *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Lone Survivor* (2013)). This understanding sees 9/11 as heinous and unprovoked attack on a virtuous and blameless nation, an attack that was impossible to anticipate and one that brought about a reluctant 'end of innocence' for the United States. However, some films sought to challenge this prevailing understanding of 9/11, the War on Terror and the "with us or against us" rhetoric of
the Bush administration. The films that attempted to do this provided a striking sense of context, often through a process of reverse focalisation and an attempt to deconstruct the quasi-mythological approach to dramatisations of trauma, revenge and justice which emerged after 9/11, even daring to suggest that the US might not be such a bastion of moral clarity as President George W. Bush would have had us believe.

**EUP:** You suggest that to be a ‘true’ post-9/11 film, the movie has to resonate within the decade. Do these ‘true’ post 9/11 films share particular characteristics, features and feelings?

**TMcs:** Arguably, it is not enough to simply categorise all those films made after September 11th 2001 as post-9/11 films. While in a chronological sense they undoubtedly are, the book asserts that to be a post-9/11 film is to reverberate with the fears and anxieties of the decade. What makes Christopher Nolan’s iteration of Batman in its presentation of a narrative that has existed in various forms since 1939 distinctly post-9/11? Or Steven Spielberg’s adaptation of H.G Wells’ classic alien invasion novel *The War of the Worlds* (1898) viscerally connected to the post-9/11 era? How do the James Bond, *Mission Impossible* and Jason Bourne films made after 9/11 differ, if at all, from earlier incarnations of their heroic narratives? Is a science fiction film like *Cloverfield* simply a new millennial reincarnation of a classic monster B movie, a cynical manipulation of traumatic imagery designed to make a quick buck at the box office, or a film which provides us with an opportunity to both vicariously experience and deconstruct the spectacle of 9/11 through the safety of an alien invasion film? Once again we see that the films American audiences ‘escaped to’ in the post 9/11 era are not at all disconnected from the historical moment in which they are made, but, on the contrary, deeply immersed in it.
EUP: To what extent do you think 9/11 has been turned into a commodity by the film industry?

TMcS: Despite many concurring with Gene Seymour who wrote in *The Los Angeles Times* on the 21st September 2001 that "the whole notion of making spectacle out of mass destruction now seems trivial and indulgent at best, insensitive and tastes at worst", within a few brief years American cinema had not only begun to make films which evoked 9/11, but unquestionably subsumed one of the greatest traumatic events in the history of the United States into its narratives, repackaged it and used it in order to sell movie tickets to the masses. In this understanding film becomes part of a range of ways in which 9/11 was constructed as a national trauma and then consumerised, as Dana Heller asserted in *The Selling of 9/11: How a National Tragedy Became a Commodity* (2005). Heller charges that Americans "both participated in, and bore witness to, a rapid transformation of the World Trade Center attacks into commodities aimed at repackaging turbulent and chaotic emotions, reducing them to pious, quasi-religious nationalism". Like the 9/11 memorabilia that flooded the markets in the guise of memorial t-shirts, snow globes, poker chips and postcards, 9/11 was incorporated into American cinema as one of its fundamental narratives and visual tropes in the first decade of the new millennium. Stephen Prince argued in his book *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism* (2009) that Hollywood "seized upon terrorism as a kind of godsend, as a trope capable of animating popular genres for the foreseeable future because the issues posed by terrorism presently show no end coming". It would have been impossible for the film industry to ignore such an impactful cultural event, but how it chose to tell these stories is extremely revealing. Thus, as writers like Siegfried Kracauer, Anton Kaes and Robin Wood have suggested, popular cinema functions not as a meaningless and disposable frivolity, but rather as dynamic texts, almost living time capsules of the era, rife with the discontinuity and ambiguity which characterised of the decade.
EUP: It is now more than a decade since 9/11 and the start of the 'War on Terror'. How far is American cinema still feeling the impact of these events?

TMcS: 9/11 saw itself paradoxically both erased from the cinema screens and returned to in film after film in the first decade of the new millennium. In the heightened political climate of the Bush era, films overtly critical of US foreign policy were rare and thus the majority of popular cinema reproduced an uncritical and unreflective narrative of American victimisation, a pronounced disconnection from the complexities of the geopolitical arena, and, in some cases, even an elaborate erasure of political and historical context. Yet the trauma of 9/11 was too powerful to be entirely contained and disavowed. Just as a bright image continues to appear on one's retina long after the original has disappeared, 9/11 is the quintessential afterimage of the new millennium and has continued to linger on the frames of American film ever since. While the intensity of the immediate post 9/11 has abated the imagery and themes of the 'War on Terror' era continue to return to the screens (See Captain American: Winter Soldier (2014), Zero Dark Thirty (2012), White House Down (2013), Man of Steel (2013), Skyfall (2012)). Certainly America has yet to produce a new millennial equivalent to those epoch defining texts like The Deer Hunter, Apocalypse Now or Platoon, which have come to embody the era regardless of their political perspective. This might be seen as an indication that the defining films of the war on terror era have yet to be made – whether they ever will be remains to be seen.