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## **Obsessed With the Image: Vulgar Auteurism and Post-Cinematic Affect in the Late Films of Tony Scott**

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Obsessed With the Image: Vulgar Auteurism and Post-Cinematic Affect  
in the Late Films of Tony Scott

A Thesis by

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## ABSTRACT

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Tony Scott

by Ethan Cartwright

Beginning in the mid-2000s and carrying through the next several years, a small, dedicated group of critics and cinephiles worked at reevaluating certain contemporary Hollywood genre filmmakers whose work had been largely maligned or ignored by both critics and mainstream audiences. This group, termed as “vulgar auteurism,” distinguished directors like Michael Mann and Paul W.S. Anderson for their audacious and unique formal styles, often using digital technologies and imagery. This thesis proposes that the films and filmmakers associated with vulgar auteurism are connected through how they uniquely portray life in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century using three of Tony Scott’s late-period films: *Man on Fire* (2004); *Déjà Vu* (2006); and *The Taking of Pelham 123* (2009). These films exemplify “post-cinematic affect,” a term used by Steven Shaviro to define how both changes in filmmaking and larger economic shifts have together created new forms of aesthetics for articulating lived experience. This paper also utilizes two areas of focus—postmodernism and neoliberalism—to better understand the sociocultural and economic backgrounds post-cinematic affect derives from. Through close analysis of the three Tony Scott films mentioned above, this thesis demonstrates that the films and directors reappraised by vulgar auteurism provide new critical insights into how we live and move through the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, examining contemporary cultural and political issues like international terrorism, government surveillance, and financial instability.

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## Introduction

In 2012, the filmmaker Tony Scott unexpectedly died by suicide, spawning a larger critical reassessment of his work in Hollywood over the past three decades. Most critics and film scholars have regarded Scott's films as entertaining but vapid action blockbusters. However, his death brought into the mainstream a dedicated group of film critics and cinephiles who rejected existing critical evaluation of Scott, instead praising him as one of the most important directors of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This group—whose critical work is popularly known as “vulgar auteurism”—consisted of film critics, bloggers, and cinephiles from around the world who have contributed since the mid-2000s to elevating Scott and other Hollywood directors like him whose genre films have been negatively received or ignored by audiences, film critics, and cinephiles at large.

Ignatiy Vishnevetsky, one of the leading critics associated with vulgar auteurism, praised Scott's later films of the 2000s especially, which were characterized by their hyperkinetic cinematography and rapid editing. Where most critics saw these movies as over-stylized and unrealistic,<sup>1</sup> Vishnevetsky instead praised them as formally innovative: films such as *Man on Fire* (2004) and *Déjà Vu* (2006) broke away from the classical Hollywood modes of continuity editing and helped build a new form of aesthetics that transcended traditional boundaries of space and time. The combination of constantly moving camerawork, fast cutting, and collaging and dissolving images created a visually impressionistic and often abstract style that conveyed more of a rapid-fire sensory experience than a rigidly defined reality, leading Vishnevetsky to classify Scott as an “action painter.”<sup>2</sup> Vishnevetsky and other vulgar auteurs received Scott's

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<sup>1</sup> See Roger Ebert's *Man on Fire* review (referenced below); Manohla Dargis, “Movie Review: *Déjà Vu*,” New York Times, November 22, 2006, accessed February 25, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/22/movies/22deja.html>; Andrew Lane, “Off the Rails: *The Taking of Pelham 123* and *Whatever Works*,” The New Yorker, June 15, 2009, accessed February 25, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/06/22/off-the-rails-3>.

<sup>2</sup> Ignatiy Vishnevetsky, “Smearing the Senses: Tony Scott, Action Painter,” *MUBI Notebook*, August 22, 2012, accessed June 26, 2020, <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/smearing-the-senses-tony-scott-action-painter>.

films as both purely cinematic works in and of themselves—films that fully displayed the power of images through a formally audacious and unique style—as well as exciting alternatives to the homogeneity of most Hollywood blockbuster genre films that still extensively rely on traditional modes of filmmaking to create a more toned-down form of realism.

This thesis examines this change of critical evaluation of Tony Scott's films in order to bring attention to vulgar auteurism, a small but significant critical movement that has worked to bring into mainstream discussions critical reevaluations of directors like Scott, Michael Mann, and Paul W.S. Anderson whose work has previously been dismissed as mere commercial entertainment appealing to the lowest common denominator. The term "vulgar" comes from the low genres (horror, science fiction, action) these directors mostly work within, as well as the graphic violence and dark cynicism that typically characterize their films. The reevaluation and critical acclaim of these directors and their work built up during the 2000s and arguably peaked in 2012 with the unexpected death of Tony Scott as previously mentioned. This new critical attention to his later films is largely centered around the formal techniques adopted in these films, specifically the images their films construct and oftentimes thematically wrestle with—for example, the surveillance footage of a dead woman that protagonist Doug Carlin watches and starts to fall in love with in *Déjà Vu*. Carlin's obsession with the image of something deceased ties into larger cultural feelings of the inability to prevent disaster before it happens—whether it be the terrorist attacks of September 11 or the destruction of New Orleans caused by Hurricane Katrina—as well as referencing back to the act of watching film itself.

I contend that the films and filmmakers that have been rediscovered by vulgar auteurism are connected through how they uniquely portray life in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century through new modes of aesthetics that offer a heightened sensorial experience for the viewers. In that respect,



these films exemplify what scholar Steven Shaviro terms “post-cinematic affect.” Shaviro uses the term to define how the changes in modes of filmmaking (from analog to digital) along with larger economic shifts have created new forms of articulating lived experience. Shaviro marks out different “diagrams” of our contemporary world that films map out, including: the newly globalized economy whose financial flows are removed from traditional productivity and instead exist within intricate digital networks; the contemporary media landscape saturated with digital imagery and overwhelmed by surveillance from a mass dispersal of cameras and other technology; and a new flexibility and versatility required of workers as they are expected to respond and adjust to constantly shifting surroundings.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, these films serve as affective maps that work to trace out and participate in these newly created social relations and flows of capital that have emerged from what scholars like David Harvey have termed neoliberalism, a wide range of economic policies and rationality that places emphasis on deregulation and free trade.<sup>4</sup> Both neoliberalism and the cultural movement termed as postmodernism provide a framework by which to discuss post-cinematic affect and how it manifests in the works reappraised by vulgar auteurism.

By analyzing three of Tony Scott’s late-period movies—*Man on Fire* (2004), *Déjà Vu* (2006), and *The Taking of Pelham 123* (2009)—this thesis aims to demonstrate the ways in which these films and, by extension, the films praised by the critics and cinephiles associated with vulgar auteurism embody “post-cinematic affect.” In Scott’s case, the expressive formal techniques—rapid-fire cutting, kinetic cinematography, and compositing of images—and narratives of his films work in tandem to obliquely call attention to contemporary cultural and political issues such as fear of terrorist attacks, an increase of government surveillance, and

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<sup>3</sup> Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Winchester: O-Books, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

financial instability. Ultimately, Scott's unique mode of aesthetics affectively depicts life in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, where both the highly interconnected global economy and the constant proliferation of digital screens and images break down traditionally set boundaries of space and time and force subjects into becoming highly versatile laborers who must be able to mold themselves to their constantly changing surroundings.

In order to contextualize Tony Scott's films and how they demonstrate post-cinematic affect, this thesis starts by following the trajectory of his filmmaking career in Hollywood to show the shift in his approach to filmmaking and how vulgar auteurism began reassessing and praising his later films alongside those of other contemporaries like Michael Mann and Paul W.S. Anderson. It will look at auteurism itself and how it fits into contemporary filmmaking and film scholarship, concluding that the filmmakers associated with vulgar auteurism are connected through both their positions as Hollywood blockbuster filmmakers and their unique brand of aesthetics that can be classified as post-cinematic affect. From there, this these explores the term post-cinematic affect and how the term relates back to the rise of neoliberalism in specific policies and general practice. Finally, this thesis analyzes three of Tony Scott's late-period films and explores how each uses unique formal techniques along with oblique references to events and shifts of the 2000s to depict contemporary lived experience.

### **Tony Scott and Vulgar Auteurism**

Tony Scott's filmmaking techniques notably changed at the end of the 1990s and through the 2000s. Known for blockbusters like *Top Gun* (1986) and *Days of Thunder* (1990), Scott continued to make big-budget action films, but began experimenting more and more with his camerawork and editing. His later films are characterized by their rapid camera movement,

frequent cutting, and dissolving images on top of each other. While these techniques create a constant forward momentum, the films feature characters who are often forced to quickly adapt to new situations and surroundings. Though these films were mostly rejected by mainstream critics for their overstylization, those dedicated writers and cinephiles that became situated in the vulgar auteurism movement—most notably critics like Ignaty Vishnevetsky, Adam Cook, and Adam Nayman—began reassessing and praising Scott and directors like him whom they considered as creating new, innovative work in Hollywood blockbuster filmmaking. Their films went against the grain with their unique visions of lived experience in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Though vulgar auteurism clearly takes its roots from critics like Andrew Sarris and Robin Wood who applied the auteur theory to the classical Hollywood studio system, the critics and cinephiles associated with the movement are more interested in exploring how directors like Scott use their films to uniquely explore, reflect on, and even participate in the digitized, neoliberal world that we all live in and move through.

Tony Scott's late-period Hollywood films—starting in the late 1990s and ending with his final movie *Unstoppable* (2010)—have been some of the most popularly praised and discussed movies by vulgar auteurism. Scott, younger brother to filmmaker Ridley Scott, started his career directing commercials in the late 1970s in Britain before moving to Hollywood in the early 1980s. He began working with producer Jerry Bruckheimer during that period and made his most successful and popular film *Top Gun* with Tom Cruise and Val Kilmer. Rather than following his contemporaries into transitioning towards prestige pictures, Scott continued making big-budget commercial genre films into the 1990s and 2000s. It was only later in his career that he began experimenting with different formal techniques, adapting fast-paced editing and rapid camera movements. Film scholar Robert Arnett situates Tony Scott as a post-classical Hollywood auteur,

making what he terms “B+ films” (B-movies with larger budgets while still drawing on genre frameworks and star power). Unlike the viewers of classical Hollywood films, the audiences of Scott’s work “must organize fragments and make connections—not in a sense of complete abandonment of the Classical Hollywood’s reliance on continuity editing, but relying on the contemporary audience’s educated space of film style and narrative and thereby expanding the time and space of continuity editing to find new time and spaces.”<sup>5</sup> Films like *Man on Fire* or *The Taking of Pelham 123* (2009) therefore propel continuity editing into a state of acceleration, heightening the sensory input of their audiences while retaining a distant connection to the traditional structure and form of Hollywood filmmaking.

Most contemporary critics disregarded Scott’s newfound style and responded to his later work with mixed or negative reactions: for example, in his review of *Man on Fire*, Roger Ebert praises lead actor Denzel Washington’s performance but dismisses the film as a whole for its formulaic action, threadbare plot, and “an excess of style.”<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the vulgar auteurist camp instead viewed *Man on Fire* and Scott’s other late-period work as a formally daring contrast to most other blockbuster films. Ignatiy Vishnevetsky writes that Scott’s “hyperactive, impressionistic style made no attempt to accurately represent physical reality—and the movies... are about people who establish relationships that transcend physical presence while dealing with some concrete, physical threat which the relationship ultimately allows them to overcome. They are movies about the denial of physical reality made in a style that denies physical reality... at every opportunity.”<sup>7</sup> If Scott’s films seem over-stylized, it is only because they are responding to

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Arnett, “Understanding Tony Scott: Authorship and Post-Classical Hollywood,” *Film Criticism* 39, no. 3 (2015): 58, accessed July 30, 2020, [www.jstor.org/stable/24777935](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24777935).

<sup>6</sup> Roger Ebert, “*Man on Fire*,” *RogerEbert.com*, April 23, 2004, accessed February 17, 2021, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/man-on-fire-2004>.

<sup>7</sup> Vishnevetsky, “Smearing the Senses: Tony Scott Action Painter.”

a new world that is less grounded in physical space and instead abstracted through digital technologies and new forms of economic relations.

The formal elements of Scott's films, in effect, reflect the relatively new modes of lived experience in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century: where communication and connection is often filtered through digital technology and the world moves at a heightened and unpredictable speed, forcing ordinary people to adapt both to changing technologies and positions they have no training or experience with. Scott's editing splices characters together across time and space and allows them to form deeply emotional bonds through digital screens or extended phone calls. The rapid camerawork of his films characterizes how his protagonists (almost always professionals defined by their skill at their jobs) have to constantly adapt and move forward through unexpected and dangerous situations that push them to their limits—a necessary part of living in a world filled with economic precarity and uncertainty. Both characters within Scott's films and audiences outside the texts have to parse and reorient themselves through watching or experiencing different images at the same time, whether it be the visualization of a protagonist's fragmented mind or a character trying to navigate his way through two different temporal realities at the same time. As such, the reassessment of Tony Scott's later films showcases the ways in which the vulgar auteurist critics highlight these new modes of filmmaking as well as how contemporary society and, thus, lived experience has transformed.

The term “vulgar auteurism”<sup>8</sup> was first coined by critic Andrew Tracy in a 2009 article on the filmmaker Michael Mann, focusing on how his latest digital films *Miami Vice* (2006) and *Public Enemies* (2009) have been reappraised by a minority group of cinephiles. Tracy critiques

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<sup>8</sup> To date, there has been no significant academic scholarship on vulgar auteurism as a phenomenon. More popular directors like Tony Scott have been studied (see footnote 5), but not in the context of how the critics and cinephiles of vulgar auteurism have reappraised him and his work.

both these films and their fans: he judges *Miami Vice* and *Public Enemies* as formally audacious but ultimately thematically empty studio movies. Furthermore, the fans of these works attempt to apply auteur theory to contemporary American filmmakers whose work has little to no thematic consistency and is more bound together by industry marketing than a personal artistic vision. According to Tracy, “The auteurist delving after the personal in the midst of the facelessly industrial has perhaps inevitably yielded the vulgar auteurist notion that... in Mann’s case, the jets and speedboats and minutely reproduced period settings are felicitous bursts of visual rapture rather than a heavy-duty... marshalling of equipment and people.”<sup>9</sup> Though Tracy criticizes many of the films vulgar auteurism has revered, his description of Mann and his recent digital films that have been poorly received and subsequently reappraised is nevertheless apt. The most common thread that unites the filmmakers associated with vulgar auteurism—Scott, Mann, Michael Bay, and Paul W.S. Anderson among others—is that they all make popular Hollywood genre films that are usually negatively received by both mainstream audiences and film critics.

Filmmakers such as Bay and Anderson started their careers in Hollywood as digital technologies became well-established, and they significantly utilized these techniques as they headed large studio franchises (*Transformers* and *Resident Evil*, respectively) while also making smaller, more personal stand-alone films along the way. On the other hand, directors like Michael Mann and Tony Scott had been making films since the 1980s that were more well-received by contemporary moviegoers, but their work from the 2000s onward marked a shift in their formal techniques. Just as Scott’s films transitioned to fast-paced editing that heavily relied on rapid cuts and overlapping images in increasingly abstract ways, Mann also began changing

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew Tracy, “Vulgar Auteurism: The Case of Michael Mann,” *Cinema Scope* 40 (Fall 2009): accessed October 4, 2020, <https://cinema-scope.com/cinema-scope-online/vulgar-auteurism-case-michael-mann/>.

his process of filmmaking through shooting on digital cameras that gave his later films different visual textures and sheens that couldn't be created through traditional celluloid.

Vulgar auteurism nominally calls back to classical auteurism as defined and theorized by American film critics and scholars in the 1960s and 1970s, who began appropriating what the French *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics termed *les politique des auteurs* to the Hollywood studio system. Critic and filmmaker François Truffaut originally differentiated those filmmakers that brought their own creativity and authority into the films they made as auteurs, as opposed to *metteurs en scene* that simply directed the given script as faithfully as they could.<sup>10</sup> Critics like Andrew Sarris analyzed works by directors like Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, and Howard Hawks from an auteurist perspective, highlighting the ways in which their creative voices were powerful and distinct enough to shine through the restrictions of the studio system.<sup>11</sup> However, because of both shifts within the film industry and larger socioeconomic changes over the past few decades, auteurs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have “a new need to thoroughly reassess reality, trying to decipher, understand, and make sense of the conundrum presented to mankind in the age of corporate capitalism. In the process, the role of the auteur... may be more crucial and relevant than ever.”<sup>12</sup> In this regard, vulgar auteurism is not so much extending classical auteurism to filmmakers like Tony Scott and Michael Bay than they are changing and adapting its tenets to reflect on movies made in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Today, Hollywood is both freer and more restrictive than it was during the classical studio system: while there is no production code that filmmakers have to follow to get their work

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<sup>10</sup> François Truffaut, “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema,” in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: An Anthology*, ed. Scott MacKenzie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 133-144.

<sup>11</sup> In this regard, vulgar auteurism is arguably a reiteration of auteur theory in that its critics seek to assign high aesthetic value and artistic merit to what has been traditionally regarded “low” genre filmmaking.

<sup>12</sup> Seung-hoon Jeong and Jeremi Szaniawski, introduction to *The Global Auteur: The Politics of Authorship in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Cinema*, eds. Seung-hoon Jeong and Jeremi Szaniawski (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 16.

distributed, major studios have almost exclusively focused on adapting intellectual properties they have acquired (Marvel and DC Comics, Star Wars, etc.). The directors who take on these projects are often merely guns-for-hire and lack any significant creative input, as their movies typically have to fit within a larger franchise and are repeatedly market-tested for studios to achieve a maximum profit. Because these films are seen as purely financial investments on the part of studio executives and producers, they tend to avoid any stylistic deviation from the established Hollywood mode of filmmaking and continuity editing for fear of bombing at the box office. Therefore, as Hollywood has become increasingly homogenized and corporatized, vulgar auteurism can be seen as a small but defiant response by elevating directors whose studio films display a unique artistic vision that is all but absent in most other contemporary Hollywood movies.

The films revered by vulgar auteurism aptly and audaciously reflect the world we live in today—never providing any explicit social or political statements, but instead fully submerging into the experience of the present-day world. In a blog post from 2013, film critic and scholar Peter Labuza in his own analysis of vulgar auteurism argues that many filmmakers associated with vulgar auteurism are not only making movies with striking images, but also raising larger questions *through* creating these images and placing significant thematic weight on them. The films reevaluated by vulgar auteurism rely less on classical modes of editing and cinematography, instead drawing on a wide range of media forms (24-hour news, video games, reality TV) to redefine how films can depict and participate within our newly digitized world.<sup>13</sup> Whereas critics like Vishnevetsky have avoided If the movies praised by vulgar auteurs have

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Labuza, “Expressive Esoterica in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—Or: What is Vulgar Auteurism?,” *LabuzaMovies.Com*, June 3, 2013, accessed June 26, 2020, <https://labuzamovies.com/2013/06/03/expressive-esoterica-in-the-21st-century-or-what-is-vulgar-auteurism/>.



one thing in common, it is their unique mode of aesthetics in depicting lived experience in today's world—or, as Steven Shaviro describes it, post-cinematic affect.

In Tony Scott's case, the quick cutting, compositing of images together, and hyperkinetic camerawork of his late-period films work to create a powerful sensory experience that emphasizes the rapid momentum and constant instability of moving through and acting in the present-day world. His characters are frequently working professionals who must quickly adapt to new, strange situations that they are unprepared for, whether that be the kidnapping of a client's daughter (*Man on Fire*) or negotiating with hijackers on a subway train (*The Taking of Pelham 123*). Furthermore, the backgrounds of his films allude to cultural and political issues of the 2000s such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the Bush-era government's response in *Man on Fire*, the PATRIOT Act that increased the powers of law enforcement and legitimized mass surveillance of citizens in *Déjà Vu*, and the 2008-9 economic recession that cost millions of people their jobs and life savings in *The Taking of Pelham 123*. Ultimately, the combination of these formal and thematic elements affectively traces out and engages in the new flows and relations of today's society created by both the rise of neoliberal economics and the influx of digital screens and imagery.

### **Digital Technologies, Neoliberal Capitalism, and Post-Cinematic Affect**

The advent of digital technologies and their incorporation into cinema over the past couple decades have sparked a significant change in the medium that some scholars have come to refer to as post-cinema.<sup>14</sup> Among different approaches to studying this recent phenomenon,

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<sup>14</sup> Post-cinema itself is more broadly discussed in terms of how the ever-expanding and transforming media landscape of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century has created a transition into new cinematic forms. See *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21<sup>st</sup> Century Film*, eds. Shane Denson and Julia Leyda (Falmer: REFRAME Books, 2016).

scholar Steven Shaviro's concept of post-cinematic affect is particularly useful in assessing Tony Scott's late-period films. In his book entitled *Post-Cinematic Affect*, Shaviro engages with Brian Massumi's affect theory<sup>15</sup>—how films can create affect within their audience that leads to emotional responses—in his analysis of films and music videos from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, discussing how these texts adopt new modes of aesthetics in response to two major changes: first, digital technologies overtaking analog filmmaking and second, broader socioeconomic changes of the past few decades. In particular, Shaviro cites how neoliberalism has created a surge of free-market economic policies ranging from privatization of previously public industries to financialization of global markets, along with the rationale that anything (and anyone) can serve as a form of capital to be invested in. The effects of neoliberalism have heightened wealth inequality and increased dehumanization of workers as they are reduced to purely economic subjects in the eyes of the market and government alike. As social relations dramatically transform according to the principles and policies of neoliberalism, Shaviro contends that a distinct change has also occurred in the modes of film aesthetics to better depict, capture, and participate in this new era of capitalism.<sup>16</sup> Shaviro, alongside postmodern cultural theorists such as Fredric Jameson and economic theorists such as David Harvey who study the rise and effects of neoliberalism, provide a critical foundation on which to analyze three of Tony Scott's late-period films and how their unique formal techniques and narratives work in tandem to document and engage with lived experience in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Shaviro's analysis of Richard Kelly's science fiction satire *Southland Tales* (2006) provides a suitable approach to similarly reading Tony Scott's films in terms of post-cinematic affect. The film takes place in an alternate 2008, where the United States has been attacked by

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<sup>15</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect*, 2.

nuclear bombs and has subsequently embarked on a third world war abroad in fighting terrorism while also expanding the bounds of the PATRIOT Act. Shaviro discusses how *Southland Tales* formally and thematically depicts life in the 2000s through a darkly comic and often ruthlessly bleak lens: the rapid expansion of mass media and permeation of digital imagery; the constant surveillance of citizens by the government and corporations alike; and the consequences of sending soldiers to fight endless wars abroad. Furthermore, Shaviro explores how the film relies on digital compositing rather than montage, placing different images next to each other through various screens rather than cutting between one another as in traditional montage. “The media experiencer can no longer be figured as a ‘spectator,’ standing apart from and overlooking a homogenous visual field. Rather, he or she must parse multiple, windowed image sources as rhythmic patterns and as information fields.”<sup>17</sup> Shaviro’s analysis here aligns with vulgar auteurism in several different ways—reassessing a negatively received big-budget Hollywood genre film, reflecting on the images it creates (often through digital screens), and examining how the movie’s vulgarity works to create a unique depiction and satirical critique of lived experience in the 2000s. Tony Scott, therefore, uniquely demonstrates the concept of post-cinematic affect in his big-budget Hollywood genre movies rather than new forms of audiovisual media or international arthouse films. Because Hollywood genre films are bound by stricter conventions and are rarely taken as seriously as arthouse or “prestige” movies, this could account for why Scott’s late-period films have been so poorly received by popular audiences and the majority of film critics.

In analyzing how post-cinematic affect manifests in the films of Tony Scott, it is important to acknowledge and discuss two areas of focus that can help in understanding the

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<sup>17</sup> Shaviro, 79.

sociocultural, political, and economic backgrounds these works draw on to depict lived experience in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The first is postmodernism, the large movement and social condition that emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in literature, art, film, and criticism, can be viewed as a broader social and cultural response to the changes brought on by neoliberalism, even if it is termed more broadly as “late capitalism.” I draw from two cultural theorists’ work on postmodernism: Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard. Jameson’s book *Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* is one of the most significant Marxist critiques of the collapse of modernism and the rise of postmodernism, examining how mass culture has transformed the creation of art into a massive commodity production that pervades every part of our lives. He describes in the introduction to his book that postmodernism is largely a reaction to changes in capitalism and consumer culture.<sup>18</sup> While it has only been loosely defined by its critics, Jameson identifies some aspects of postmodern culture, including a breakdown of the distinction between “high” and “low” art, a new form of depthlessness defined by a literal flatness of texture or superficiality, and new forms of technology brought on by the digital age. Scott’s late-period films exemplify this “flatness” through their formal techniques, dissolving different images on to one another within the same composition to visually display how his characters see and move through a postmodern world.

Jean Baudrillard analyzes contemporary culture and explores the breakdown between reality and imitations of reality, or simulations. Baudrillard claims that our world has entirely replaced reality with an overabundance of signs and symbols that have lost any relationship to the real, creating a world filled with *simulacra*. The effects of this substitution and replacement of the real with images or signs of the real are the indistinguishability between reality and images

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<sup>18</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), xii.

reproduced in mass media; the shift in how society views personal value in purely monetary terms, and the dominance of capitalism and global financial networks that weakens traditional connections to family, labor, and country.<sup>19</sup> Baudrillard's theories on simulacra are also relevant into the discussion of vulgar auteurism, especially because so much of the movement revolves around images themselves and their proliferation in today's world. Tony Scott's *Déjà Vu*, for example, revolves around a futuristic program that creates a literal window into the past that government agents use to locate terrorists. The image of the past becomes central to the film, especially as the second half of the film follows the protagonist as he *enters* the image, traveling back in time to prevent an attack.

Both Jameson and Baudrillard's work is in direct response to the significant economic and political changes that have occurred across the globe since the mid-1970s. Though neither theorist mentions the term directly in their work, I contend that the economic shift into "late capitalism" that both theorists discuss extensively can be characterized by the term neoliberalism. Economist David Harvey defines it as such:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices... Furthermore, if markets do not exist..., then they must be created.<sup>20</sup>

Neoliberalism began emerging as a common economic strategy in the United States and Britain with conservative leaders like Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher who led mass privatizations of government programs, cracked down on the power of labor unions, and dismantled regulations all in the name of free enterprise; and in developing countries across the

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<sup>19</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 2.

globe where neoliberal economics were forced on to millions of people through international financial institutions, government corruption, and right-wing dictators. Harvey's study goes over the massive changes brought on by neoliberal policies since the 1970s to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and he ultimately concludes that the project of neoliberalism is little more than an extensive project conducted largely by the rich to retain their wealth after decades of Keynesian economics in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The results of neoliberalism have been an increase in widespread global poverty, economic instability on both personal and global levels, greater corporate control over policy-making and legal structures, and continued environmental destruction as a result of flagrant de-regulation.

In an article on introducing neoliberal theories to the discipline of film studies, Anna Cooper argues that “neoliberal ideology has ultimately taken on a life of its own as a mechanism of totalizing control over every individual and all social interactions everywhere,” adding that “neoliberalism has... affected virtually every aspect of human life: not just traditionally-understood economic spheres... but also areas like urban geography, human mobilities, practices of art and creativity, interpersonal relationships and family life, conceptions of selfhood, visions of utopia and dystopia, and of course configurations of race and gender.”<sup>21</sup> In discussing neoliberalism and its presence within the films praised by vulgar auteurism, one cannot ignore the rationality that accompanies these economic and political changes and how it plays a role in lived experience in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Thus, along with Harvey, I draw on scholar Wendy Brown's studies on neoliberalism, particularly her book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* to discuss the social effects of neoliberalism as manifested in Scott's films. Brown expands from scholars like

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<sup>21</sup> Anna Cooper, “Neoliberal theory and film studies,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 17, no. 3 (2019): 272, accessed August 1, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2019.1622877>.

Harvey in focusing on the detrimental consequences of neoliberal reasoning and rationality, as it is applied to and ultimately corrodes democratic institutions such as the law, higher education, and political governance. Drawing on Michel Foucault's 1978-79 *Birth of Biopolitics* lectures, Brown refers to the neoliberal subject as *homo oeconomicus*—a completely economized subject in contrast to *homo politicus* as theorized by earlier thinkers like Hegel and Rousseau. Because this new subject is defined solely by their financial capital, its ideas of freedom are completely reoriented from the political realm to the free markets.<sup>22</sup> This can be seen in *Man on Fire*, which features the utilization of child hostages as capital and industries that profit off of security threats and kidnappings, as well as the two lead characters of *The Taking of Pelham 123* who have been punished and largely abandoned by the systems they worked for. Through positioning its protagonists as economized subjects that act in a world where anything and everything can be sources of capital, Tony Scott's films thereby clearly demonstrate the sociocultural consequences of neoliberalism, even if no specific economic policies or theories are ever mentioned.

### **Post-Cinematic Affect in the Films of Tony Scott**

The three films analyzed here all use Scott's unique brand of aesthetics but each text and its narrative and themes are also heavily influenced by the culture and politics of the 2000s: the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the Bush-era response that led to wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (*Man on Fire*); the PATRIOT Act that legitimized enhanced interrogation and mass surveillance (*Déjà Vu*); and the 2008-09 economic recession (*The Taking of Pelham 123*). This link to contemporary events, changes, and sociocultural attitudes adds to the post-cinematic affect each text creates along with its formal elements. Along with the other films that fall under the

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<sup>22</sup> Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 109-10.

umbrella of vulgar auteurism, Tony Scott's late-period work refuses to create any critical distance from the world and characters he portrays; to quote Shaviro's concluding remarks on post-cinematic affect, his films "operate on the premise that the only way out is the way through. The world of real subsumption is a world without transcendence; the only way, therefore, to get 'beyond' this world is to exhaust its possibilities and push its inherent tendencies to their utmost extremity."<sup>23</sup> Scott's three films embrace and entangle themselves within the 2000s, not entirely criticizing but instead actively portraying how people move through a world now consumed by fears of insecurity from attacks, almost total economic precarity, and expanded surveillance that removes any form of privacy.

*Man on Fire* (2004) — "Do You Think God Will Forgive Us?"

*Man on Fire* marked Scott's ultimate turn towards the formal techniques that would define the final films of his career—hyperkinetic cinematography, rapid-fire cutting, and compositing of images on top of each other. He uses these techniques here to visually display the fractured mind of bodyguard John Creasy (Denzel Washington) as he goes on a revenge spree following the kidnapping and murder of his client's young daughter. Early on in *Man on Fire*, Creasy asks his close friend and former colleague Rayburn (Christopher Walken) whether God would forgive them for what they've done in their previous lives working for the U.S. government in black ops and counterterrorist operations. Coming out a mere three years after the 9/11 attacks, the film depicts a new era of fear and need for security through a wealthy family in Mexico City, whose patriarch has to balance his financial instability with protecting his wife and daughter during a dramatic rise in kidnappings for millions of dollars in ransom. These fears in

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<sup>23</sup> Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect*, 136.



turn help to produce new ways of earning money both legitimately and illegally, and work to reduce human beings to pure capital. In particular, the kidnapping insurance business represents the project of neoliberalism doled out to its fullest extent—a business that profits off of the fears of wealthy Mexico City residents and the real dangers their children face. Furthermore, Carlin’s vigilante justice in the second half of the film echoes the Bush-era response to terrorism abroad in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, where foreign subjects are detained, brutally interrogated, and murdered for information.

Based on the novel of the same title by A.J. Quinnell, *Man on Fire* follows John Creasy, an alcoholic ex-military soldier who is hired to protect the young daughter of a Mexican-American family living in Mexico City. The opening montage of the film—depicting a teenage boy being abducted and his family forced to pay ransom—immediately sets up the danger of Mexico City and the fear and paranoia that accompanies its wealthier residents, who worry their own child will be taken, tortured, and held ransom for millions of dollars. This worry over lack of security and an attack that could come anytime anywhere is emblematic of the fear that spread through the United States following the September 11 terrorist attacks. The Bush administration used the widespread national fear as a springboard for extended war in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the rapid passing of the PATRIOT Act that stretched the legality of law enforcement agencies to increase surveillance and detain and interrogate anyone who they suspected of being or having ties to terrorist groups. As his new client Samuel Ramos (Marc Anthony) learns from reading his resume, Creasy has sixteen years of military experience including “extensive counterterrorism work” for the CIA, implying his role in covert operations that went outside legal boundaries.

Ramos, a wealthy Mexican businessman secretly struggling to pay off massive debts left over by his deceased father, hires Creasy as a bodyguard for his American wife Lisa (Radha Mitchell) and their 9-year-old daughter Lupita (Dakota Fanning). Ramos tries to hide the fact that he is in an economically unstable position from his family, even debating with his lawyer Jordan Kalfus (Mickey Rourke) over hiring a new bodyguard to protect his daughter. Kalfus's solution is both economical and brutally pragmatic: hire a cheap bodyguard for a few months so Ramos can hold on to his kidnappers' insurance policy. Neoliberal ideology dictates that along with privatizing previously public industries, new ways of accumulating capital that had been previously disregarded can also be opened up to make profits.<sup>24</sup> Kidnapping insurance resembles this tenet of neoliberalism perfectly, and it also emblemizes similar businesses that made millions of dollars following the 9/11 attacks, as both the American government and private businesses were in demand of better surveillance technology and private security to ward off any possible attacks. Furthermore, Ramos deciding to hire a less expensive (and likely less efficient) bodyguard demonstrates how financial instability can in turn create other areas of personal instability—like having to buy a used, old car that may not start when you have to get to work.

Though it only started a year before *Man on Fire* was released, there are parallels between Creasy's previous life and the American invasion and occupation of Iraq that started in 2003 and lasted for the next eight years. Creasy, an incredibly skilled bodyguard, is only hampered by his intense alcoholism as he struggles to reckon with his past work for the US military. Along with protecting clients, Creasy has experience in brutally interrogating and torturing people—something that would become one of the chief debates of the decade as photos and documentation of beaten and mutilated victims in Abu Ghraib and other American detention

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<sup>24</sup> Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 160.

facilities would shock the international community. Creasy's faith in God is in part what drives him into alcoholism and intense feelings of guilt and depression: he is lost because he does not know whether the actions he's committed have been morally good or not.

Film scholar Paul Davies discusses the role God and religion plays in the film, contending that while characters like Creasy believe in God, they are unable to see whether what they do is right or wrong in His eyes. In a postmodern world overrun by global networks and unseen connections, no one can know the effects of their actions and whether torturing or killing another human being is justified in the eyes of God.<sup>25</sup> Creasy's intense confusion over his actions reflect the opaque morality of being a military operative in the War on Terror: if you are tasked simply with torturing possible suspects to acquire information and pass it on to your superiors, you have no real idea of whether or not what you are doing will help save lives. All you are left with is the immediate knowledge of your actions, which are undoubtedly evil in God's eyes.

Creasy finds himself redeemed through his growing relationship with Ramos's daughter Pita, and the bond the two develop in turn gets him to emerge from his alcoholic stupor and start letting go of his depression and suicidal emotions. However, his brief recovery is ultimately shattered when Pita is abducted after walking out of a piano lesson. The moments where Creasy notices the abductors as Pita leaves the building and engages in a firefight with them shows how Tony Scott uses formal techniques to depict the headspace of Creasy: the sequence is peppered with rapid editing, jump cuts, and slow motion, dissolving flashes of images on top of each other. Additionally, "hand-crank camera is used a great deal, along with cross-processed reversal film stock. This produces grainy images with color faults like in old holiday films, flashes and

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Davies, "Be not Overcome by Evil but Overcome Evil with Good: The Theology of Evil in *Man on Fire*," *At the Interface / Probing the Boundaries* 63 (January 2011): 220, accessed October 16, 2020, <https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=ufh&AN=58843770&site=eds-live>.

flutters. It brings out the colors and makes the grain pop out, with the result that everything looks more vivid... it's a heightened reality."<sup>26</sup> These devices all work to affectively depict two parts of Creasy's character: his experience and professionalism in recognizing and responding to an imminent threat, and his panic and emotion over someone trying to harm the person he holds dearest. Jump cuts and wide pans emphasize Creasy's sudden tension as he glances around and notices different cars blocking the street; quick back-and-forth cutting between Creasy and Pita as they exchange glances and Pita realizes something is wrong visually displays the bond between the two; and the raw, grainy flashes Creasy sees after he is shot in the chest of Pita crying and being taken away show the pain and raw emotion he feels.

These formal techniques are more heavily used in the latter half of the film, as Creasy learns that Pita was murdered by her captors and goes on a vindictive rampage against anyone who was involved in her death—regardless of the physical and mental toll it plays on him. The rapid editing, flashes of images, and dynamic cinematography add to the mania of Creasy's vengeance and visually indicate the psychological damage such evil acts do to his soul. Creasy discovers a large network of people who are to blame for Pita's kidnapping and murder—from crooked cops who stole the ransom money to shifty nightclub owners and locals who moved the girl from place to place to organized crime bosses who oversee hundreds of these kidnappings every year.

According to Shaviro, one of the conditions surrounding post-cinematic affect is the newly financialized economy consisting of intricately dispersed networks: "the endlessly modulating financial flows of globalized network capitalism are no longer tied to any concrete processes of production. Incessantly leveraged and reinvested, these flows proliferate

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<sup>26</sup> See note 22 above.

cancerously—at least until they reach a point of necrosis, or sheer implosion.”<sup>27</sup> The network Creasy seeks to tear apart is similarly designed based on treating children as capital that they can use to exchange for millions of dollars. Furthermore, those in this network are people connected to each other only through phone conversations or ATM cards. Torturing one person who was involved gives Creasy information that only leads to another person and so on (again reminiscent of military operatives fighting the War on Terror through detaining and interrogating possible suspects).

The most shocking culprit behind Pita’s kidnapping is her father Ramos and his lawyer Jordan Kalfus, who arranged the abduction with crime boss Daniel Sanchez (Roberto Sosa) as a way to quickly profit off of the kidnapping insurance company’s ransom. Their plan, however, was foiled when corrupt policemen stole the money left at the drop site for themselves. Again, Ramos and Kalfus apply neoliberal rationality to its fullest and most dehumanizing extent through this arrangement. The reasoning that neoliberal practice and policy has created forces human beings to consider themselves and each other in purely economic terms, changing their value from how much labor they can produce to how good of an investment they are.<sup>28</sup> Ramos similarly uses his own daughter as a possible source of capital, desperate enough to have her abducted and placed in danger in order to escape his financial problems, and later kills himself out of anguish over his role in Pita’s demise.

After Creasy kidnaps and mutilates Sanchez’s younger brother, Sanchez reveals that Pita is still alive: he held on to her as a possible source of profit following his ransom money being stolen by the cops. Creasy, already close to death, agrees to turn both himself and Sanchez’s brother into Sanchez in exchange for Pita’s freedom. The exchange takes place, and Pita is

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<sup>27</sup> Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect*, 30.

<sup>28</sup> Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, 65.

reunited with her mother while Creasy is driven away towards his (presumed) death. The flashes of images used in the ending sequence—a dormant volcano towering over the landscape, a tired Creasy leaning against the car window, his scarred hand holding a necklace of St. Jude given to him by Pita—were teased intermittently at the beginning of the film as Creasy entered Mexico, implying a sense of fate and purpose fulfilled. His sacrifice at the end of the film directly saves someone rather than harming or killing them, an unmistakably good and noble action in a world tormented by violence, greed, and despair.

*Déjà Vu* (2006) — “I Need Her to Matter to You”

Whereas *Man on Fire* reflected the Bush-era response to terrorism abroad, *Déjà Vu* shifts the focus to its effects on domestic law enforcement and the proliferation of surveillance technologies used to monitor and track American citizens. Scott’s unique formal techniques are specifically utilized through the film’s fictional Snow White program, a window into the immediate past that federal agents use to find the culprit of a terrorist attack, and demonstrate the lack of privacy created by the widespread use of such technologies. The film also takes on an almost romantic tone, as agent Doug Carlin (Denzel Washington) finds himself falling in love with the image of a woman who was killed by the terrorist before he set off the bomb. Handing him a photograph of his daughter, the dead woman’s father tells Carlin, “I need her to matter to you,” foreshadowing the film’s emphasis on images and how they can take on a life of their own. Carlin’s obsession with the image of the deceased echoes not just the power of images in the digital age, but also a larger cultural sadness over the mass casualties caused by terrorist attacks like 9/11 and natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. Carlin’s desire for the woman he only

knows through watching surveillance causes him to *enter* the image, travelling back in time to save her and prevent the attack from being carried out.

Following the bombing of a river ferry in New Orleans and the killing of over 500 passengers and crew members, ATF agent Doug Carlin is assigned to find the terrorist responsible. His sharp detective work gets him added to a team that uses high-tech surveillance technology to try to find the perpetrator. The technology—nicknamed “Snow White”—is able to create a constant audiovisual stream of the nearby area from four days previous. What Carlin discovers as he works with Special Agent Paul Pryzwarra (Val Kilmer) and his team is that Snow White is not a series of images but an actual window into the past that was accidentally created by university researchers and harnessed by the United States government to solve high-profile crimes. According to Steven Shaviro, the genre of science fiction brings the underlying sense of futurity we feel in the present day to a visible surface, using fictional devices to highlight our contemporary fears and desires.<sup>29</sup> Though the premise of the film is complete science fiction, it mirrors the passing of the US PATRIOT Act after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the rapid rise of government surveillance in the twenty years since. The Snow White program has the ability to watch anyone anywhere (within a specific radius), eliminating any sense of privacy and operating above any legal restraints. The effect of seeing such a technology in action is equal parts mesmerizing and disturbing for how Carlin and the government use it to invade innocent citizens’ privacy in order to find a domestic terrorist.

At Carlin’s request, the surveillance team follows Claire Kuchever (Paula Patton), a young woman who Carlin suspects was murdered by the terrorist shortly before the ferry explosion. As Carlin watches her through surveillance imagery, he grows obsessed with her,

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<sup>29</sup> Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect*, 67.

even though she is already dead in the time where he resides. When he finally discovers the truth about Snow White, he becomes furious at the rest of the team in his disorientation over whether Claire is alive or dead. Carlin, in effect, is confronting not a reconstruction of the past, but the *actual* past mediated through a digital screen.<sup>30</sup> Claire is *both* alive and dead, and this connection between two different temporalities creates a rift and confusion in Carlin's brain. She lives on in the images he watches, and therefore there is still a possibility he can save her from her fate.

The formal techniques present in *Man on Fire* return in this film as well, though they are largely restrained to the images that Carlin and his team have to navigate through. Hence, the camera rapidly pans through buildings and digitally adjusts the image as the team moves the surveillance technology to different surroundings to find new targets. Zooms and jump cuts are also utilized, as Carlin asks to check what number someone is dialing, license plates, or faces of a possible suspect. The effects of the fast camerawork and editing adds to the notion that the team are themselves audiences watching a film, moving from scene to scene and trying to piece together different events and scraps of information. Yet what they are watching is more than a film: it is another reality in and of itself, one that is connected to and yet separated from the one that Carlin and the team occupy. The technology is more or less an extension of today's world that is governed by the images surrounding us on the screens of our televisions, our laptops, and our cellphones—their depthlessness and tactility makes them equal to or even surpass reality.<sup>31</sup> Carlin's increased obsession with the images he sees of Claire refers to the ability of cinema to capture "lost" or "dead" objects that can forever live on through moving images. The Snow White program effectively represents the magnification of the power of cinema and deconstructs

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<sup>30</sup> Michael J. Anderson, "Resurrecting the Rube: Diegesis Formation and Contemporary Trauma in Tony Scott's *Déjà Vu*," *Film Criticism* 33, no. 2 (2008): 8-9, accessed July 30, 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect*, 38.



the division between reality and image—Carlin can not only watch Claire through the images he sees but interact with her as well, which he demonstrates by pointing a laser pointer at the screen that Claire notices within the image.

Not only does the Snow White program blur the lines between the reality that Carlin exists in and that displayed through surveillance imagery, but it also defies linear notions of cause and effect. Carlin suggests sending a note back in time to his own desk to inform himself of where the terrorist will be; however, the team sends the note back too late and Carlin's partner Larry Minuti (Matt Craven) receives it instead. Miunti goes by himself to check out the tip and instead gets killed by the terrorist. Rather than prevent the ferry bomb from going off, Carlin in the present has only retroactively caused his partner's death four days previously. Desperate, Carlin takes a car equipped with a sophisticated goggle rig that can transmit the images of the past from a mobile location. The car chase that takes place is set in two different temporalities that Carlin must negotiate between: one eye sees the goggle-image of the terrorist's truck going away and the other eye must notice and respond to oncoming traffic of the present. In the words of Jameson, Carlin effectively "is called upon to do the impossible, namely, to see all the screens at once, in their radical and random difference."<sup>32</sup> Scott's rapid editing adds to the frenzy of the chase sequence, cutting between images of the past that Carlin and his team at their base watch intently and Carlin's own struggles in avoiding crashing his car in the present. One point-of-view shot, however, juxtaposes the image of the terrorist's car on the goggle to the traffic Carlin avoids in reality, relying on composition rather than editing to affectively portray the difficulty from the character's perspective (similar to the digital compositing mentioned above by Shavero in Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales*).

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<sup>32</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 31.

Using the rig, Carlin is able to find and capture the terrorist, Carroll Oerstadt (Jim Caviezel), a disgruntled, mentally unstable self-called patriot who bombed the ferry out of anger that he wasn't accepted into the marines or army. With Oerstadt captured, Pryzwarra and his team prepare to pack up Snow White and move on; however, Carlin is still consumed by the idea that he can save Claire and the victims of the ferry explosion. The Snow White program—like the cinematic form itself—has not only the power of recreating an object lost in time, but also displaying a former reality now lost in the past.<sup>33</sup> In that manner, Carlin sees Claire as a lost object, something that can be brought back to life through the power of the images he has seen. His attitude also has larger cultural connections: *Déjà Vu* came out in 2006, a mere five years after the devastation of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York City. The film is set in New Orleans and was shot shortly after the destruction created by Hurricane Katrina, signs of which are shown in poor neighborhoods still decimated and unrepaired or banners that say, “Katrina only made us stronger!” Furthermore, Carlin has previous experience working on domestic terrorist bombings: Pryzwarra finds out that he worked in Oklahoma City, no doubt referencing when extremists blew up a government building in 1995. The combination of all these callbacks to past disasters shows that Carlin is not just drawn to go back out of an obsession for Claire, but also out of the possibility that he might be able to prevent a disaster from taking place rather than deal with the remains after it occurs. The night before the rest of the team leaves, Carlin convinces lead scientist Dr. Alexander Denny (Adam Goldberg) to try sending him back in the same manner as the note, even though it's never been attempted on living things before.

The experiment works, and Carlin is transported back in time to the morning of the ferry explosion hours before it's set to go off. From there, he rescues Claire and gets her to assist him

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<sup>33</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 47.

in going to the ferry to prevent the bomb from going off. Shots from the opening sequence repeat themselves—sailors rushing on to the ferry, a young girl dropping her doll in the water, a teacher counting heads of schoolchildren—but this time they are intercut with the action around Carlin, Claire, and Oerstadt. The repetition of these images emphasizes the difference between the beginning and end of the film—what seemed like an inevitable disaster has now transformed into a suspenseful ticking-bomb scenario. Carlin manages to kill Oerstadt and drives the truck containing the bomb into the river, sacrificing his life just as Creasy does in *Man on Fire*. The film comes full circle as the Carlin from the past comes on to the crime scene as he did at the beginning and meets Claire (again) for the first time. The world Carlin saw through the Snow White program—one where Claire is alive and disaster hasn't happened—has moved from mere image to reality.

*The Taking of Pelham 123* (2009) — “You’re My Goddamned Hero”

*The Taking of Pelham 123* came out in the midst of the 2008-09 recession, where millions of people lost their jobs and their homes and were forced into extreme debt due to the crash of a global finance market that had become increasingly unstable.<sup>34</sup> The narrative of *Pelham* echoes that financial instability, as New York City transit employee Walter Garber has to deal with Ryder, a former hedge fund executive who was sentenced to years in prison and has now taken several hostages on a subway car. Just as Scott used his unique mode of aesthetics to connect Carlin and Claire across time and space in *Déjà Vu*, so he does again in *Pelham* with Garber and Ryder, who only get to know each other through phone calls for much of the film. The men forge a bond over how they have been both screwed over by the systems that they had

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<sup>34</sup> Annie Lowrey, “The Great Recession Is Still With Us,” *The Atlantic*, December 1, 2017, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/12/great-recession-still-with-us/547268/>.

dedicated themselves to, Garber about to be fired for taking a bribe and Ryder imprisoned for investment fraud. Ryder repeatedly calls Garber his “goddamned hero,” as he sees Garber as the rare man who values human life in and of itself rather than in terms of economics. Alternately, Ryder views the hostages he has solely as forms of capital as the kidnappers in Mexico City in *Man on Fire* do, and Garber has to quickly adapt to his new role as negotiator to keep them alive while the city of New York scrambles to deliver the money, reflecting the essential versatility all workers need to have in an unstable global economy where one can lose everything they have in an instant through no fault of their own.

A remake of the 1974 thriller of the same title, *The Taking of Pelham 123* follows New York train dispatcher Walter Garber (Denzel Washington) as he is forced to negotiate with a group of criminals who hijacked a subway car and demand ten million dollars from the city in exchange for the hostages’ lives. The leader of the gang, nicknamed “Ryder” (John Travolta), strikes up an immediate relationship over the radio with Garber, and the two quickly develop a rapport as the New York City mayor and police work on delivering the money and stopping the criminals. Though it is never directly mentioned, the 2008-9 economic crisis and recession overshadows the film. The recession in real life was caused by years of recklessness and lack of regulation by banks, stockbrokers, and corporations; despite that, the effects of the recession were largely felt by millions of ordinary people who lost their savings and their jobs. On the other hand, banks and corporations largely received bailouts from the government with little to no consequences for those actually responsible for the recession. The importance of finance has been key to the neoliberal project, but it has also created an increased instability in global markets; as a result, governments have focused more on protecting the integrity of financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank rather than on their own

constituents.<sup>35</sup> In order to ensure the stability of the more financialized economy, governments work to protect the wealthy rather than the poor when crises like the recession occur. Ryder is revealed to be a former Wall Street investor who committed fraud and was sent to prison for ten years, having his sentence extended by the city despite entering a plea bargain; his motivation is as much revenge against New York City as it is to make money.

Ryder quickly sympathizes with Garber because he sees him as someone who has also been screwed over by the city. Garber was previously demoted from his higher position because of accusations that he took a bribe from a Japanese train manufacturer. When Ryder asks him whether he did in fact take the bribe, Garber denies it repeatedly; only when Ryder threatens to murder a hostage does Garber relent and reveal he did take the bribe to pay for his daughters' college tuition. Garber's act of selflessness impresses Ryder, who repeatedly calls him "my goddamned hero." Garber's legal troubles are also reflective of the precarity of living in a neoliberal society that has significantly cut down on social services, health care, and public education, resulting in increased poverty and extensive inequality. Furthermore, people are deemed as personally responsible for their failures to attain wealth, a cold rationale that avoids deeper questions about neoliberal policy.<sup>36</sup> Demoting and possibly firing Garber for taking the bribe adheres to the neoliberal practice of individual responsibility—even though it ignores larger systemic faults as to how a civic employee who provided decades of hard work to the city is unable to afford sending his two kids to college.

Like *Déjà Vu*, much of the film is mediated across space through both digital screens and the radio call between the two main characters. Garber works in a similar space that is dominated by a single large monitor that displays the subway cars in his area with different colored lights

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<sup>35</sup> Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 33.

<sup>36</sup> Harvey, 76.

and numbers. The opening of the film intercuts Ryder and his gang boarding the subway and preparing their takeover of the cars with Garber busy at his job moving from different motormen and dispatchers at a rapid pace. The fast editing and moving cinematography typical of Tony Scott's late work are used by cutting quick scenes of characters moving or talking with blurry images and sounds of a train moving—the effect is that of a subway car moving underneath the city and making quick stops at each station. The formal techniques also work to connect Garber and Ryder together even though they are miles apart; unlike the compositions in *Déjà Vu* that place the image of Claire and Carlin watching her in the same shot, *Pelham 123* uses the cut to forge the bond between the two men.

Writing about the two lead characters of Tony Scott's *Spy Game* (2001), Ignatiy Vishnevetsky writes: "The images cut them apart and then the editing glues them back together until it becomes clear that their camaraderie isn't just a question of professionalism, but is in fact an emotional bond existing on some kind of more subtle level... Scott's quadruple-speed editing means this idea is unable to be carried as a clearly-discernible metaphor; it simply becomes the accepted reality of the style."<sup>37</sup> A similar method is used with Garber and Ryder, though it works on a grander scale: the leads of *Spy Game* have flashbacks where they are in the same place, but Garber and Ryder are bridged together for two-thirds of the movie solely through speaking to each other over the radio.

The replacement of physical connections with those mediated through digital screens or telephone calls reflects a world that has replaced hard labor with finance, and Ryder's character exposes the dehumanizing nature of such a world. He repeatedly refers to the hostages he holds as "commodities" and lists off different financial terms like "spot trade" to Garber and the police.

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<sup>37</sup> Vishnevetsky, "Smearing the Senses: Tony Scott, Action Painter."

It ultimately appears that, to Ryder, he is working on a large investment or trade agreement rather than threatening innocent people in exchange for money. Like Ramos arranging the kidnapping of his young daughter in *Man on Fire*, the hostages are sources of capital for Ryder. Under neoliberal rationality, everyone is human capital for themselves and those around them, and as a result can be deemed redundant or invaluable at any time by forces larger than themselves.<sup>38</sup> Ryder's violent treatment of the hostages as sources of capital ultimately has its basis in the way both businesses and the government treat workers and citizens—the only difference is that the violence Ryder uses is physical and openly displayed whereas the violence of corporations and the state is hidden through no less degrading economic policy.

Near the end of the film, it is revealed that the ransom money is part of a much larger financial scheme: Ryder had invested the millions he had stolen years ago as part of his investment company in gold and used the withdrawal of the 10 million dollars from the federal reserve to astronomically increase the stock price of gold on the stock market, profiting by over 300 million. His scheme demonstrates how crises such as natural disasters or terrorist acts can affect the stock market unexpectedly and how someone can create such a crisis to profit immensely. The best way to make money, even for a criminal, is through the market rather than stealing it or receiving it as ransom. For all his criticisms of the system that chews up and spits out people like Garber, Ryder is still acting within that same system, albeit from the other side of the law. After Ryder and his gang escape the subway car with the hostages onboard, Garber follows Ryder on to the Manhattan Bridge where he stops him at gunpoint. Ryder refuses to give himself up and return to prison, and forces Garber to fatally shoot him when he reaches for his gun. With his dying breath, Ryder tells Garber again “you’re my goddamned hero;” to Ryder,

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<sup>38</sup> Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, 37.

Garber is a rarity, someone who rejects the neoliberal view of human beings as economic subjects and who values human life in and of itself.

## **Conclusion**

In the past few years, vulgar auteurism has slowly become a more dated term, especially as some of the movement's most popular directors have made fewer and fewer films. Tony Scott's last film *Unstoppable* was released in 2010, and he passed away two years later. Michael Mann has only made one film in the past decade, *Blackhat* (2015), which bombed at the box office and only received a minority of favorable reviews from critics. More important to the slow dissolution of vulgar auteurism may be the increased shutting out of large-budget studio genre films that are not attached to any independent properties, like Marvel, DC, Star Wars, or other franchises. As discussed previously, these franchises are driven more by producers than directors and often hire relatively new independent filmmakers as guns-for-hire that don't have the creative power to insert their unique vision or artistry into these movies. The present state of the film industry in Hollywood, however, only increases the importance of the legacy of vulgar auteurism and movements similar to it that raise the stature of directors whose work has either been scorned by mainstream cinephilia or has been largely ignored.

While most of the films under the umbrella of vulgar auteurism can be connected through Shaviro's concept of post-cinematic affect, the intentions of this thesis are meant to open a larger discussion on directors like Tony Scott, whose work has been largely ignored by critics and academics alike. These films have increased value for their unique depictions of lived experience in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and raise larger questions about events all of us are still trying to process and wrap our heads around. At the end of his book on post-cinematic affect, Steven Shaviro asserts



that “accelerationism is a useful, productive, and even necessary aesthetic strategy today—for all that it is dubious as a political one. The project of cognitive and affective mapping seeks, at the very least, to explore the contours of the prison we find ourselves in.”<sup>39</sup> The analysis I have done of the three Tony Scott films in relation to vulgar auteurism demonstrates that the film’s formal and thematic elements are responsive to and affectively display the world we live in today: one of a surplus of digital screens and imagery, one of economic insecurity and almost total lack of privacy from governments and corporations alike, one connected by global networks of finance and capital. Approaching Scott and other filmmakers who have been reassessed by vulgar auteurism can, in turn, broaden our views of both filmmaking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the world these filmmakers uniquely depict. The only way we can truly understand—and therefore escape—the world we live in today is to delve deeper.

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<sup>39</sup> Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect*, 137.

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