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# The Commodification of Tragedy: A Critical Examination of Contemporary Film

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The Commodification of Tragedy

The Commodification of Tragedy: A Critical Examination of Contemporary Film

Thesis submitted to  
the Graduate College of  
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of  
the program requirements for the degree  
of Master of Arts  
in Sociology

By

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## Abstract

The commodification of tragedy is an examination of contemporary film that depicts real events of human tragedy that are imposed on human society. Commodities are the cultural products of capitalist society through which meanings are attached; nationally released film and documentary-style cinematic productions are objects for consumption that presents tragedy as a simplistic and distorted spectacle of simulated reality. *Titanic*, *United 93*, and *We Are...Marshall!* share the conspicuous traits of distortion in historical facts through fictionalization of the event and reduction of complexity carried out by the entertainment industry.

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## The Commodification of Tragedy: A Critical Examination of Contemporary Film

“It's funny how the colors of the real world only seem really real when you viddy them on the screen” (*IMDB Memorable Quotes for A Clockwork Orange*, 2007).

### **Chapter One: Introduction**

The words “commodification” and “tragedy” are familiar concepts to academic literature, a long line of social, cultural, and political thinkers have considered them in various ways. The study of the social relationships that develop from the production, distribution, and circulation of commodities in industrial capitalism has a rich history within the Marxian tradition. Karl Marx’s contemporaries and later generations of scholars continued studying these relationships across disciplinary boundaries and have identified the commodity as an important object of study. Georg Lukacs (1971/1923) wrote in *History and Class Consciousness* of the importance of studying commodities and their larger social implication, stating that “the problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society” (p. 83).

The cultural productions of capitalist society are objects of exchange or “commodities” to be sold and purchased for consumption on the liberal market; these objects are the artifacts of culture through which people assign meaning and value (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986). The resurgence of interest in the Marxian critical critique of commodities began to slowly resurface in the scientific community after 9/11 (Heller, 2005; Marcoux, & Legoux, 2005). Some social analysts, such as Jean-Sebastien Marcoux, & Renaud Legoux (2005) are critical of

the amount of social scientific scrutiny given to the sale of objects and representations of the September 11, 2001 tragedy, suggesting that more scholars need to examine the broad implications of the phenomenon. However, ground zero and the products associated with 9/11 are not the only sites or events that have been transformed into merchandise that can be consumed like any other commodity.

Contemporary film is one of the mediums through which tragedy becomes commodified; mass media institutions, i.e., the entertainment industry, depict these events through nationally released dramatic and documentary-style cinematic motion pictures. The entertainment industry's finished product loses any sense of realistic authenticity while simultaneously claiming that their vision provides a window into history. The importance of studying films that depict real tragedy was embodied in a quote from Roland Brown (2006) who stated that "cinema creates 'official versions' for mass consumption to a greater extent than any official text or academic history" (p. 37). The sudden, severe, emotionally charged, and out of the ordinary scenarios that have been imposed onto human society are put on display as fantastic entertainment. Thus, the commodification of tragedy is a description of the way in which cinematic productions blur the line between reality and fantasy; rather than retelling the tale of tragic struggle or reporting the facts for historical awareness, the event is sold as an object whose physical niceties make the product more consumable. These events, such as 9-11, are presented through extravagant visual effects, reduced complexity, and other physical qualities that detract from its authenticity (Sugita, 2005). *Titanic*, *United 93*, and *We Are Marshall!* use techniques that blur the window of history through fictionalization and the simplification of social and political issues.

First, I will demonstrate in the forthcoming analysis that the commodification of tragedy steps away from its classic meaning that has been prevalent in the academic literature. The study of tragedy has been traditionally critiqued at the cultural level in terms of Greek and Shakespearian theatrical art and its relationship to some aspect of the human condition; reflection on these real tragedies as a commodity allows the social sciences to focus on a new theme once dominated by philosophy, psychoanalysis, and literary scholars (Felski, 2004; Aylen, 1964). The working definition for tragedy in its commodified form occurs when a real event of lamentable, woeful, unforeseen, and a varying level of fatal, cataclysmic despair is imposed upon the general population of a human society at a particular juncture in history. Tragedy becomes a commodity in the form of film; the cultural products distributed by the entertainment industry reproduce these events as larger than life spectacle. However, for the purposes of this analysis I will only cover the 1997 release of *Titanic*, and the 2006 releases of *United 93*, and *We Are... Marshall!*

Second, the theoretical inspiration for the commodification of tragedy is largely inspired by the classics of social thought, particularly Marx's (1976/1867) critical analysis in *Capital: Volume One*. Marx (1976/1867) addresses the commodity and the social relationships that develop through their productive forces, as well as the distinguishing characteristics of the commodity as they are related to the exploitation of labor in any historical epoch. The intention of using Marx's analysis of the commodity serves as a springboard to contemporary social thinkers who have expanded the literature on commodification in different periods of capitalism's progression through history. Sources for the conceptualization and inspiration of the commodification of tragedy draw heavily upon both Marxian tradition, including the thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School, as well as Jean Baudrillard and Guy Debord.

Third, after examining the International Movie Database (2007) or IMDB's lists of nationally released theatrical and documentary-style films between January 1, 1995 and March 8, 2007, I have found several films that meet the description of the commodification of tragedy. Using the IMDB (2007), I have performed a content analysis of all movie and documentary-style films released in the United States between January 1, 1995 and March 8, 2007 to uncover their common themes. After narrowing the search to the selected spectacles of tragedy stated above, I analyzed their content for their representational authenticity, looking for consistent themes of distortion that fictionalize the event and simplify social and political issues.

Distortions and simplifications are not uncommon in film particularly among categories of race and ethnicity (Shaheen, 2003). According to Jack Shaheen (2003) using prejudiced stereotypes of Muslim and Middle Eastern people indoctrinates the public with distorted messages which potentially disrupts discourse and political policy making. The use of racial and religious stereotypes has become routine within the film industry, using Middle Eastern people as irrational, crazed "bad guys." Shaheen (2003) states that repetition has been used as an educating device for movie goers, repeating endless images of Arab people as monstrous and barbaric. Assuming that the fanatics used on the silver screen in Hollywood are representative of the entire Muslim religion is like assuming that the Grand Wizard of the Klu Klux Klan is representative of the entire Christian population. There is a lack of separation between fanaticism and the average Muslim, Shaheem (2003) believes that this characterization leads to the negative stereotypes of an otherwise peaceful people.

*Titanic*

The 1997 epic film *Titanic* illustrates the characteristics of the commodification of tragedy; the number one box office hit brought in eleven Oscars and more money at the theatres than any other film (Pence, 1999; Terry-Chandler, 2000 ). *Titanic* is a tale of the tragic sinking of the legendary luxury cruise liner. According to Mike Pence (1999) it claimed the lives of an estimated 1,500 people on April 14, 1912 and has developed a “raw commercial appeal” (p.40). *Titanic* starred Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio who play two young lovers that defy the constraints of social class in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. DiCaprio’s character Jack Dawson is a poor artist who wins his ticket aboard the Titanic in a card game, while Rose DeWitt Bukater played by Kate Winslet was born into the bourgeoisie lap of luxury. Years after surviving the sinking of the ship, Rose contacts a team of treasure hunters searching for the “Heart of the Ocean” diamond necklace given to her by her ex-fiancé Caledon Nathan Hockley played by Billy Zane.

The importance of keeping depiction of the event as real was espoused by *Titanic*’s director James Cameron who claimed that

I made it a sacred goal of the production, a goal that came to be shared by everyone involved, to honor facts without compromise. I wanted to be able to say to an audience, without the slightest pang of guilt: This is real. This is what happened. Exactly like this. (Terry-Chandler, 2000, p.70).

Terry-Chandler (2000) states that interviews with Cameron had a consistent theme of the phrase *authenticity* in *Titanic*’s ability to act as a time capsule and offer a window into history, “this retrieval of the past is central to the film” (p. 72). The filmmakers’ claim of authenticity was supposed to be a part of the *Titanic*’s record-setting budget that required forty acres and a million-gallon seawater tank big enough to fit a scale model of the ship (Roberts, 2000). The expense spent on props was met with an equal focus on state of the art special audio and visual

effects, transforming the tragedy into a larger than life spectacle for the world to consume (Roberts, 2000; Terry-Chandler, 2000).

The commodification of the Titanic tragedy has produced significant revenue for the entertainment industry; looking at the profit derived from theatre attendance raises awareness to the degree of mass consumption associated with an event. According to Gillian Roberts (2000) *Titanic* had a budget of \$200,000,000 and was the most expensive movie ever made, going \$100,000,000 over the original slated budget. The estimated revenue generated by *Titanic* as presented in Appendix A identifies that it made \$28,638,131 on opening weekend, \$274,599,886 in the first month, and \$600,779,824 at the theatres by September 20, 1998. (*IMDB Box Office/Business Data for Titanic*, 2007). *Titanic* not only broke box office records but is also ranked second of out of all DVD sales (Terry-Chandler, 2000).

Unfortunately, the above figures only include the film attendance and DVD sales, not the various objects sold in conjunction with the film, event, and site of the tragedy, including jewelry, movie soundtracks, movie posters, key chains, toys, and etc. Fast food restaurants peddled their advertising via the various trinkets offered in combination with certain meal orders. Thus, one can purchase their tragedy and eat it too. Entrepreneurs have found a number of avenues to commodify the Titanic tragedy; for example, the site and physical remains of the ship have also become objects of consumerism (CNN, 2007; MacInnis, 2007). CNN (2007) reported that Romain Jerome SA is making luxurious watches out of the hull of the ship; those who can afford these trinkets can expect to pay \$7,800 to \$173,100 each. The watches are a rare commodity, as the watch maker will only create 2,012 watches to coincide with the one-hundred year anniversary of the Titanic's sinking in 2012 (MacInnis, 2007).

*United 93*

The story of the sunken cruise ship for the wealthy is certainly not the only film that that represents a commodification of tragedy. The 2006 release titled *United 93* presents a cinematic representation of the United Flight 93 plane hijacked during the 9-11 attacks, which missed its target and crashed in Pennsylvania. *United 93* takes the consumer inside the plane and air traffic control tower, also presenting a detailed account of a botched passenger revolt against the hijackers Ziad Jarrah, Saeed al-Ghamdi, Ahmed al-Haznawi, and Ahmed al-Nami. *United 93* is a spectacle that is no stranger to an elevated status within the entertainment industry; the film received nominations for Oscars including Best Achievement in Directing and Best Achievement in Editing and awards from the British Academy of Film Television Arts for Best Editing, Boston Society of Film Critics for Best Ensemble Cast, The Dallas-Fort Worth Film Critics Association Award for Best Picture, Kansas City Film Critics Circle for Best Director and Best Film to name a few of its achievements (*IMDB Awards for United 93*, 2007).

*United 93* is the source of controversy due to the use of the 9/11 tragedy as entertainment and the depiction of unsubstantiated events on United Flight 93 (Danto, 2006; Carter, 2006; Smith, 2006). No one survived the plane crash to retell the tale of the events and no records of activities were found among the wreckage. The only knowledge that can be derived from the activities on the flight are phone calls made by passengers and the flight communication logs, which have been recently released in the trial of al-Qaida conspirator Zacarias Moussaoui (Lewis, 2006; Carr, 2006). There is some question as to how United Flight 93 crashed in Pennsylvania on September 11; some suggest that the plane was shot down by the United States

military rather than through the passenger revolt depicted in the film. Carter (2006) tells the *New York Amsterdam News* that

I do not believe the big 727 airliner crashed in the wake of alleged and still unproven heroic actions by its passengers. The latter is simply a feel-good fairy tale conjured up to make us feel better about one of the darkest days in American history (Carter, 2006, p. 10).

Paul Greengrass, *United 93*'s filmmaker, was greatly concerned with authenticity and the ability to be respectful to the family members of the victims, considering this would be a window into the last moments of the 9/11 victims who may have been able to alter the course sought by terrorists (Carr, 2006; Smith, 2006). The storyline presented in *United 93* is based on the filmmaker's interviews with family members, phone and FCC transcripts from communications on the plane, and many of the flight-control sequences star the actual airport staff re-creating their roles in that event (Brown, 2006; Abramowitz, 2007).

*United 93* as a commodification of tragedy did not see the same financial success at the box office as *Titanic*, although the film did produce significant revenue. According to IMDB (2007) and outlined in Appendix A, with a \$15,000,000 budget *United 93* brought in \$11,478,360 in the opening week-end, within one month's time grossed \$29,878,975 and an estimated \$31,471,430 to date in U.S. movie theatres (*IMDB Box Office/Business Data for United 93*, 2007). Another interesting fact about *United 93* is that Universal Pictures advertised that they would donate ten percent of the opening weekend's profit to a charity fund for the victims of United Flight 93, which was only an estimated \$1.15 million (Danto, 2006; *IMDB Box Office/Business Data for United 93*, 2007). The 9/11 tragedy has produced various other pieces of merchandise beyond the film itself. However, little is known about the wealth created from these products. Where the World Trade Center once stood has now become the site of souvenir stands, selling 9/11 and New York related products (Heller, 2005; Marcoux & Legoux, 2005).

*We Are...Marshall!*

Keeping with the theme of tragic plane crashes, the late 2006 release of *We Are...Marshall!* is about the 1970 plane crash carrying thirty-seven members of the Marshall University football team, eight coaches and university administrators, twenty-five community members and five crew members (Gorcycya, 1999; Gallaspy, 2006; Holden, 2006; Kean, 2006). The film depicts the moments before the fatal crash and the subsequent transformation of the community's story of tragedy to triumph through the resurgence of the football team. According to Beth Gorcycya (1999) the Marshall tragedy of 1970 is still considered the worst sports accident in American history and has drawn extensive local interest among the Huntington, West Virginia area natives. *We are...Marshall!* was advertised and promoted by filmmakers, actors, and those associated with the film as the real story of the tragic 1970 plane wreck (Lowry, 2007.) Much of *We are... Marshall!* was shot in Huntington, West Virginia with vintage lenses and other video equipment used to capture the aesthetic of the historical era (Olson, 2006).

Much like *United 93*, *We Are... Marshall!* did not have the profound success as *Titanic* in terms of box office numbers and the status of the film in terms of awards is currently unknown. *We Are...Marshall!*'s late December 2006 release missed the dates for a number of official nominations. The release of this information will come after the deadline of this project. The film did turn a profit for those involved in the entertainment industry, though IMDB (2007) lists no budget for the film. *We Are... Marshall!*, as stated in Appendix A, grossed \$8,582,508 on opening weekend and by March 4, 2007 over \$43,500,000 in U.S. movie theatres (*IMDB Box Office/Business Data for We Are Marshall*, 2007).

*We...Are Marshall!* was not the only way in which the tragedy has been turned into a commodity. However, the amount of money made using the Marshall tragedy to sell t-shirts, pencils, pens, key chains, sweat shirts, bank accounts, and various other trinkets of death are unknown. According to Kean (2006), *Nike* has been contracted through the Collegiate Licensing Company to produce and nationally distribute *We are...Marshall!* t-shirts. Marshall University receives 8.5 cents on the dollar of each t-shirt sold, which is a higher percentage of revenue than other large universities (Kean, 2006). The film's advertisement also acts as a commercial for Marshall University; its name was plastered across various mass media outlets including magazines, television talk shows, newspapers, and various other mediums that reach an audience beyond football fans. The university now hopes to benefit from this arrangement to draw students and sponsors that might have otherwise been out of reach, yet according to Kean (2006) University officials are careful not to suggest that they are *capitalizing* on the tragedy.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### Tragedy: Traditional conceptions and the sale of 9-11

Before entering into the intricacies of the theoretical sources that underlie the commodification of tragedy, I will first demonstrate how my conceptualization for tragedy is separate from previous scholars. Tragedy has been traditionally conceived of in terms of Greek and Shakespearian dramatic art, with a rich heritage in attempting to understand how these theatrical productions are in some way connected to the natural human condition (Felski, 2004; Silk & Stern, 1981). The following analysis will briefly outline some of the previous scholars who considered the philosophical and psychological ramifications of theatrical tragedy such as Georg W. Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Leo Aylan. Rita Felski (2004) notes the importance of acknowledging the contributions of the great thinkers of tragedy, stating that “To rethink tragedy is, of necessity, to acknowledge a history of prior thought” (p.v).

Tragedy has been considered outside the Greek and Shakespearian tradition, particularly the commodification of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States (Heller 2005; Marcoux, & Legoux, 2005). The recognition of 9-11 as a national *tragedy* and as an event that had been turned into an article of exchange was initially considered by Dana Heller (2005) and Marcoux, & Legoux (2005) who set the stage for it to be considered as a valid topic for social analysis. The events of September 11, 2001 were devastatingly real, sudden, sorrowful, and accompanied by catastrophic misfortune that was an out of the ordinary occurrence in American society. Heller (2005) and Marcoux, & Legoux’s (2005) understanding of commodification and tragedy have applicability outside the isolated incident of 9-11, including

the sinking of a luxury cruise liner filled with people, other terrorist attacks on large population centers, genocides, attacks on one's homeland, and plane crashes. Death does not have to occur in these earth-shattering and egregious events however, in this analysis the loss of human life is a likely spectacle in the events under question.

*Tragedy and the tradition of dramatic arts*

The commodification of tragedy steps away from the long line of punctilious studies of Greek and Shakespearian dramatic tragedy, which has been previously dominated by the discipline of philosophy, psychology, and literary criticism. Taking the study of tragedy out of the realm of philosophy and interjecting it into the sociological literature would not be appropriate without mentioning some of its previous considerations. Critiques from such great minds as Georg W. Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Leo Aylen focused on the dramatic production of a customarily fictitious set of events; depicting a falling from grace that incites a heart rendering emotional reaction, and relationship of these productions to the often quotidian unpredictability of the human condition. Since the commodification of tragedy has its theoretical roots deeply entrenched in Karl Marx and the Frankfurt School theorists' critique of commodities, a brief mention of their lodestar G.W. Hegel's dealing with tragedy as a part of his overall theory of religion is felicitous. Friedrich Nietzsche, on the other hand, viewed tragedy as the interplay of internal antagonisms between the Apollonian and Dionysian inspiration within an individual artist expressed through the materialization of their creativity (Silk & Stern, 1981). Finally, Aylen (1964) was concerned with the psychological nature of mankind's dealing with death through self-reflection and this relationship to Greek tragedy.

G.W. Hegel attempted to understand Greek tragedy in terms of the human conscious and religion's historical progression into an advanced form in terms of spirit. According to Tony Smith (1993), spirit is the "dialectical structure of unity in difference" (p.24). *Phenomenology of the Spirit* is Hegel's (1977/1807) recondite work where tragedy is discussed in terms of the spirit; the roles of the actors in Greek theatrical tragedy are representational of the concepts of universality, particularity, and the individual. Tragedy is the expression of conflict within the more highly developed aspects of Greek religion and culture; the autonomy of the particular becomes unavoidably at odds with the universal. Hegel (1977/1807) believes that Greek dramatic tragedy

is in fact the syllogism in which the extreme of universality, the world of the gods, is linked with individuality, with the Minstrel, through the middle term of particularity. The middle term is the nation in its heroes, who are individual men like the Minstrel, but presented only in idea, and are thereby at the same time universal, like the free extreme of universality (p. 441)

Each of the characters in the artistic expression of Greek tragedy represented the major aspects of his overall theory; tragedy becomes the source of social conflict as the hero is antagonistic to the gods or the Universal. Since gods and heroes typically share goals, ideals and represent the harmony of the universal; the nature of tragedy places them into conflict with one another and serves as the site of estrangement or alienation due to excessive individualism on behalf of the hero. Hegel is not concerned with the reality of the tragedy that is depicted through dramatic art, but rather how these dealings with sorrowful and unpleasant themes are expressions of universal consciousness.

Nietzsche's (2000/1872) work in *The Birth of Tragedy* examines the inspiration of theatrical Greek tragedy and the nature of German culture, linking the two together via the Dionysian inspired music and Apollonian inspired visual arts.

To both of their artistic deities, Apollo and Dionysus, is linked our knowledge that in Greek culture there existed a tremendous opposition, in terms of origin and goals, between the Apollonian art of the sculptor and the imageless Dionysian art of music (Nietzsche, 2000, p.1).

The conflict between Dionysus and Apollo within the artist leads to the creation of art based upon the creative product of the two; though these inspirations are interdependent, the lack of equilibrium can lead to cultural productions that are consumed by their extreme manifestations. Nietzsche (2000/1872) believed that there was a link between German and Greek culture and that the various aspects of tragedy pointed to those relationships. The songs of the German composer Richard Wagner and those of Greek tragedy are inspired by Dionysus, the god of intoxication and the inspiration of a gloomy or more somber side of life (Nietzsche, 2000; Danto, 2005). Thus, the Apollonian influence is based on that of Apollo who was the god of light; his presence added the visual element that can be found in paintings, sculptures, and architecture.

Nietzsche (2000/1872) believes that the balance created by Apollo and Dionysus in Greek tragedy becomes disrupted by an exterior force, the influence of Euripides whose emphases on rationalism, structure, and realism of characters marks the decline of tragedy. The commodification of tragedy is not concerned with the inspiration of ancient deities and their relationship to culture among creative artistic expressions; however, it is an interesting note that Nietzsche found the indoctrination of reality into tragedy so disturbing. Themes of Greek tragedy with more realistically based characters and plots were created under Euripides, rather than that of the gods or ideal entities, creating the conditions for the dissolution of Greek tragedy (Danto, 2005).

Other contemporaries have attempted to reinterpret tragedy as it pertains to the way in which people deal with their own personal mortality (Aylen, 1964). The Greeks, for example, did not shy away from such dismal topics as death. In this sense, these tales of hardship and woe

were produced for theatre to simultaneously entertain the audience and remind them of the potential of demise. According to Aylen (1964), these theatrical productions are functional for its viewers, reminding them of the inevitability of death and the shortness of human life. Greek tragedy becomes a wake-up call for the spectator to reevaluate or self-reflect on life, to prepare for the certain and potentially unexpected finality of physical world.

Aylen's, Nietzsche's, and Hegel's thoughts on tragedy do not reflect it as a commodity, particularly Hegel who was not alive during capitalism. The commodification of tragedy is not a part of the philosophic critique of dramatic theatre, but the description of cultural productions of real, unfortunate, and sorrowful events that are consumed like any other article of exchange. The subject of artistic innovation is substituted for the banal object of profit for the entertainment industry which distorts the impetuous and horrific misfortunes of human society to consume as entertainment.

#### *Tragedy redefined through the sale of 9-11*

Dana Heller (2005) and Marcoux, & Legoux (2005) do not delve into the intricacies of defining tragedy in their work on the commodification of 9-11; however, their conceptualization and usage for it is similar to my own. The tragedy of September 11, 2001 was the United States' lethal encounter with politically motivated terrorists. This was an unexpected event that took the lives of thousands, and shattered false visions of security. However, this event is far from the only tragedy that has been turned into an article of exchange and used to create wealth for elites in the entertainment industry. Since art is a product of culture and film is one of the material productions of cultural institutions, then *We are... Marshall!, Titanic, Pearl Harbor,*

*Black Hawk Down*, and *Hotel Rwanda* serve as examples of the commodified instances of tragedy that remain out of the scope of Marcoux, & Legoux, (2005) and Keller's (2005) work. However, other films such as *World Trade Center*, *United 93*, and *Fahrenheit 9-11* that produce the tragedy as objects of consumption for a profiting entertainment industry would be covered.

Dana Heller (2005) and Marcoux, & Legoux (2005) continued the Marxist critique of commodification and opens up the concept of tragedy to a new form of debate. Bringing these two concepts to the spotlight is their attempt to understand the consequences of the capitalist mode of production after the 9-11-01 terrorist attacks on the United States. Heller (2005) organized a collection of articles and essays titled *The Selling of 9-11: How a National Tragedy Became a Commodity* which concentrated on the various ways in which 9-11 had become an article of exchange on the liberal market and a useful distraction for the benefit of political and economic elites. The marketing of 9-11 went far beyond retelling the tale of tragedy, struggle and triumph, entering the boundaries of a moral debate concerning the profitability of the event.

Marcoux, & Legoux (2005) discuss their documentary film *Selling Tragedy*, which specifically examines the commodification of ground zero of the 9-11 attacks on the World Trade Center. *Selling Tragedy* shows scenes of where the towers once stood and offers critical analysis of the entrepreneurship of souvenir shops that litter the site of the tragedy. Marcoux, & Legoux (2005) also state that the documentary film questions the role of 9-11 and commodification in the politics of memory and the morality surrounding this form of economic activity (Marcoux & Legoux, 2005). My argument conceptualizes tragedy in the same way as Marcoux, & Legoux (2005) and Heller (2005), although I plan to expand and generalize tragedy to include other phenomenon than the 9/11. The selling of tragedy can encompass a number of other human atrocities that have become products for consumption on the free market. Narrowly

focusing on 9-11 misses the opportunity to generalize a profound and valid social observation of human tragedies that become items for the profit of an entertainment industry.

Marx, the Commodity, and Fetishism

The commodification of tragedy embraces the Marxian critique of the material products of capitalist society, as defined within of *Capital: Volume one*. The commodity is any object that has been produced by one person or group for the consumption of another and is unique to the capitalist stage of development. The problem of commodities is unique to the historical epoch of industrial capitalism, for the production and distribution of cultural goods perverted the worker's relation to the product of labor (Marx, 1976/1867). People within industrial and postindustrial capitalist societies have become dependent upon commodity consumption to meet their wants and basic needs, and their only able to access the objects of labor through the medium of money received from wages. According to Arjun Appadurai (1986) the material representation of capitalist society becomes materialized in the commodity and represents the core of the Marxist critique of political economy. Under these conditions the commodity form encompass food, water, clothing, transportation, housing, labor, and all other cultural products through which meaning and value are congealed in a purchasable object. Marx (1976/1867) dealt with the issue of commodities and commodification in *Capital: Volume One* where he states that "the wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an immense collection of commodities" (p. 125).

The traditional Marxist critique views analysis of commodities or *external things* that are produced to satisfy various human *needs*, regardless of whether or not those *needs* are life sustaining elements of the human condition (Arjun Appadurai, 1986; Milward, 2000). According to Marx (1976/1867) they are "an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. The very nature of these needs....makes no difference" (p. 125).

Wool, bananas, steel, coffee, and movies are all products to be ingurgitated by a public whose demand is heightened by a manipulative draw to the qualitative aspects of the object. In advanced capitalist society, real tragedies are transformed into commodities and consumed in the form of movies and documentary-style productions.

According to Marx (1976/1867) a “thing can be a useful and a product of human labor without being a commodity. "He who satisfies his own need with the product of his own labor admittedly creates use-values and not commodities” (p.131). The first characteristic of the commodity is the use-value which is the aspect which meets people’s needs, wants, or whatever service is provided by the object of labor. Marx (1999/1859) states that the “Use-value as an aspect of the commodity coincides with the physical palpable existence of the commodity.....A use-value has value only in use, and is realized only in the process of consumption” (p.27). This qualitative aspect of the commodity is the physical attributes that make the object useful to the consumer, for instance bananas are useful to stop hunger or water to quench thirst. The use-value of commodified tragedy is the entertainment of the consumer, whose *need* was aroused by the desire to escape the void created by the conditions of capitalist society.

The commodity expresses a relationship between the use value and exchange value, which Marx (1976/1867) explains is “the quantitative relation, the proportion, in which use-values of one kind exchange for use-values of another kind” (p. 126). The exchange value is the numerical worth of an object in relation to other commodities available to be bought and sold on the free market. When tragedy appears the exchange value refers to its money price or the number of commodities necessary to equal its quantitative value. The use-value of the commodification of tragedy is related to its cost on the liberal market, entertainment or distraction may coincide with a different exchange value than commodities designed to educate.

Tragedy, as with any other commodity, has a manipulative, larger than life draw to the object, as if filled with an excess virtue of the gods. Related to the use-value of a commodity, the value or meaning attached to a product becomes the object of fixation. Marx (1976/1867) explains “a commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (p.163). This infers that commodities take on a mystical character that is created by man and then worshiped as if it contained some divine virtue, enhancing the object’s use-value as a product for consumption. Marx (1976/1867) states that this is “the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labor as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities” (p.165).

Commodities are the cultural products of capitalist society through which people attach meaning, forgetting that they are the ones who give the object value. The fetishism of commodities occurs when the value placed in the object of capitalist production begins to determine the value of those who provided its meaning. According to Marx (1976/1867) the fetishistic connections by consumer to the object masks the reality of capitalist mode of production. In other words, the distraction of movies and documentary films takes the on-looker away from life’s harsh realities. Inhabitants of capitalist society are left to establish meanings of real tragedy from spectacles whose authenticity has been distorted and depoliticized by the entertainment industry.

### The Frankfurt School and Critical Theory

The Marx-Hegelian thinkers from the Frankfurt School that have helped shape the ideas that drive the commodification of tragedy, including the work of Georg Lukacs, Max Horkheimer, Theodore W. Adorno, and Jurgen Habermas. Each of these theorists possessed a unique vision of commodification, drawing influences from an array academic disciplines within social science and philosophy. The Frankfurt School attempted to develop a critical theory that was as equally cynical of the capitalist society as it was of itself with a particular focus on commodities. The former Frankfurt School director Max Horkheimer (1972/1968) once proclaimed that “the critical theory of society begins with the simple exchange of commodities”, thus denoting the importance of the estranged and virtuous object of consumption that is ubiquitous in capitalist society.

#### *Lukacs and the commodity*

Georg Lukacs (1971/1968) expands on Marx’s notion of the qualitative aspects of commodities and the central importance of it to problems within capitalist society. This expansion takes form in the idea of reification which directly addressed the use-value and the fetishistic tendencies of the commodity along with the social relationships that spurred from the conditions of production necessary for its existence. Ritzer and Goodman (2004) state that for Lukacs, much like Marx, the “commodity is at base a relation among people that they come to believe, takes on the character of a thing and develops an objective form” (p. 133).

The commodity is the central problem of all capitalist society and should not be analyzed without looking at the social, economic, and political forces that give it life. Those who produce commodities lose sight of the fact that they gave the commodity its material existence and assign it a value, which becomes alienated from the producers. Lukacs (1971/1968) explains that the “transformation of the commodity relation into a thing of ‘ghostly objectivity’ cannot therefore content itself with the reduction of all objects for the gratification of human needs to commodities: (p.100). The reified nature of the commodity is not isolated to the economic realm and expands into all walks of social life, for capitalism requires an entire system and consciousness to maintain its existence. Thus, all of the social conditions of commodified culture are seen as a natural state of affairs with a life of its own, independent of the actors who make up the system and masking the entire system from the proletariat consciousness.

*Horkheimer, Adorno, and the commodity*

Horkheimer and Adorno’s (2002/1947) work in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* extended the Marxist critique of capitalist society, yet distinguished themselves with their cynical insight into the disillusion created by mass produced cultural commodities and their tendency toward totalitarianism. Overall, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002/1947) believe that there is a culture industry that deludes the masses with a slew of standardized and commodified art, keeping them from being critical and perusing happiness in the real world. Like drug addicts, a subjugated public becomes dependent upon cultural commodities distributed through mass media via the television and film industry to fill the void created by the conditions of production in capitalist society. Horkheimer and Adorno’s (2002/1947) criticism goes as far as to suggest that “Donald

Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate victim in real life receive their beatings so that the spectators can accustom themselves to theirs” (p.110). The disenfranchised, complacent, distracted, and unfulfilled mass public through the consumption of cultural commodities remain accepting of social arrangements that are contrary to their interests. The static apathy of commodity producers creates the conditions for totalitarian social arrangements, entertaining themselves with homogenized cultural products in the form of popular film and television.

The commodities produced by the culture industry have been the object of routinization, standardization, and formulaic similarity indirectly indoctrinated on its consumers. Horkheimer and Adorno (2002/1947) state that “Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part” (p. 71). In other words, television and film as cultural commodities have a recognizable recipe or prescribed blue print that gets repeated with very little change of detail. These simplistic and standardized products become difficult to tell one from the other. In the words of Horkheimer and Adorno (2001/1947),

“The details become interchangeable. The brief interval sequence which has proved catchy in a hit song, the heroes temporary disgrace which he accepts as ‘good sport,’ the wholesome slaps the heroine receives from the strong hand of the male, his plain-speaking abruptness toward the pampered heiress, are, like the details, ready-made clichés, to be used here and there...” (p. 98).

The refusal of the culture industry to produce commodities that are new and untested is uniquely tied to its place within the capitalist economy. The goal of the culture industry is not to produce creative or realistic cinematic productions, but to produce profit from the efficiency of standardized commodities. According to Adorno (2001/1975) “the entire practice of the culture industry transfers the profit motive naked onto cultural forms” (p.99). This standardization makes the replication of culture more efficient in its attempt to peddle its commodities in mass quantities to a consuming public. The products of the culture industry are “plastic” or fake and

overly administered having a profound effect on the consciousness of society, Horkheimer and Adorno (2001/1947) found that the culture industry numbs the masses into submission through the industry's inferior product; the populace becomes dependent upon it like a junkie on their dealer. People remain complacent and fill the hole in their lives created by the conditions of labor in capitalist society. Thus, television and film becomes the "opiate of the masses."

### *Habermas and commodification*

Jurgen Habermas's (2001/1962; 1975/1973) *Structural transformation of the public sphere* and *Legitimation Crisis* continued the line of Marxist inspired thinkers that were critical of the commodification process in capitalist society. These works depicted separate spheres, one based in the interactions of everyday life and another where the political and/or economic systems prevail. According to Habermas (2001/1962; 1975/1973), the superimposition of instrumental rationality by the economic system can create drastic impediments on the ability of the public sphere or life-world to operate as a place where cultural meanings are developed through communicative action.

Habermas' (2001/1962) *Structural transformation of the public sphere* depicted an ideal location where people could meet as equals to discuss social and political issues in a rational, non-emotional manner. This bourgeois ideal of the public sphere evolved out of cultural criticism in coffee houses, theatres, salons, and music halls that developed into democratic institutions that were to be composed of a debating public. Media institutions developed into a press that was free to engage in promoting rational dialogue in the form of newspapers, books, and journals once prohibited or limited under the absolute power of a monarchy.

The ideals of the public sphere were eventually bought and sold for the profit for the booming media industry, reducing its goal from promoting rational debate to enriching entrepreneurial capitalists. According to Habermas (2001/1962) “the press became commercialized, the threshold between the circulation of a commodity and the exchange of communications among the member of a public was leveled” (p.181). The introduction of advertising or marketing of cultural commodities or invasion by the economic system cuts off the rational dialogue or communicative action that is necessary for the public sphere. The annihilation of the public sphere through advertising of commodities was bombarded with appeals to emotion, partial information, distraction, and all other authorities that sway the ability of each person to be recognized as equals and have the opportunity to speak rationally on any topic. Only through a return to a critical debating public can this economic institutional hex be lifted and reestablish a healthy public sphere. Commodified tragedy disrupts the idealized public sphere through the entertainment industries emphasis on reducing a complex event to entertainment, distorting it into an ostentatious and depoliticized production rather recounting than the actual details.

Habermas’ ideas on the public sphere and its decline shared a striking similarity to his conception of the colonization of the life world discussed in *Legitimation Crisis*. The crux of Habermas' (1975/1973) *Legitimation Crisis* was an attempt to identify the points at which crisis occurs within advanced capitalist societies, more specifically how the domination of the state and economy come to disrupt the activity of everyday life. Making an organismic analogy, crisis occurs as “the phase of illness in which it is decided whether the organism’s self-healing powers are sufficient for recovery” (Habermas, 1973 p.1). Society, much like the infected organism, arrives at a crossroad where the self-generating system can no longer function under its ideal

homeostatic existence. When the state and/or economic system impose on the interactions within society's normative balance, colonization occurs. The imposition of standardized and bromidic cultural commodities by the economic mode of production can create crisis in meaning, potentially when these objects of consumption are the real, grievous tragedies produced for profit.

### Postmodernism and Commodification

Postmodernists of Jean Baudrillard and Guy Debord have also have provided a cynical critiques of commodities that have been both inspired and disaffected by Marx's original explanations (Ritzer and Goodman, 2004). Baudrillard (1988) considers the qualitative aspects of commodities claiming that Marx's notion of use-value has become too limited, introducing sign-value or the image created through advertising that is actually consumed. Commodities are no longer an expression of need, but a function of the social practices of advanced capitalism (Baudrillard, 1975; Appadurai, 1986). Debord (2001/1977) contributed to the Marxian critique of commodities Marx's ideas on use-value and fetishism of the commodity, along with Lukacs' reification; the spectacle or the seductive and conspicuous nature of commodities appear to simulate real life.

Jean Baudrillard (1988) expanded the classic Marxian explanation of the commodity by attempting to develop on his idea of use-value and fetishism. The commodity is believed to have gone through a sequence of historical stages that helped it develop into the way in which they exist in the postmodern world. Baudrillard (1988) claimed that commodities were no longer solely characterized by use and exchange value, they now were consumed with a sign-value.

The sign-value is an extension of use-value but does not refer to its relation to the fulfillment of human needs, but rather the image associated with the object created through advertising.

Baudrillard (1988) explains that in “order to become an object of consumption, the object must become a sign...” (p.22). Advertising of commodities constructs an image of the object to be sold and consumers find themselves more caught up in the representational aspects than its actual utility. The symbolic nature of the commodity reflects some level of prestige or status attained through consumption, the demand is dependent upon the cultural meanings attached to image of the object. These images transferred on onto commodities help to perpetuate false needs and distract consumers from real life under an expanding capitalist system.

Baudrillard (1988) went a step beyond his notion of sign-value to suggest that these signs had become simulacrum, “it is now a principle of simulation, and not of reality, that regulates social life” (p. 120). These simulations have now come to become dominant over all social life, masking class antagonisms and reorganizing production around these false imitations of reality. More specifically, Baudrillard (2006/1981) saw simulacrum created by the electronic media as a copy of a copy so far abstracted that its relation to the original object is no longer evident; rather than producing meaning in media commodities, they become a “gigantic process of simulation” (p.80). Thus, commodities generated by mass media institutions are a falsified duplication of reality that comes to replace the original.

Guy Debord (2001/1977) takes a different path in describing the commodity, stating the “where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles” (p.139). These spectacles take on a life of their own, having imagery consumed with highly animated manifestations of reality, and has mystifying impact on the public consciousness. According to Debord (2001/1977) the “spectacle is not a collection of

images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images” (p.139). This view of contemporary capitalist society is an adaptation of Marx’s alienation and Lukacs’ reification, the spectacle becomes a means to placate and distract society from reality and the creative human potential. Cultural commodities, such as art, no longer become authentic representations of social life but spectacles that are consumed by a docile public. The disenfranchised masses are saturated with the commercial advertising of cultural commodities from commodified tragedy to political actors, which alienates them further from the mode of production. These spectacles serve to reproduce the status quo and quash oppositional ideas through the medium of distraction.

### Chapter Three: Methods

My argument on the commodification of tragedy begins with a content analysis of the cinematic motion pictures released to theatres nationally in the United States from January 1, 1995 through March 8, 2007, including documentary-style and standard performance. The number of theatres playing the film is the distinguishing characteristic that differentiates nationally released from independent films. Independent releases are only distributed through a small number of film festivals or are not released to theatres at all and go directly to home-video distribution. This step was desirable in order to gain wider insight into the types of tragedies that become depicted in major films, providing me with the opportunity to select a sample from a distinguished category of data. These films were drawn from the International Movie Data Base (IMDB), a database of all theatrical releases from virtually every country in the world where movies have been produced or released, and are available at [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com). IMDB's (2007) records date back to the beginning of film production and carry to present day; however I am only concerned with the films released in the United States over the past twelve years for themes related to the commodification of tragedy.

I searched IMDB (2007) for general themes in movies and documentary-style productions for plots that are based on real, sorrowful, catastrophic events that fit the definition of the commodification of tragedy. Descriptions of films that make some claim of reality within their description using such terms or phrases as "based on real events", "the true story", "the real story" and other such characterizations helped to narrow the category. Any film defined as tragedy was selected from those that made the claim of reality and was a severe, sudden, unexpected, emotionally-charged, and fatally cataclysmic event that impacted society. These

events coincide with a loss of life, in which the film focuses on the sorrowful tragic moment followed by a subsequent rise to glory through heartbreak and struggle. Identifying the tragedies that have been depicted in movies and documentary films from January 1, 1995 through March 8, 2007 has been helpful to suggest the kind of events that become sold by the entertainment industry.

After establishing the films and documentary-style productions that met the criteria for the commodification of tragedy, I selected three films to focus on due to their representation of three different types of tragedy in different historical periods. I watched *Titanic*, *United 93*, and *We Are Marshall* to witness the conspicuous characteristics of the commodification of tragedy; these distinctive features are reduced complexity and fictional accounts that distort the event. The conspicuous characteristics of the commodification of tragedy are not independent categories; they are interdependent aspects of the object that contribute to the loss of authenticity in their production by the entertainment industry.

## Chapter Four: Results/Discussion

The IMDB's (2007) records between the years January 1, 1995 through March 8, 2007, revealed striking common themes among the tragedies depicted in documentaries and theatrical releases. The detailed results of analysis can be found in Appendix A; this table displays the films titles, budget, and revenue produced while in the theatres in the United States. Real topics such as the unintended consequences of war, foreign attacks on ones homeland, genocides, assassinations of political and social movement leaders, tragic accidents, gun violence, terrorist attacks, and natural disasters share the embodiment of the commodification of tragedy. The major theatrical and documentary-style productions are not the only films that depict real tragedy. Each year there is a larger number of independent releases to film festivals and video. Also, the literal number of real tragedy depicted in film appears to increase dramatically beginning in 2002 and continues until the end of 2006; a wealth of these independent movies and documentaries are dedicated to the events surrounding 9/11 and the U.S. war on terrorism.

Nationally released films and documentary-style motion pictures of real tragedy are not well represented among the top blockbusters of all time (*IMDB All-Time USA Box Office*, 2007). The 2001 release of *Pearl Harbor* is the only other film within the top 100 that meets the criteria of the commodification of tragedy. Most of the top films in the United States do not depict any real event; people appear to prefer fiction to reality in terms of box office numbers as a reflection of choice. Science fiction and fantasy represents the upper layers of box office hits as *Star Wars Episode I, II, and IV, E.T., Lord of the Rings*, and *Spiderman I and II* are among the top money makers in the business. However, when real tragic events materialize in the form of nationally

released cinematic motion pictures they share the conspicuous characteristics of the commodification of tragedy.

I chose *Titanic*, *United 93*, and *We Are...Marshall!* out of the IMDB's list of films between January 1, 1995 through March 8, 2007, because these films represent tragedies in different time periods and have been prevalent in popular culture. The three events share the basic similarity in that they each depict a travel tragedy and a substantial death count along with the characteristics of the commodification of tragedy. *Titanic*, *United 93*, and *We Are...Marshall!* have been the spectacles of major media coverage and academic debate regarding the details of the films, yet little concentration has been on the way in which these films that symbolize tragedy distort their reality. When people develop meaning from their cultural artifacts, i.e. commodities in the form of film, they become based on fantastic entertainment.

### *Titanic*

*Titanic* distorts reality in terms of social stratification; the passengers aboard the cruise ship are either the bourgeoisie or lumpenproletariat. The crew members of the Titanic are the only symbolic representations of socioeconomic class that breaks these categories. Jack and Rose exemplify this dichotomous class relationship; for instance, Jack wanders from city to city and exists outside the wage labor system. Rose has been born into wealth and privilege, going on the cruise is a part of a courting ritual with her fiancé whom is a wealthy entrepreneur. This does not adequately symbolize the variation in class that lost their lives on that fateful journey and suggests a stratification system that does not reflect the reality of the era.

The representation of class inequality is also distorted by the display of poverty as fun and politically absent; the lives of the wealthy are depicted as less pleasurable than that of the poor. Rose is frustrated with her role among bourgeoisie society and is on the brink of suicide until Jack helps her throw caution to the wind, breaking out of the cage of isolation and routine of everyday life. One of Jack's statements that exemplifies his pleasure in poverty is stated when meets with Rose's family in the bourgeoisie section of the ship, his reward after preventing her suicide attempt. Jack explains that

I got everything I need right here with me. I got air in my lungs, a few blank sheets of paper. I mean, I love waking up in the morning not knowing what's gonna happen or, who I'm gonna meet, where I'm gonna wind up. Just the other night I was sleeping under a bridge and now here I am on the grandest ship in the world having champagne with you fine people (*IMDB Memorable quotes for Titanic*, 2007).

While the elite dine on expensive food, liquor, and smoke cigars while discussing high society and politics, Jack takes Rose on the lower decks. The poor have been completely depoliticized are content with their festivities, dancing, laughing and listening to music rather than expressing a conscious awareness of their social position.

One of the most glaring distortions of the Titanic tragedy is that the characters are fictional; there is no record of a Jack, Rose, or the family on the ship. These fabrications appear to contradict James Cameron's claim of historical authenticity, when he stated that "If you went back in a time machine and stood on the deck, this is what you would have seen" (Terry-Chandler, 2000, p.70). The build up of the romantic relationship between Rose and Jack occurs on the deck of the ship from the suicide attempt to Rose being taught how to spit. The nature of reality becomes questionable because one could not stand aboard the deck and watch these events unfold among two fictional young people. The blatant class distinctions and horrific death

of those on the Titanic becomes a backdrop for the clichéd love story that occurs between Rose and Jack.

The entire representation of the events aboard the Titanic is based upon Rose's recall. She tells the story to a group of treasure hunters searching for the "Heart of the Ocean" necklace, and much of her memory of the occurrences is implausibly psychic. The necklace is a fabrication; there is no record of any such piece of jewelry in existence. The search for this supposed priceless commodity is a part of the entertaining story. The treasure hunters uncover a painting that depicts the necklace which ends up on the news, Rose contacts them to identify herself in the picture and that the object was once her own. The fictionalized tale told by the composite character takes the treasure hunters back in time to reveal her entire experience on Titanic. Rose providing the window into history also becomes questionable in that she has a memory of conversations and actions that occurred when she was not around; no explanation was offered as to how she could have acquired this information.

Death becomes put on display as a spectacle through dazzling displays high-tech special effects. The destruction of the Titanic after coming into contact with the ice berg is shown in striking detail. Passengers are shown dying by drowning, freezing, and through the impact of the destruction of the Titanic's infrastructure. These ostentatious displays consist of people being crushed under the weight of the ship's smoke stacks while swimming in the icy waters, drowned by the undertow of the ship as it sinks, giving up the struggle of survival through suicide, and being frozen in the water below after the denial access to a lifeboat.

*United 93*

The distortions that define the commodification of tragedy are evident within the representation of United Flight 93 hijacking in *United 93*. The filmmakers take the audience inside the plane to view the activities of passengers and hijackers; however, no one survived the crash to retell the tale. There is no legitimate source that can verify the activities on the plane, especially the climactic depiction of the passenger revolt against the hijackers. Interviews with loved ones of the victims and flight transmissions are not adequate to suggest that there was not another plausible explanation as to how the vessel crashed in Pennsylvania. Even if consumers are to accept the *United 93* representation of a passenger revolt, the suggestion that they were able to break down the door to the reinforced steel cockpit doors of the plane with a drink cart is questionable. This suggests that the drink cart was very strong or the door to the cockpit was very weak; neither of these scenarios can be substantiated. The events are represented as a clichéd action sequence and traditional male heroism, as the men in the plane plan and take part in the revolt.

*United 93* depict racial and religious stereotypes of Islamic Middle Easterners coupled with American patriotism. The beginning of film exemplifies this sentiment most graciously; the hijackers are presumed to be praying while the scenes pan back and forth between them the tops of skyscrapers in some urban metropolis. There are no subtitles to suggest what the men are saying and if one does not speak Arabic or is unfamiliar with this culture, this leaves the consumer with little to go on in the representation of events. Once the praying ends, camera shots are in a first person mode accompanying the hijackers to the airport, where one of the first things they pass is a large red, white, and blue sign that reads “God bless America.”

*United 93* indirectly symbolize the U.S. as an innocent bystander that has been the subject of an unprovoked attack by fanatical Muslims on a suicide mission. The film lacks the depth of political dialogue that simplifies the tragedy, avoiding a discussion of the role of the United States in the Middle East. The concept of blowback and *why* is out of the equation for *United 93*, substituted for the filmmaker's interpretation of *how* these events took place. Role of terrorists/religion are out of context and one-sided. The 9/11 tragedy was one of the most politically symbolic attacks on the United States in history, yet the film removes the political factor and isolates it from its larger implications.

*We Are... Marshall!*

One of the core characteristics of the commodification of tragedy is the distortions of reality depicted in the film. *We Are... Marshall!* presented an falsified and simplified representation of the tragic 1970 plane crash and subsequent rise to glory, particularly the "We are... Marshall" film title and cheer. The cheer which has come to symbolize the University, football team, and tragedy did not exist as a cultural expression pertaining to the University until 1988 during a homecoming football game against Furman at Fairfield Stadium (Spencer, 2007). However, during crucial events of the film the phrase is chanted or referred to in some fashion. *We are... Marshall!* was tied to the plane crash itself; the passengers on the plane were shown chanting the slogan seconds before the plane crashed. The Marshall University football coach, played by Robert Patrick, calls for his team's attention at the front of the plane exclaiming "We are..." to which they exclaim "Marshall!" The coach immediately takes his seat and seconds later the plane crashes. The film's footage of what occurred on the plane was minimal, however, any

reflection of the happenings on the plane have no bearing in reality. The coach's motivational speech followed by a rallying call for the We Are...Marshall cheer is unsubstantiated. No one survived the crash to retell what happened.

Another pivotal moment of the film in which the slogan came into play was during the scene depicting the deliberation to suspend the University's football program. Nate Ruffin, played by Anthony Mackie, interrupts the closed door meeting of University officials determined to suspend the program for the psychological well-being of the community. Directing their attention out the window, Nate Ruffin reveals a mass of people chanting *We are....Marshall!* in support of continuing football at Marshall. The mob chants the slogan and simultaneously thrust their fists in the air as a collective unit which inspires the Marshall officials to continue the football program. This scene was crucial in setting up the against all odds struggle of rebuilding the team, replacing the coaches and athletic directors, and dealing with an emotionally charged community conflicted continuing the program.

Much like *Titanic*, *We Are...Marshall!* uses fictional characters in its *real* story of the tragedy. Annie Cantrell, played by Kate Mara, never existed and worked in a fictional diner; she played a Marshall cheerleader traumatized after losing her fiancé Chris Griffen in the plane crash. While Chris' life was lost in the crash, Annie's role played the part of the clichéd love interest, like Kate Winslet's character Rose in *Titanic*. The use of characters and places distorts the historical accuracy of the tragedy as no legitimate historian would consider creating falsified people and places when retelling the story of the American Revolution. The film's role as an authentic representation loses its realistic value for the same reason.

Another distortion that results from simplification is the lack of any representation of the social and political turmoil of the early 1970's prevalent on college campuses. Any depiction of

anti-Vietnam War, racial and women's movements, or local fears of Marxist sentiments were in the film. Huntington, West Virginia and Marshall University campus in 1970 did not have as strong a movement as other universities. However, the social turmoil that defined a generation were not absent at the time of the tragedy (Hennen, 1993). *We Are...Marshall!* completely depoliticized an era that was ripe with controversy and civil disobedience. According to Hennen (1993) the highly controversial leftist organization *Students for a Democratic Society* or SDS became institutionalized at Marshall just over a year before the fatal tragedy; Marshall campus saw waves of right-wing counter movements emanating from the Campus Christian Center. The surviving members of the varsity team of the tragic plane crash would have been familiar and evidence of the struggle should have been visible. None of the students, teachers, administrators, or community leaders even had an opinion of these viewpoints. Even though the film was about the tragedy to triumph conflict and struggle, this does not mean that these issues were not on the minds of the community symbolized.

The wreckage of the plane is put on display as a spectacle, reenacting the fire and destruction during the aftermath of the crash. Local citizens are shown rushing toward the blazing fire and scattered remnants of the plane, sobbing and expressing disbelief. Television and radio media filter the site of the crash to an on consuming public impacted by the tragedy, initially reporting the incident without the benefit of details.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

*Titanic*, *United 93*, and *We Are...Marshall!* are cinematic representations of the commodification of tragedy, sharing like conspicuous characteristics. The role of mass media institutions, i.e. the entertainment industry in the depiction of these tragedies has been to present the tragic spectacle of death as fantastic entertainment. Since the commodity is the cultural artifact of capitalist society through which people attach meaning, the symbolic representation of tragedy as an article of exchange becomes muddled with distortions in reality. The historical window opened by nationally released films will simplify or completely remove the social and political conditions of the depicted eras.

My analysis of the commodification of tragedy in contemporary film provides both questions and answers. Transforming tragedy into an article of exchange occurs across a broad spectrum of events and merchandise that can be sold under free market capitalism, not solely limited to nationally released cinematic representations. Research on the different forms of products that represent tragedy and the conspicuous characteristics that define them is necessary in order to fully grasp the nature of the commodification of tragedy. Products associated with the Holocaust, Rwandan genocide, Hurricane Katrina, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, assassination of political and community leaders, the Columbine High School shootings, and etc is needed to understand this phenomenon in its totality.

The films covered in my analysis bring out questions of sex and gender when depicted in the commodification of tragedy. There appear to be themes of masculine empowerment in all three of the films I covered, representing the traditional patriarchy critiqued by feminists. Roberts (2000) and Terry-Chandler (2000) recognize the gender related themes in *Titanic*;

however, their optimism appears to cloud their analysis. *Titanic* may put Rose on display as a young woman challenging the constraint of tradition; however, by herself she knows no other alternative than suicide. Also, Rose is helpless without Jack and cannot survive without his guidance during the crisis when the ship begins to sink. Even though Terry-Chandler (2000) recognizes Rose, her mother Ruth, and Molly Brown as strong female characters, their actual ability to get off the boat is not possible without the masculine hero and “women and children first” mentality. Two illustrations are Jack’s teaching Rose what to do once the ship plunges into the water and when he literally sacrifices his own life so that she can float on top of the icy water. *United 93* and *We Are...Marshall!* seem to mirror these traditional expressions of masculinity; aggressive male behavior is present along with female pacification. Thus, with more analysis the commodification of tragedy may come to be symbolic of traditional masculinity.

Finally, there appears to varying degrees of commodification when depicting tragedy through mass media. Documentary films that recall history through news reporting and interviews with those involved perform a different role than those of the entertainment industry. These products are still commodities; however, they do not distort the events for dramatic effect or artistic entitlement. The documentary film titled *Ashes to Glory* on the Marshall tragedy serves as an exemplary illustration; while the object is consumed like any other commodity, it is serves as a tool for historical awareness and depicts the actual events and people associated with the tragedy. *Ashes to Glory* relies on news broadcasts, witness accounts, and victim’s friends and family to open the window of history; rather than fantastic entertainment that makes a spectacle of death and presents a distorted, larger than life simulation of tragedy.

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## Appendix A

## Nationally Released Films on Tragedies January 1, 1995 through March 8, 2007

Film Title	Year	Tragedy	Budget \$	Opening Weekend \$	\$ Total
Braveheart	1995	War/Destruction/death/Struggle	\$53,000,000	N/A	\$75,600,000
Courage Under Fire	1996	War/Destruction/Death/Struggle	\$46,000,000	\$12,501,000	\$58,918,501
Titanic	1997	Travel/Destruction/Death/Struggle/Boat wreck	\$200,000,000	\$28,638,131	\$600,779,824
Jakob the Liar	1999	Genocide/Destruction/War/Race/Ethnicity	\$15,000,000	\$2,056,647	\$4,956,401
Boys Don't Cry	1999	Destruction/violence/Sexual orientation	\$2,000,000	\$73,720	\$11,533,945
The Patriot	2000	War/Destruction/Death	\$110,000,000	\$22,413,710	\$113,330,342
Pearl Harbor	2001	War/Destruction/Death/Air Craft wreck	\$135,250,000	\$75,177,654	\$198,539,855
Black Hawk Down	2001	War /Destruction/Death/Middle East/Air Craft wreck	\$90,000,000	\$274,347	\$108,638,745
Bloody Sunday	2002	Death/Destruction/Politics	\$5,000,000	\$29,419	\$768,045
We Were Soldiers	2002	War/Destruction/Death	\$75,000,000	\$20,212,543	\$78,120,196
Bowling For Columbine	2002	Death/Politics	\$4,000,000	\$209,148	\$21,244,913
Hotel Rwanda	2004	Genocide/ Destruction/Death/	\$17,500,000	\$100,091	\$23,472,900

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Fahrenheit 9/11	2004	9-11/ /War/Destruction/Air craft wreck	\$6,000,000	\$23,920,637	\$119,194,771
United 93	2006	9- 11/Destruction/Death/Air craft wreck	\$15,000,000	\$11,478,360	\$31,471,430
World Trade Center	2006	9- 11/Destruction/Death/Air craft wreck	\$63,000,000	\$18,730,762	\$70,236,496
We Are Marshall	2006	Death/Destruction/Ai craft wreck	N/A	\$8,582,508	\$43,532,294

\*All information gathered from the *International Movie Database* (2007) at [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)