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Hollywood's Metaphors

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In the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, *The Chronicle* asked scholars in a variety of disciplines to reflect on those events. Their comments were submitted in writing or transcribed from interviews.

This month's cataclysm symbolically represents not just an attack on America and the American way of life, but an assault on the forward-looking, short-term, money-fueled mode of thought that is the driving force behind the Western entertainment industry.

Perhaps that fact, coupled with the ungraspable enormity of the tragedy, will now compel us to look beyond Hollywood for our narratives and metaphors. Attempts to evoke the magnitude of the horror demand a return to the more primitive, magical modes of thinking more characteristic of early art, literature, and religion. Who needs Schwarzenegger when we have the terrors of Dante and Hieronymus Bosch, or the infernal nightmare revealed to St. John in his original vision of the Apocalypse?

If this appalling tragedy does lead to significant shifts in the nature of popular entertainment, the open question is how long those changes will last. Will it be a few months, while the culture industry regroupes its forces and rejiggers its ideas for new ways of exploiting a public hungrier than ever for comforting fantasies? Or will a reconfigured set of psychological needs and social demands produce new, relatively enlightened approaches to mass-marketed diversion and to the effects such entertainment inevitably has on popular mindsets?

The first, more cynical answer is more likely, although the appalling novelty of these terrorist attacks may produce upheavals more lasting than we can currently predict.

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