

Postmodernity and September 11 2001 – Life imitating art? Art pre-empting Life? An Australian Perspective

by Christine Nicholls, *Altitude*, Volume 4, Article 1, 2004.

Reflecting on the events of September 11 2001, I, like many others, was left with a strong sense of déjà vu. This does not betoken any prophetic gift on my part – far from it. As it happens, many of the occurrences of that day and the subsequent fall out had been pre-empted visually by Hollywood movies (mostly B-grade), especially those that fall into the aptly named genre ‘disaster movies’. Debord¹ has noted that our social relations are mediated through images and on no occasion was this more apparent than on September 11 2001, where the porous relationship between image and reality became obvious via the presentation of an act of terrorism as a ratings-pushing television spectacle.

The repetitive broadcasting of the September 11 footage on all Australian television stations day in, day out (sometimes in fact, hour in, hour out) in the period immediately following September 11 2001 reinforced the impression that the disaster constituted its own self-referential loop. This occurred to the point that the repetitious footage could almost be read as the kind of saturation advertising that commonly precedes forthcoming blockbuster movie. The fact that in Australia we are so geographically distant from the US, while at the same time such avid consumers of its televisual culture, served to reinforce the impression that the basis of this event had less connection to documentary reality than it did to the movie industry. In other words, the main external referent for September 11 2001, at least as visual spectacle, seemed not to be ‘the real’ or ‘reality’ but the movies, specifically Hollywood movies. In a bizarre inversion of what is supposed to be the norm, simulacra of reality, at least in some respects, became the major referent for the real in this case.

Some of the films prefiguring the tragic events of 9/11 reflected so-called ‘natural’ disasters but the more recent ones (especially aircraft disasters brought about by some human failing) have been increasingly presenting human-engineered disasters as the spectacle-de-jour and chief entertainment. The unfolding events of September 11 in which the crisis was presented in the most graphic of tele-visual terms – as the ultimate disaster movie – showed life uncannily imitating art, rather than vice versa, which is how it is supposed to be, in theory.

Even comparatively early moving pictures like *The Perils of Pauline* and *King Kong* in which a terrifyingly large, grotesque ‘subhuman’ gorilla stands astride tall buildings in New York City, prefigure the endlessly repeated visual imagery of the burning, toppling, crumbling, Twin Towers – architectural symbols of American power and its metaphoric fall. As I have already signalled, the proliferation of hybrid filmic genres that prey on people’s deepest fears visually flagged the events surrounding September 11 2001, in a number of ways. Included in this category are earlier films like *The Poseidon Adventure*, films about the sinking of the *Titanic*, the numerous very popular in-sky aircraft disaster movies, as well as the phenomenally popular *Star Wars* and its sequel *The Empire Strikes*

Back. Equally, many of these films contain imagery of desperate people jumping out of high buildings or off sinking ships – jumping to certain death.

The more recent spate of American movies about encroaching Aliens – films that are actually about ‘immigration rage’ – are testaments to westerners’ fear, indeed collective paranoia, about the deviant, exotic Other intruding upon or even usurping ‘our’ privileged ways of life. Such themes tap into the temper of our times and also subliminally influence and colour national responses to episodes such as the Tampa in Australia. In this discourse, the Aliens’ capacity to perform exceedingly clever and visually astonishing acts of apparently unmitigated evil (for example, in the case of the Tampa, by allegedly throwing their own children overboard), in order to further their own dark, selfish, predatory, even colonising agendas, also tap into this growing culture of fear.² Such movies also foreshadow September 11 2001 in some respects. Almost all of these films emanate from the US, although Australians and many others are complicit with their underlying politics.

Of course, in a number of cases the films referred to in this context belong to a variety of different genres and/or subgenres, including that of Nature versus Man (*The Poseidon Adventure*, 1972); Nature versus God (the third version of *The Titanic*) and a pastiche of the past set in the future (*Star Wars*). Nonetheless, the general point still stands – that Hollywood films did in fact precede (and of course, have continued to represent since) the horrors of September 11 2001. The major point here is that images of such disasters, regardless of sub-genre, have been influential in terms of pre-empting and shaping responses to ‘real’ life.

The language used by western leaders to describe September 11 2001 reinforced this sense of the televisual forming the basis of real life. George W Bush’s Texan-arcane tough-guy talk of ‘axes of evil’, ‘smoking out’ villains, ‘weapons of mass destruction’, and ‘war against terrorism’, is pure Hollywood-speak – such language has a ‘genuinely’ celluloid ring to it.

The Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, is also capable of using an Aussie-hybrid dialect of this dumbed-down Hollywood-speak on occasion coupled with a uniquely Australian linguistic element of what seems at first glance to be sheer cultural cringe (ie, his Sheriff/Deputy Sheriff formulation). However, he betrays his political cleverness by successfully manipulating this language to discuss complex situations, in ways that are very much to his electoral advantage.

‘What sort of people’, asked our Prime Minister, ‘would throw their own children overboard?’ In another example, the routinely favoured rhetoric of border protection employed by the Prime Minister and the former Minister for Immigration, Philip Ruddock, includes terminology like ‘illegals’ and ‘queue jumpers’ to describe asylum seekers. As is the case with George Bush’s Texan version of movie-speak inflected rhetoric, such language grossly oversimplifies very complex political issues and situations for considerable political gain.

The uncanny way in which life reflected or even simulated art on September 11 lead the spectator towards understanding this as the world's first real postmodern crisis, or more accurately, the first crisis that truly evinces the cultural ethos of postmodernity. In this context 'postmodernity' is to be understood as a mood or *Zeitgeist* defining the cultural situation we currently inhabit, rather than a theoretical position per se. In the remainder of this article I will briefly enumerate some of the specific elements that involve a reading of September 11 2001 as the first world crisis expressing postmodernity. As space permits only a brief analysis of this line of thought, I will link some of key words associated with postmodernity (namely appropriation, irony, simulacrum, hyperreality, rhizomes), with the visual iterations and re-iterations of September 11, and some of the events that followed in its wake.

'Appropriation' is a key word in postmodernism. Postmodernism in Western art practice refers to artists, (but also equally to architects, chefs, those in the fashion industry, and so on) borrowing, quoting from, imitating, referencing or recontextualizing earlier works or genres in more direct and overt ways than their modernist precursors. This sometimes involves a *mélange* of disparate styles, elements and sensibilities in a kind of dialogue with the past. For instance, appropriative tendencies and practices underpin the contemporary passion for 'retro' in material culture and the arts.

On September 11 2001 such borrowings occurred at a quite a literal level – in order to create this disaster the terrorists made skilful use of the United States own domestic infrastructure and architecture, using these as weapons against itself. The planes used to wreak the destruction were part of the United States domestic national airline fleet, United Airlines. New York's tallest buildings were also used both materially and symbolically, as part of the weaponry. In other words, the terrorists practised the logic of the existing system, turning it upon itself in such a way as to undermine the United States. By using its own familiar and normally benign domestic infrastructure, the terrorists cleverly recontextualized this infrastructure by turning these into weapons that acted in a destructive way upon the US.

At the visual level, the entire disaster was characterized by ironic double coding, recontextualizing or recoding of existing infrastructure and equipment (see the work of Charles Jencks for examples of re-contextualization and subsequent recoding of older styles and forms in postmodern architecture), while imitating the most spectacular of the Hollywood disaster movies. One of the great ironies, of course, is that at one level the crisis may be represented as a clash between fundamentalisms (aka grand narratives) of various brands.

While shocking to the extreme, there is no denying the glossy, seductive surface of the imagery of September 11 2001 and its magnetic power to draw the spectator's eye to its own apparently endlessly replicating visual sign system. The ultimate postmodern appropriation that occurred in the whole sorry business must surely be that of the US media machinery, which was ultimately conscripted inadvertently by the terrorists to broadcast and thereby expose to the entire world America's humiliation and pain. The US media constantly updated the story, revealing each new development or twist in soap-

operatic terms, giving the terrorists the kind of publicity that money simply cannot buy. America had become its own soap opera, and it, along with the rest of the world, was watching as each new newsbreak, development or piece of information came to light. The ultimate, defining postmodern moment in the fallout from September 11 was this (unwitting) appropriation of the US domestic media along with other infrastructural elements for the purpose of publicizing the event – and the fall, both metaphoric and actual, of the United States.

Baudrillard's notions of simulacrum and hyperreality also exemplify the postmodern ethos. A simulacrum is something which closely resembles another. Jean Baudrillard has observed that in the postmodern world the status of the real has been transformed into the hyper-real, to the extent that it becomes 'its own pure simulacrum'. Baudrillard is also credited with coining the term hyperreality, or hyperrealism, which is the meticulous reproduction of the real, preferably through another, reproductive medium, such as photography.³ The prominent Slovenian intellectual Slavoj Žižek has in fact used the idea of hyperreality in relation to September 11 2001 in his *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002). In this work Žižek argues that the Twin Towers may be read as centres of virtual reality – in this instance, signifying finance capital.

In the real-life (as opposed to reel-life) version George Bush Senior stars as Luke Skywalker Sr; George 'Dubya' Bush is introduced as Skywalker Junior, morally compelled to finish the clean up of a process that his father began but was unable to complete. On the baddies' side, and in the absence of any readily defined enemy group, Osama Bin Laden was perfectly cast as a hybridized version of Darth Vader and The Phantom, while Saddam Hussein excelled as the broody, dark, scheming, evil general of Middle Eastern background. The script was racialized in terms of its presentation of good and evil, although in these politically correct times greater ethnic balance was required. Hence, the mandatory appearance of the 'good' black general, Colin Powell and the attractive and smart Condoleezza Rice, a gorgeous and smart superheroine if ever there was one. The stereotypic representations of good and evil in the media depictions of this series of events also owe something to comic book traditions – another predominantly visual medium.

A large cast of baddies-as-backdrops also exist in Iraq, Afghanistan and North Korea, waiting in the wings, as it were, in case the action began to slow. In other far-flung regions of the world there were also other supposed 'goodies' ready, willing and able to provide backup for Luke Jr in his quest to rid the world of evil. This provided the space where John Howard would eventually enter, further down the track, in a small walk-on role, hoping to be noticed and considered for a larger role in the future. In common with many bit-part players who land a secondary role in a blockbuster, this actor's role was greatly magnified in his own mind, providing him with subject matter for dining out for a very long time. (Many Europeans still do not even know that Australia had a role in the Iraq war).

In the immediate wake of September 11 2001, it was not known who had perpetrated these heinous deeds. Subsequently, war was declared against terror. This was unlike any

previous declaration of war on the part of the west, where the enemy was clearly defined (for example, World War I and II). The rhizomic⁴ structures of the terrorist networks mean that they are connected in qualitatively different ways than previous 'enemies', for example, conventional twentieth century armies where a hierarchy exists based on a linear model and identifiable chain of command. Those were the days – of knowing thine enemy. But the connections between and among the terrorists were not clear. Who exactly was the enemy, in this case? Rather the terrorists were (are) characterized by a rhizomatic system, which perhaps not unlike the Internet, connects people via alternative networks, like the intertwining of mosses. (Mosses and tubers are part of rhizomatic systems whilst trees, branches and twigs according to Deleuze and Guattari's 'fix an order'). So, perhaps for the first time in history, war was declared on terror, an abstract enemy, an unknown, rhizomatic enemy. But this war was declared by a system that still exemplified the hierarchical, linear structure that Deleuze and Guattari liken to trees and branches. Perhaps this, in part, is what makes the language used by many in the West to discuss this virtually unseen 'enemy' seem so outdated, quaint and ultimately ineffectual, as do our responses to the situation (for example, bombing the whole of Afghanistan in an attempt to 'get' Osama Bin Laden, followed by the bombing of all of Iraq in order to vanquish Saddam).

It was once fashionable to deride Ronald Regan as a B-grade actor turned president of the United States. But now, it seems, this process has been neatly reversed, with the President of the United States recently morphing into a B-grade actor. And his performance seems to have garnered high ratings. And what of Bush's politically cunning, seemingly willing Antipodean sidekick, and Regan-style champion of wedge politics, L'il Johnny? While initially Prime Minister Howard also seemed to have turned in a ratings-pushing performance, more than likely winning him the last two and possibly even the next federal election, there are a number of variables including the postwar situation as it unfolds in Iraq, which undoubtedly will have an impact on the situation in the longer term. It has yet to be seen how in the future this situation will pan itself out with the sometimes rather cynical Australian voting public. This attitude on the part of many Australians, an understandable consequence of long-term (and possibly growing) distrust of politicians, based on solid historical and contemporary grounds, may ultimately result in our secular salvation. God Save America.

Notes

1 In *The Society of Spectacle*, 1967.

2 See Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* for one of the few leftist critiques (if flawed) in the movies of this 'Culture of Fear', that is, fear cultivated and manipulated by both government and the media to keep the domestic population in line. Such fear has reached unprecedented levels in the US particularly since September 11.

3 Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 1976.

4 See Deleuze and Guattari.

5 In an enlightening talk given at the Art Gallery of South Australia about the artwork of James Gleeson, noted Australian art writer Renee Free described the 21st century as 'The Age of Terror', comparing it with the twentieth century, which has been widely glossed

as 'The Age of Anxiety' . Renee Free observed the recent social shift in Australia and elsewhere away from The Age of Anxiety and into The Age of Terror.