

**DRAFT**

## **“Bring it on”: the apocalypse of George W. Bush**

**Marcus O’Donnell<sup>1</sup>**

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ABSTRACT: This article examines a number of cinematic, literary and journalistic texts in the context of what film maker Tom Tykwer calls the “aesthetic memory” of September 11. In particular it explores the way these narratives relate to deeply embedded Western cultural myths of the apocalyptic. The apocalyptic language of American Christian fundamentalism and the heroic narratives of Hollywood film are explored as twin influences on a powerful civil religion dubbed by Jewett and Lawrence (2003) “The Captain America complex”.

In *The Day After Tomorrow*, quite early in the film, a massive tornado runs through Los Angeles as climate change begins to wreck havoc in American cities. As the storm builds, a flabbergasted newscaster looks up at Mt Lee and realises to his horror that Griffith Park’s famous sign is taking a tumble: “Oh my god,” he cries, “the Hollywood sign is being erased.”

*The Day After Tomorrow* is both an erasure and a reinscription of Hollywood signs. Its apocalyptic content, and its New York setting make it all the more significant in a post 9/11 environment. But what is particularly interesting is that although the sign and other LA landmarks are destroyed, New York remains grided, upright and intact even as it is submerged in ice and water. This is a strange disaster movie because apart from the early tornado scene it has little of the chaos of traditional disaster flicks.

As Isabelle Freda and many other commentators have noted, 9/11 brought its own erasure or at least its own inversion:

Nine-eleven was, in part, such a shock because of the force with which it brought death – *American* mortality – into the carefully guarded world of American irreality, one policed by a commodified news media. The attacks seemed to invert outside and inside, “them” and “us” or fiction and reality, providing a potent site of (potential and actual) destabilisation of “American spectatorship.” (Freda: 227)

We all have our memories of those days in September 2001, where we were when “it” happened, how much of it we saw and how we reacted when we saw those images replayed again and again in the hours, days and weeks that followed.

I uncharacteristically turned on the TV late that night. It was immediately apparent that something big, catastrophic, awesome was happening. Then about five minutes after I tuned in, it happened: that scene, the crash, the confusion, and then the fall. I saw the second plane hit the tower, then I saw the tower collapse, then I saw it replayed again, again and again.

I sat glued to the television into the very early hours of the morning. My main emotion during that time was not horror but a type of shocked awe. I distinctly remember thinking, quite literally, in the first few minutes after I tuned in, before I had fully made sense of what was going on: “Oh my god it’s the end of the world.”

I knew that it wasn’t, but I had some sense that I was closer to that script than I had ever been before. After seeing that tower collapse, after the crosses backwards and forwards from the towers to the Pentagon, it was hard to imagine what would happen next. Suddenly these images made anything imaginable and anything imaginable possible.

“What is it about that scene that makes us want to look at it again and again?” a friend asked me recently, neither of us could find a satisfactory answer to that question. But the answer has something to do with the fact that the crash and the collapse (and the cycle of the replay itself) are all so utterly familiar but in this instance so incredibly strange or should I say strained. Reality seems stretched because its primary reference becomes fiction, because the place we have seen this all before is at the movies.

The constant replay of the falling towers was only the first of a continuing cycle of repetitions that the events of September 11 set to play. The images of that morning are still constantly before us, not as they were back then, in real time or its immediate approximation, but in our memories, in the discourse of politicians and in the haunting resonances that we wilfully or subliminally detect, construct or recognise in film, fiction and the news. In the domains of both popular culture and current affairs it often seems, nearly three years after the event, September 11 is still everywhere you look.

This article will examine a number of cinematic, literary and journalistic texts in the context of what film maker Tom Tykwer calls the “aesthetic memory” of September 11. It is not a

comprehensive analysis of the cultural field but seeks to identify a number of mythic patterns that can be identified across a range of genres. In particular I am interested in exploring the way these myths relate to deeply embedded Western cultural narratives of the apocalyptic.

## **Narrative and myth**

Myth (Bird&Dardeene; Lule 2001) and ritual (Carey 1989; 1998) have been consistently used as paradigms to analyse journalism as cultural storytelling. They are also concepts that have been widely used in cinema studies (Izod 2001) television studies (Silverstone 1981) literary criticism (Fry 1957; Ferrell 2000) and broader studies of popular culture (Drucker & Cathcart 1994; Coupe 1997).

I have previously argued (O'Donnell 2004; 2004a) that although myth provides a valuable tool for the analysis of journalism, the models of myth currently used by journalism scholars are inadequate. I have suggested that theories of intertextuality (Kristeva 1980) and narrative identity (Ricoeur 1988) can assist in the development of a more cogent theory of myth.

Media anthropologist Elizabeth Bird is also critical of “universalising” text-bound approaches to myth. She argues for an anthropological understanding of myth “more as process than text and as a joint product of storyteller and audience.” (2003:159). She suggest that any holistic approach to myth must “reach out from the story itself toward a set of connections between it and notions that are simmering in the culture at large.” (2003:162)

Although Bird is cautious about any easy constitution of “active audiences” who define resistant interpretations to popular texts, (Fiske 1989) she situates her critique within Hall’s (1981) framework of the “active work” of cultural transformations. “Existing traditions and activities [are subject to] active reworking so that they come out a different way: they appear to ‘persist’ – yet, from one period to another, they come to stand in a different relation to the ways working people live and the ways they define their relations to each other, to ‘the others’ and to the conditions of life.” (Hall quoted in Bird 2003:160)

In his exhaustive study of different approaches to myth in fields as diverse as anthropology, theology, literary studies and cultural

studies Doty warns that “myth is a term with no singular historical usage; rather it has carried and does carry a wide range of defining features” (2000:30). He argues for a “complex field definition” or a “definitional matrix” that “recognizes mythic multidimensionality in both origination and application” (2000:33).

I would argue that such a definitional matrix would begin with a concept of myths as emotionally toned, meaning-seeking narratives that grow in narrative power through repetition, evolution and adaptation. Individual myths would be best understood as nodes at the centre of complex networks of inter-related stories.

As intertextual narratives, myths can act as literary organising devices, which bring different, sometimes contradictory, textual elements into dialogue with one another. They bring into dialogue past, present and emerging paradigms deploying interactive sets of symbolic codes. Although traditionally associated with religious or sacred stories and symbols, contemporary myths draw on a range of psychological, socio-political and scientific images and frameworks.

Myths are social stories, which emerge out of commonly understood cultural frameworks; they narrate themes of fundamental importance to cultural groups; they can serve to confirm or challenge broadly held cultural beliefs. Myths also provide narrative frameworks that are used by individuals to help organise experience; they influence personal identity formation; they can provide both restrictive and transformative models of subjectivity.

### **The apocalyptic in contemporary culture**

The apocalypse myth has a long lineage in a variety of cultures not just the Judeo-Christian world (Cohn 1993). As Eugen Weber has argued, “apocalypse long furnished the key to human history,” (Weber 1999:5) particularly in the Judeo-Christian west where until the 17th century “premonitory history” *was history*. Although, after the enlightenment turn to reason, this apocalyptic mindset began to “seep out of educated consciousness, it did so only partially and incompletely” (Weber 1999:3).

Greek for revelation, Apocalypse is the name given to the final book of the Christian bible, a highly symbolic end time narrative which predicts a cataclysmic final battle between the forces of good and evil.

The apocalyptic theme that has been taken up widely across a range of disciplines including: theology (Keller 1996; McGinn 1998) history (Cohn 1970; Weber 1999) sociology (Robbins and Palmer 1997) literature (Kermode 1970; Ahearn 1996;) cinema studies (Sharrett 1993; Broderick 1999) and postmodern philosophy (Derrida 1993; Dellamora 1994; Pippin 1999).

Berger (2000:388) has argued that the twentieth century has been “thoroughly marked, perhaps even defined by, apocalyptic impulses, fears representations and events.” He outlines four principle areas of post-war apocalyptic representation: “The first is nuclear war, the second is the Holocaust, the third is the apocalypses of liberation (feminist, African American, postcolonial) and the fourth is what is loosely called ‘postmodernity’.” (390). To these could be added a fifth significant area: the ecological crisis (Buell 2003).

For Berger and for other theorists of the apocalypse, these stories are not merely catastrophic they are in some way revelatory. In nuclear narratives “accident and telos are intertwined” (390). For many writers and artists the holocaust “has come to occupy a central place in late twentieth century European and American moral consciousness...[it] is portrayed as the revelatory, traumatic, apocalyptic fulcrum of the twentieth century” (391); and much postmodern fiction is driven by “some revelatory catastrophe whose traumatic force reshapes all that preceded it and all that follows” (392).

The events of September 11 have frequently been described in such a way, as ushering in a new and terrible era. But as Slavoj Zizek notes this is often an “empty gesture of saying something ‘deep’ without really knowing what we want to say (2002:46). And what of the “war on terror”? As Zizek comments, the problem is: at one level, on the homefront, we are *not* at war.

Such paradoxes also provide the key to how the two logics of the state of emergency relate to one another: today’s liberal-totalitarian emergency of the ‘war on terrorism’ and the

authentic revolutionary state of emergency first articulated by St Paul in what he called the emergency of the ‘end of time’ approaching. The answer is clear: when a state institution proclaims a state of emergency, it does so by definition as part of a strategy to avoid the true state of emergency and return to the ‘normal course of things’. (Zizek 2002:107-8)

Writers as diverse as theologian Bernard McGinn (1996) and sociologist Philip Lamy (1997) both emphasise the sense making explanatory function that apocalyptic or millennial myths play.

The millennial myth is a symbolic form of belief that acts as a powerful metaphor for real human events. It provides a context in which to interpret current events and give meaning and direction to people’s lives. The myth is like a floating framework for explaining the “big picture” for both religious and secular millenarian movements and all manner of “intermediate groups”. (Lamy:97)

The revelatory catastrophe can be viewed as a hopeful dialectic or in less optimistic dualistic terms.

### **George W. Bush’s apocalyptic crusade**

Ronald Reagan was, as one of his biographer’s put it, “hooked on Armageddon” and liked nothing better than to have long conversations about possible end-time scenarios. On a number of occasions Reagan stated his belief that we were close to the end times predicted in the last book of the Christian bible. (New 2002:69)

George W. Bush is less explicit about his personal apocalyptic beliefs yet his speeches are brimming with apocalyptic resonance.

Much has been written about George Bush’s faith and his use of religious language<sup>2</sup>, I will merely note three aspects of Bush’s religious rhetoric, which highlight an underlying apocalyptic worldview. Firstly and most obviously Bush has defined the current “war on terrorism” as a battle between “good” and “evil”.

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<sup>2</sup> This topic was dealt with extensively in the PBS program *The Jesus Factor*, for full transcripts see: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jesus/>. For newspaper articles dealing with this topic see the list at: [http://www.religionandpluralism.org/ANC\\_ArticleList.htm](http://www.religionandpluralism.org/ANC_ArticleList.htm). For an academic analysis see Maddox 2003.

Secondly he believes we are living in unprecedented times that call for fundamentally new responses. Thirdly he believes he has been chosen by God to lead.

These three themes, which can be traced across many of Bush's public statements, find symbolic resonance in key themes of the biblical book of Revelation. It narrates the calling of prophets and leaders, a cataclysmic battle between the good "Lamb" and the evil "beast" and the saving of a remnant after a time of cataclysm and tribulation. Much of this symbolic battle is expressed in socio-political language of empires at war.

If Ronald Reagan became infamous for his reference to the Soviet Union as "the evil empire", Bush's phrase "the axis of evil" (State of the Union Address January 2002) in reference to Iran, Iraq and North Korea was equally the subject of both denunciation and endless satire.

But as Robert Wright has pointed out, it is in its very incoherence as a phrase, that the implications of "axis of evil" become most frightening. There is no known axis/connection between the three states unless the terms are read at a metaphysical level.

If you take the word "evil" really seriously, the "axis" part follows; the various manifestations of evil are inherently coordinated, since they all have the same source. Iran and Iraq may hate each other, but they're both on Satan's team. (Wright 2002)

Bush's response to the attacks of September 11 and his subsequent proclamation of the war on terror was always more than a merely strategic response, it was more even than a threat of revenge it was in his own poorly judged phrase a "crusade".

In off the cuff remarks to reporters on the White House lawn, September 16, after flying back from a meeting with senior advisers at Camp David, Bush reiterated what he had said at Washington's National Cathedral two days earlier, his task, America's task, was to "rid the world of evil".

Tomorrow, when you get back to work, work hard like you always have. But we've been warned. We've been warned there are evil people in this world. We've been warned so vividly.

And we'll be alert. Your government is alert. The governors and mayors are alert that evil folks still lurk out there. As I said yesterday, people have declared war on America and they have made a terrible mistake. My administration has a job to do and we're going to do it. We will rid the world of the evildoers. (CNN 16/9/04)

After further questions Bush went on to say:

This is a new kind of, a new kind of evil. And the American people are beginning to understand. This crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take awhile. (quoted in Salisbury 2001)

As the *Christian Science Monitor* (Ford 2001) reported, Bush's use of the term "crusade" was ignored or passed over by most the American press until European and Arab leaders started to warn that such rhetoric could only lead to a further "clash of civilisations".

The European press immediately picked up on the implications of Bush's language and his apparent worldview. Paris daily *Le Monde* warned in an editorial:

If this 'war' takes a form that affronts moderate Arab opinion, if it has the air of a clash of civilizations, there is a strong risk that it will contribute to Osama bin Laden's goal: a conflict between the Arab-Muslim world and the West (*Ford 2001*)

Dominique Moisi, a political analyst with the French Institute for International Relations a foreign policy think tank warned:

The same black and white language he uses to rally Americans behind him is just the sort of language that risks splitting the international coalition he is trying to build. This confusion between politics and religion...risks encouraging a clash of civilizations in a religious sense, which is very dangerous. (*Ford 2001*)

Bush's black and white rhetoric seems to swing from the moral seriousness of his early speeches to jaunty cowboy jesting. In early 2003 Bush addressed a group of sailors

The terrorists brought this war to us – and now we're takin' it back to them," he told the troops, leaning an elbow on the lectern, squinting crosswise at the camera, tossing a breathy Clint Eastwood chuckle. "We're on their trail, we're smokin' them out, we've got 'em on the run." (Klien 2003)

Klien goes on to comment that it is Bush's seemingly infallible sense of certainty that make such incidents troubling.

What is disturbing about Bush's faith in this moment of national crisis: it does not discomfort him enough; it does not impel him to have second thoughts, to explore other intellectual possibilities or question the possible consequences of his actions. I asked one of Bush's closest advisers last week if the President had struggled with his Iraq decision. "No," he said, peremptorily, then quickly amended, "He understands the enormity of it, he understands the nuances, but has there been hand-wringing or existential angst along the way? No." (Klien 2003)

Such an unwavering belief in both his mission and its terms of engagement are drawn from Bush's sense of divine mandate. He has made it clear to a number of friends that he had a sense that God was calling him to be president for a reason. After his second inauguration as governor of Texas he rang television evangelist James Robinson and said: "I feel like God wants me to run for President. I can't explain it, but I sense my country is going to need me. Something is going to happen... I know it won't be easy on me or my family, but God wants me to do it." (Harris 2003)

While there is a long tradition in American politics, which believes in the "manifest destiny" (Stephanson 1995) of the United States as a nation especially chosen by God, Bush's sense of mandate seems disturbingly personal.

This sense of divine mandate was strengthened after September 11. On the afternoon of his post 9/11 address to Congress Bush gathered together a group of religious leaders at the White House to brief them on what he was going to say and to ask them to give comfort to their flock and be ready to answer questions.

Gerald Kieschnick, president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, addressed the group with some solemnity: "Mr. President, I

have just come from the World Trade Centre site in lower Manhattan. I stood where you stood. I saw what you saw. I smelled what you smelled. You not only have a civil calling, but a divine calling. ... You are not just a civil servant; you are a servant of God called for such a time like this."

"I accept the responsibility," Bush said, nodding. (Carnes 2001)

In a much quoted section of Bob Woodward's *Plan of Attack* Bush is asked whether he consulted his father about his plans for war in Iraq.

"You know he is the wrong father to appeal to in terms of strength. There is a higher father that I appeal to," Bush said. (*Washington Post* 17/4/04)

Such appeal to a "higher father" leaves the younger Bush with a great deal of certainty. He also told Woodward that he had "no doubt" over his decision to go to war in Iraq.

Bush's ongoing actions and rhetoric have led some to speculate that he may be consciously playing out a Christian end-time scenario in which he believes himself to be playing a critical role. The Middle East, especially Jerusalem and the ancient city of Babylon, in what is now Iraq, play a key role in the eschatological scenarios of Christian Armageddon.

Bruce Lincoln who teaches a seminar on the theology of George W. Bush at the University of Chicago Divinity School, recently told the *Village Voice* that he finds very little that's explicitly apocalyptic in Bush's public speeches. Lincoln instead links Bush's Christianity to the missionising impulse of *Acts of the Apostles*, the biblical book that Bush first studied after his conversion in the mid 80s. "It's expansionist—it's religious imperialism, if you will. And I think that remains his primary orientation," Lincoln said. He continues:

[For Bush] the U.S. is the new Israel as God's most favoured nation, and those responsible for the state of America in the world also enjoy special favour....Foremost among the signs of grace—if I read him correctly—are the cardinal American virtues of courage, on the one hand, and compassion, on the other....Wherever the U.S. happens to advance something that

he can call 'freedom,' he thinks he's serving God's will, and he proclaims he's serving God's will. (Perlstein 2004)

While this is an interesting distinction it is merely splitting theological hairs because all early Christianity was in effect apocalyptic. The missionising impulse in the *Acts of the Apostle* is driven by a sense of the imminence of the sudden apocalyptic return of Jesus. This is clear in the story of the ascension of Jesus into heaven narrated at the start of *Acts*.

So when the disciples had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Sama'ria and to the end of the earth." And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." (Acts 1:6-11)

This passage makes clear that for the early Christians there was a vital connection between, the restoration of Israel, their expansionary evangelical mandate and the sudden second coming of Jesus at a time fixed by God's authority. This early Christian nexus of beliefs is also critical to the world-view of many of today's fundamentalist Christian groups. If this same symbolic logic is not informing Bush directly it is certainly guiding many of the groups who seem to have a powerful influence on White House policy.

This set of symbols, sketched in summary in passages like the one from *Acts*, is expanded dramatically in the final book of the bible known as the *Apocalypse* or the *Book of Revelation*. While I outline below some of the implications of a literal view of this type of theology, a mythopoeic interpretation, as advocated by more liberal scholars, is also instructive.

Feminist theologian and biblical scholar Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, who has written extensively about the *Book of*

*Revelation*, advocates a rhetorical-literary view of the work. She maintains that it is best viewed as a “symphony of symbols” (1991:31) or a set of “tensive multivalent symbols” (1991:30) rather than as a set of predictive omens. Its compositional structure is “not encyclopaedic but dramatic” (1991:32).

Schussler Fiorenza also argues that it is a work that is deeply political, rooted in the concrete political situation of its readers and the pre-existing mythological literature of Jewish and Greco-Roman apocalyptic literature.

As a Christian seer, the author gives not simply moral injunctions and prescriptive admonitions, but he constructs a symbolic universe and ‘plausibility structure.’ He does so in order to speak to the experience and predicament of Christians of his own time who are a powerless minority vis-à-vis the dominant majority power of their own culture. Therefore he employs socio-economic language and political-mythological imagery. (1991:32)

Much of the book’s rhetorical power lies in its unique combination of strong persuasive/inspirational elements and equally strong calls to action/resistance. As Schussler Fiorenza puts it, *Revelation* is dependent on the intertextual relations of speaker, audience, subject matter and “rhetorical situation.” Its symbolic universe invites “imaginative participation” (1998:187). She continues:

The strength of its persuasion for action lies not in the theological reasoning or historical argument of *Revelation* but in the “evocative power” of its symbols as well as in its hortatory, imaginative, emotional language and dramatic movement, which engage the hearer (reader) by eliciting reactions, emotions, convictions and identifications. (1998:187)

Bush’s rhetorical strategies may be seen as similar attempts to persuade through the mobilisation of evocative, symbolically charged language. Just as the author of *Revelation* drew on the apocalyptic mythologies of his day, so Bush draws on the biblical resources of Western culture.

In his definition of the war on terror as a fight between good and evil, in his definition of himself as a destined leader and in his

marking of the post September 11 world as a special/new time, he is creating a “symbolic universe” that draws heavily on the “plausibility structure” established in the Christian tradition.

For some this produces a distant resonance in which they hear general echoes of widely propagated Western cultural categories, for others the specific ring of the book of *Revelation* is loud and clear. Whatever Bush may himself believe, his actions and his rhetoric give hope to many who believe in a complex end-time scenario centred around the war-torn Middle East.

## **Left Behind**

One Christian interpretation concerning the end times that has gained ground over the last few decades is the “premillennialist” view. Although premillennial theology can be traced back to the British nineteenth century preacher John Darby it has increasingly become the interpretation of choice among American evangelicals since Hall Lindsay’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* became a surprise bestseller in the early 1970s.

It has been given an even wider audience through a set of runaway best selling novels known as *The Left Behind* series. The first of the twelve books was published in 1995 and when the final instalment was published this year presales had already reached 2 million. Several novels in the series have topped the bestseller lists. According to *Newsweek* (Gates 2004) there was a run on *Desecration*, the 2001 instalment, following September 11 and it became the best selling novel of the year. All up the series has sold some 62 million copies.

The *Left Behind* books are the brainchild of long time evangelical activist and co-founder of the Moral Majority, Tim La Haye, and are co-authored by novelist Jerry Jenkins. They narrate the classic “premillennialist” story that begins with the “rapture” which sees all good Christians taken “to meet the Lord in the air” so that they are saved from the seven years of tribulation which precedes the second coming of Jesus<sup>3</sup>. Meanwhile, wars rage and the Anti-Christ

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<sup>3</sup> The notion of the rapture popular with many sects of apocalyptic Christians is based on a literal interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18: “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

(in La Haye's version, the seemingly benevolent head of the United Nations) increases his world domination. Plagues hit and ultimately the Jewish temple is rebuilt.

The books are potboilers often compared to Tom Clancy or John Grisham novels. They follow the adventures of the "Tribulation force" a self-appointed group led by a TV news journalist who overcome their scepticism and vow to alert the truth behind the catastrophic world events. Behind the inevitable move towards Armageddon is the mysterious "council of ten".

Although La Haye's take on the end times is not accepted by all in the evangelical fraternity, a 2002 survey found that a staggering 59% of American's believed that the events predicted in the book of Revelation will actually occur in the future. (Lampman 2004)

La Haye and many like him see current events in Iraq and the Middle East as very positive signs that Jesus' return is imminent. "Saddam's removal clears the way for rebuilding Babylon," he wrote recently. When asked in an interview if this meant that President Bush is bringing the second coming closer by rebuilding Iraq? La Haye replied: "Totally inadvertently, yes." (Shepherdson 2004)

Other premillennial Christians not only believe the government's actions in Iraq and Israel are crucial to God's unfolding plan, they are actively lobbying to ensure that Bush's support for Israel is unwavering.

According to one recent report, when President Bush started to call on Israel to pull back its military forces from the Jenin refugee camp in 2002, evangelicals quickly mobilized 100,000 opposing e-mails to the White House and Bush became suddenly very quiet on the issue. (Lampman 2004)

According to an investigation by the *Village Voice*, Bush administration officials have regular meetings with a premillennialist group called the Apostolic Congress. In a memo of a recent meeting prepared by the Congress and obtained by the *Voice*, the National Security Council's Near East and North African Affairs director Elliott Abrams attempted to justify the administrations support for a Gaza withdrawal by stating that "the Gaza Strip had no significant Biblical influence such as

Joseph's tomb or Rachel's tomb and therefore is a piece of land that can be sacrificed for the cause of peace.” (Perlstein 2004)

Although the premillennialists believe that only 144,000 Jews will be “saved,” the rebuilding of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem – currently the site of The Dome of the Rock, one of Islam’s holiest mosques – is a key precursor to Jesus’ coming. So although they work hard on behalf of the state of Israel, it seems that it is only because the Jews are pawns in their larger end-game.

As the *Voice*’s Rick Perlstein concludes:

The problem is not that George W. Bush is discussing policy with people who press right-wing solutions to achieve peace in the Middle East, or with devout Christians. It is that he is discussing policy with Christians who might not care about peace at all—at least until the rapture. (Perlstein 2004)

### **Hollywood, the super hero and war on terror**

If the biblical language of apocalypse, of good and evil, of final and decisive battles, “enduring freedom” and “infinite justice” have been key to George Bush’s response to the events of September 11 and its aftermath, the language of film has also played a key role in forming the public understanding of these events.

*The New York Time*’s arts columnist Frank Rich recently wrote:

As the Iraq war enters its second year, it has already barrelled through at least four movie plots. What began as a *High Noon* showdown with Saddam Hussein soon gave way to George Bush's *Top Gun* victory jig. Next was the unexpected synergy with *The Fog of War*, Errol Morris's Oscar-winning documentary underlining how the Johnson administration’s manipulation of the Gulf of Tonkin incident was the ur-text for this administration's hyping of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. And then Falluja: *Black Hawk Down*. (Rich 2004)

Or as Kevin Maher has written:

The 'aesthetic memory' of 9/11 is perversely and irreversibly rooted in blockbuster movies. It's a fact that even Saddam

Hussein, hardly the world's sharpest cultural critic, has famously acknowledged, declaring: 'When we watched what was happening in America for the first time, we thought it might be another American movie. Later, we found out that it was a real movie.' (Maher 2002)

Director Robert Altman took this argument one step further when he argued, in the wake of the September 11 attacks, that Hollywood had not just made the attacks imaginatively interpretable but that they had made them actually possible.

The movies set the pattern, and these people have copied the movies ... Nobody would have thought to commit an atrocity like that...unless they'd seen it in a movie...How dare we continue to show this kind of mass destruction in movies? ... I just believe we created this atmosphere and taught them how to do it. (quoted in Roten 2002)

The Pentagon sought the advice of Hollywood screenwriters in the weeks after 9/11, to help “brainstorm” possible terrorist scenarios. (ABC 21/10/04) Then in November of 2001, key Bush advisor Karl Rove met with Jack Valanti the director of the Motion Picture Association of America and leaders of the major Hollywood studios and television networks. Although the meeting was widely reported and although both sides were keen to emphasise that the White House was not trying to dictate or censor film content, it remains unclear what if anything was decided at the meeting.

According to CNN (12/11/2001) Valenti said the meeting “was about contributing Hollywood's creative imagination and their persuasion skills to help in this war effort so that one day Americans can lead normal lives again.”

Rove is reported to have led discussion around a set of key themes that he suggested the film industry could help address:

- The antiterrorism campaign is not a war against Islam.
- There is an opportunity to issue a call to service for Americans.
- U.S. troops and their families need support.

- The September 11 attacks were an attack against civilization and require a global response.
- Children need to be reassured of their safety and security in the wake of the attacks.
- The antiterrorism campaign is a war against evil. (CNN 12/11/2001)

After a preliminary meeting between Hollywood executives and White House officials, some weeks before the one with Rove, one of the initiators of the dialogue, producer Lionel Chetwynd said:

There was a feeling around the table that something is wrong if half the world thinks we're the Great Satan and we want to make that one right. There's a genuine feeling that we as Americans are failing to get our message across to the world. (Waxman 2001)

Forty-five films were cancelled, rescheduled or altered in the immediate months following the September attacks (CNN 9/11/2001). The release of *Collateral Damage* which featured a graphic bombing orchestrated by Columbian terrorists, was delayed for a few months but *The Quiet American*, which exposed CIA involvement with terrorist attacks on civilians in Vietnam, was left in limbo for over twelve months and was then only released in selected cities for a short season, after public pressure from its British star Michael Caine. But *Black Hawk Down* a patriotic film about American military mateship, set against the tragedy of Somali genocide, was rushed into cinemas ahead of schedule.

Although each of these films was conceived and filmed before September 11 their release and reception was governed, at least in part, by the terrorist attacks. In interviews the stars and producers of these films worked hard to make clear their patriotism and their commitment to the type of agenda that Rove had outlined to the meeting of Hollywood executives.

*Collateral Damage* director Andrew Davis tried hard to spin his Arnold Schwaznegger revenge thriller as a “heartfelt” film with “soul” that in spite of its many literally explosive moments was actually anti-violence. He told CNN:

Well, I think people understand what the term collateral damage means now. It's about innocent people being killed, getting caught in the crossfire of conflicts. And so in that sense, the film is more significant, it's more important....I don't think that films that use violence as exploitive kind of entertainment are going to be tolerated. And I don't think that's what this film is about. I think it's about a real character who's going on a very heartfelt journey. (CNN 7/2/02)

This is not of course how most reviewers saw it. Todd Anthony put it succinctly: "It follows the basic plot trajectory of nearly every Schwarzenegger film: Someone crosses Arnie. Arnie blows things up." (Anthony n.d.)

Schwarzenegger plays Gordy a fire fighter whose wife and child are killed in a terrorist bombing. When he sees that the official investigation is not progressing he decides to go to Columbia and take matters into his own hands. Although in interviews for the film's release the action star is duly deferential to the memory of September 11 and laudatory about the heroism of real life fire fighters, he is refreshingly direct about the film's basic structure and impact.

Movies are movies. It's based on reality, but then you have to go the extra step. You want to make it entertaining and make it heroic, because that's what people want to see. They want a positive outcome. They want revenge. People are very loud and clear about what they want. When we tested our movie in November, they wanted to see a positive ending, they wanted us to kick the butts of the terrorists. Because in real life it's all so complicated. You know? Where are they? Have we found them all? We've found some of them. But bin Laden is still out there, some other guys are still out there. So there's still a dissatisfaction. But in a movie you close the deal. You close the chapter. Movies bring a certain kind of closure, a fantasy that makes people feel good afterwards.

This impulse towards closure operates at a number of levels. In both *Collateral Damage* and *Black Hawk Down* the terrorist leaders are given the opportunity to make set speeches about American imperialism and the justice of their respective causes. They are passionate and if accepted would open up entirely different readings of these films. However these moments are

quickly erased, because the characters are literally and metaphorically not allowed to live. The thrust of both films quickly returns to the bodies of its respective heroes, their courage, their heroism and their saving actions.

There is no characterisation of the Somalis in *Black Hawk Down* they literally provide only a background against which the American's fight. The Somali rebels are portrayed as an animalistic mass against which the individual lives of the American soldiers are either won or lost.

The Somalis and the Columbians are in Bush's terms "evil-doers" who must be cast out. David Frum the speechwriter who is credited with creating the phrase "axis of evil" has said that the language of good and evil came naturally to the President. According to Frum it was a deliberate attempt to answer back the commentators who were asking whether America's past actions made it deserving of the attacks in some way. "He wanted to cut that off right away and make it clear that he saw absolutely no moral equivalence. So he reached right into the *Psalms* for that word." Frum said (quoted in Fineman 2003).

Similarly *Collateral Damage* and *Black Hawk Down* make it clear that no matter what their histories there is no moral equivalence between the Somali rebels or the Columbian terrorists and the films' equally violent protagonists.

*The Quiet American*, on the other hand raises serious questions about the CIA's collaboration with local terrorists in Vietnam who staged attacks on innocent civilians as part of a Machiavellian plan to hasten regime change as the communists in the North were quickly gaining ground against the French colonial rulers.

Alden Pyle the young ideologue and undercover CIA agent is driven by a burning yet paternalistic desire to save the Vietnamese, from the threat of communism through any means. He believes in mobilising a democratic "third force" that will transform Asia and prevent it from falling into the grips of the communists. He is the product of both his times and his own youth full ardour. Pyle's liberationist rhetoric is remarkably similar to the language of the Bush administration on Iraq. The Asian front against the communists has merely transformed into the Middle Eastern front against Islamic terrorism.

Harvey Weinstein, co-chairman of Miramax the film's distributors told the *New York Times* that people told him that he would be "out of his mind" if he released the film straight after September 11 even though it was ready to go.

"They said: 'Are you out of your mind? You can't release this now; it's unpatriotic. America has to be cohesive, and band together.' We were worried that nobody had the stomach for a movie about bad Americans anymore." (quoted in Thompson 2002)

In September 2002 Miramax agreed to the film's screening at the Toronto film festival. "We're here in Toronto screening the film, putting our finger up and testing the wind to see if the wound is still as raw as it was," director Philip Noyce said.

Noyce perceptively went on to pin-point the critical issue surrounding the film's release.

It was made about events in the early 50's, but suddenly some of the themes Graham Greene was investigating, his portrait of a young American political evangelist, have perhaps even more relevance today than they had then. In the short term, it's produced a certain nervousness. But maybe in the long term it means that, instead of the film being about ancient history, it's about modern history. (quoted in Kehr 2003)

Unlike *Collateral Damage*, which as Schwazenegger argued was a fantasy that promised closure, the *Quiet American* was disturbingly *open* to interpretation.

The post 9/11 image of the fire fighter gave an added symbolic relevance to Arnie's heroics in *Collateral Damage* and the "no man left behind" heroism of the American soldiers in *Black Hawk Down* sparred off the patriotism of a nation at war. However *The Quiet American* opened the pathway between a complex set of "ancient" and "modern" histories.

Both its form – which is character driven rather than action driven – and its subject matter – which is personal as well as political – cohere to dispel any sense of easy closure. The film links viewers to a cycle of history played out ambiguously in the

stories of individual lives rather than entertaining them with a formulaic, incident-based drama.

Each of these films deals with what Jewett and Lawrence (2003) have termed the “Captain America complex”. In their recent book, *Captain America and the crusade against evil*, they argue that the post September 11 environment has been shaped both by the apocalyptic tradition of “zealous warfare” which has religious roots shared by Christians, Jews and Muslims and an American “civil religion” which has its roots in stories of comic and film “superheroes.” They point specifically to the long line of superheroes from the Lone Ranger to Captain America to Spider Man, who not only run a one man crusade against evil but who do this outside the existing structures of law and justice.

According to the authors the Captain America complex is a “bipolar form of civil religion that periodically blesses crusades against evil enemies, often adding the stamp of biblical authority, in the pursuit of peace.” They continue:

Since Captain America must always take the law into his own hands to rid the world of evil, this civil religion produces acute conflicts between the impulse for holy crusades and a commitment to the rule of law....Religion, in fact, particularly America's dominant Judeo-Christian tradition, has everything to do with the Captain America complex. Redemptive violence has an important place in the Bible's narratives of conquest, national security, and moral purification, and sits incoherently beside biblical messages of acceptance, coexistence, and love. (Jewett and Lawrence 2003a)

Bush's commitment to “rid the world of evil” clearly gains some of its potency from this deeply ingrained myth of American culture. The president as superhero is also an image that has been deployed by Bush and his advisers, most notably in the carefully staged *Top Gun* style arrival of the commander-in-chief on one of the aircraft carriers bringing home troops from the 2003 “victory” in Iraq.

Jewett and Lawrence relate another incident which further highlights the self styled heroics of this administration. To illustrate a largely dismissive cover story of the Bush administration's “Masters of the Universe” foreign policy, the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* commissioned a satirical

cover, which portrayed each of the key administration figures as an American superhero. Powell became Batman, Rice became Zena and leading them all was Bush as Rambo.

Daniel Coats, U.S. Ambassador to Germany, visited *Der Spiegel's* offices not to protest the cover but to report that the president was “flattered” at this depiction. Coats order 30 poster sized covers for the White House. Each of the cover stars wanted one. (Jewett and Lawrence 2003a)

Jewett and Lawrence remind readers that in *First Blood* John Rambo burns down his hometown law enforcement headquarters after killing several officers and national guardsmen. They note that, “Rambo's actions are triggered by his aching and inarticulate rage about how he is treated” and that the sequel, *First Blood II*, was released under the advertising slogan: “No Man, no Law, no War can stop him.” (Jewett and Lawrence 2003a)

## **Conclusions**

The apocalyptic myth, and its associated heroics, is apparent in President Bush’s evocation of a “crusade” against an “axis of evil” and in numerous pre and post 9/11 Hollywood films. But the same myth can also be recognised, in Zizek’s (2002:107) broader sense of an “authentic revolutionary state of emergency,” in the sites of resistance to such crusades against difference.

Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* is one obvious expression of such resistance. In many ways Moore’s urgency and determination, commonly read by his critics and the media in simplistic terms as “bias,” is both apocalyptic and anti-apocalyptic. Moore takes on the mantle of prophet and urges that we read the signs of the times and act to avert disaster. There is a tendency in Moore’s style to set up black and white scenarios that in effect mirror Bush’s own dualism. However his use of humour and irony create a more open text than any of Bush’s speeches.

In a less obvious way Hollywood blockbuster *Day After Tomorrow* also presents a very different apocalyptic vision. As distinct from other films in this genre, such as director Roland Emmerich’s previous apocalypse film *Independence Day*, this apocalypse is not averted. More significantly this apocalypse is not the product of an externalised alien “other” it is clearly portrayed as a result of a

human refusal to develop a sustainable relationship to nature. In *Independence Day* the President is a fighter pilot who leads the attack against the aliens. In *Day After Tomorrow*, the president is killed and the formally dismissive and arrogant Vice President (who bears a striking resemblance to current US VP Dick Cheney) is humbled in exile in the warmer climes of South America. He thanks the nations of the “third world” who have welcomed the exiles of the developed nations with generosity. Although, even in exile, there is an intrinsic power displayed in such a presidential world address this version of the apocalyptic story shows a world turned upside down with an as yet unfulfilled hint at the establishment of new and different power relations.

Elaine Pagels (2003) has pointed out that even the divisive language of good and evil links to a whole series of mythic meanings. She notes that many progressive social movements such as the fight for racial equality were firmly rooted in this discourse. For Pagels, a history of religions scholar with a speciality in the world of the early Christians, the language of good and evil is “an essential language that we use to interpret events”. But its current mobilisation and application to “whole blocks of people and groups of countries” by the Bush administration is being used to “shut down political discourse.” For Pagels this suggests an all or nothing drama. This drama precludes negotiation. The only end to such a story is the annihilation of one side and the victory of the other. (Pagels 2003)

Narratives of the apocalypse and the superhero that are currently being mobilised throughout western culture, but particularly in the United States, must be understood as polyvalent myths that form a complex network of intertextual storytelling. As with all myths they are subject to what Bird (2003) and Hall (1981) call the “active work” of cultural transformation and they will remain vital sites of contestation.

Berger (2000) has argued that apocalyptic narratives are key to understanding twentieth century history and culture; specifically, that the Holocaust became for many cultural producers a “revelatory, traumatic, apocalyptic fulcrum” (2000:391).

While it is still too early to make definitive judgments, indications are that September 11, and the ensuing war on terror will similarly be seen as the “revelatory, traumatic, apocalyptic fulcrum” of the

early 21<sup>st</sup> century. What kind of reworking these myths will undergo and how they will continue to be mapped, politically and culturally, is difficult to predict. As such these narratives require detailed ongoing research as they continue to change, evolve and interrelate.

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