

'BRING IT ON': THE APOCALYPSE OF GEORGE W. BUSH

Abstract

This article examines a number of cinematic, literary and journalistic texts in the context of what filmmaker 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 'The Captain America complex' by Jewett and Lawrence (2003a).

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 upright, its city grid 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.

September 11 has made filmmakers and audiences both more intrigued and more wary of apocalyptic scenarios. 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, 2003: 227)

The constant replay of the falling towers was only the first of a continuing cycle of repetitions that the events of September 11 set in 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 — that September 11 is still everywhere you look.

This article will examine a number of cinematic and journalistic texts in the context of what filmmaker Tom Tykwer calls the ‘aesthetic memory’ (Maher, 2002) 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 in which these myths relate to deeply embedded Western cultural narratives of the apocalyptic.

The apocalypse myth

Myth and ritual have been consistently used as paradigms to analyse journalism as cultural storytelling (Lule, 2001). They are also concepts that have been widely used in cinema and television studies, literary criticism and broader studies of popular culture (Coupe, 1997).

Media anthropologist Elizabeth Bird is 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 suggests 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)

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 seventeenth 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.

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 principal areas of postwar 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”.’ (2000: 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’ (Berger, 2000: 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’ (2000: 391), and much postmodern fiction is driven by ‘some revelatory catastrophe whose traumatic force reshapes all that preceded it and all that follows’ (2000: 392).

The events of September 11 have frequently been described in such a way as to be seen as ushering in a new and terrible era. But, as Slavoj Žižek notes, this is often an ‘empty gesture of saying something “deep” without really knowing what we want to say’ (2002: 46):

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’.

(Žižek, 2002: 107–8)

George W. Bush’s apocalyptic crusade

Ronald Reagan was, as one of his biographers put it, ‘hooked on Armageddon’; he 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.¹ I will merely note three aspects of Bush’s religious rhetoric which highlight an underlying apocalyptic worldview. First, and most obviously, Bush has defined the current ‘war on terrorism’ as a battle between ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Second, he believes we are living in unprecedented times that call for fundamentally new responses. Third, 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)

In off-the-cuff remarks to reporters on the White House lawn on 16 September, 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, 2001a)

After further questions, Bush went on to emphasise the radically new time, the new evil that had been ushered in by the New York attacks. Most disturbingly, he described his new war as a ‘crusade’ — a term with a blighted history for Muslim–Christian relations:

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 a while. (quoted in Salisbury, 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.’ (Klein, 2003)

The president’s unwavering belief in both his mission and its terms of engagement is drawn from a sense of divine mandate. Bush 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 Robison 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.

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 April 2004). 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 recently argued that there is very little that is 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-1980s:

It's expansionist — it's religious imperialism, if you will. And I think that remains his primary orientation ... [For Bush] the US is the new Israel as God's most favoured nation ... Wherever the US happens to advance something that he can call 'freedom', he thinks he's serving God's will.' (Lincoln, in Perlstein, 2004b)

However, the missionising impulse in the Acts of the Apostles is driven by a sense of the imminence of the sudden apocalyptic return of Jesus. The story of the ascension of Jesus into heaven narrated at the start of Acts (Acts 1:6–11) makes it 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. This theology of end-times and of empire is expanded dramatically in the final book of the Bible known both as *The Apocalypse* and *The Book of Revelation*. While most mainstream theologians interpret the events in the Book of Revelation as symbolic, a 2002 survey found that a staggering 59 per cent of Americans believed the events predicted in the Book of Revelation would actually occur in the future (Lampman, 2004).

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 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 rooted in the

concrete political situation of its readers and pre-existing Jewish and Greco-Roman apocalyptic literature. As she puts it, Revelation is dependent on the intertextual relations of speaker, audience, subject-matter and ‘rhetorical situation’ which creates a ‘plausibility structure’ (1991: 32) for its message. Its symbolic universe invites ‘imaginative participation’ (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. Perlstein (2004) reports that Christian pro-Israeli lobby group The Apostolic Congress has regular meetings with key Bush advisers. Lampman (2004) reports that such groups can mobilise huge email campaigns from their evangelical base in support of pro-Israeli policies.

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 himself may 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.

Although the pre-millennialists 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 many right-wing Christian groups work hard on behalf of the state of Israel,² it seems that it is only because the Jews are pawns in their larger end-game.

Hollywood, the superhero and war on terror

If the Biblical language of apocalypse, of good and evil, of final and decisive battles, ‘enduring freedom’ and ‘infinite justice’ has 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 Times’ arts columnist Frank Rich recently wrote that the Iraq war had already ‘barrelled through at least four movie plots’. There was the initial *High Noon* showdown with Saddam Hussein, followed by Bush’s ‘*Top Gun* victory jig’. Errol Morris’s *The Fog of War* provided historic comparison. Finally, Rich read Falluja as *Black Hawk Down* (Rich, 2004).

The Pentagon sought the advice of Hollywood screenwriters in the weeks after 9/11, to help ‘brainstorm’ possible terrorist scenarios (Jablon, 2001) Then, in November 2001, key Bush adviser 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. 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 (2001b), Rove is reported to have led discussion around a set of key themes that he suggested the film industry could help address. The themes include key Bush messages such as the anti-terrorism campaign as a war against evil and the terrorist attacks as an attack against civilisation that requires a global response. Rove is also said to have emphasised that there was ‘an opportunity to issue a call to service for Americans’ (CNN, 2001b).

An earlier comment by producer Lionel Chetwynd, one of the initiators of the Washington/Hollywood dialogue, gives an indication of how these general themes were fleshed out by some in the industry:

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 months immediately following the September 11 attacks (CNN, 2001c). 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 12 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 were governed, at least in part, by the terrorist attacks. In interviews, the stars and producers of these films made 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 talked up his Arnold Schwarzenegger revenge thriller as a ‘heartfelt’ film with ‘soul’ that, in spite of its many literally explosive moments, was actually anti-violence (CNN, 2002). 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 firefighter 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 firefighters, 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. (O'Hehir, 2002)

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 Somalis in *Black Hawk Down*: they are used only as visual background. 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 [evil-doers].' (Frum, 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 grip of the communists. He is a product both of his time and of his own youthful 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 advisers warned 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. America had to be cohesive and band together, he was told (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 pinpoint the critical issue surrounding the film's release:

It was made about events in the early 50s, 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 Schwarzenegger argued was a fantasy that promised closure, *The Quiet American* was disturbingly *open* to interpretation.

The post 9/11 image of the firefighter 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 (2003a) 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, 2003b)

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 Xena and leading them all was Bush as Rambo.

Daniel Coats, US 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 ordered 30 poster sized covers for the White House. Each of the cover stars wanted one. (Jewett and Lawrence, 2003b)

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, 2003b).

Anti-apocalypse

The apocalyptic myth, together with 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 Žižek'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 creates a more open text than any of Bush's speeches.

In a less obvious way, Hollywood blockbuster *The 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 with nature. In *Independence Day*, the president is a fighter pilot who leads the attack against the aliens. In *The Day After Tomorrow*, the president is killed and the formally dismissive and arrogant vice president (who bears a striking resemblance to current US vice president 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 address. This version of the apocalyptic story shows a world turned upside down with a hint at the possible establishment of new and different power relations.

Elaine Pagels has pointed out that even the divisive language of good and evil links to a diverse set 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 are 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, in Pagels and Gaddy 2003).

Conclusion

Myths are best understood as nodes at the centre of complex networks of interrelated stories. As intertextual narratives, myths act as 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.

Narratives of the apocalypse and the superhero that are currently being mobilised throughout Western culture, but particularly in the United States, must be understood in this way. As with all myths, they are subject to what Bird (2003) calls the ‘active work’ of cultural transformation, and they will remain vital sites of contestation. This article has attempted to map something of the narrative ecology of this emerging post-September 11 apocalypse myth.

Berger (2000) has argued that the apocalypse myth is key to understanding twentieth century history and culture — specifically, that particular events within this apocalyptic view of history, such as the Holocaust and the nuclear arms race, became key prisms for cultural production. 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’ (Berger, 2000: 391) of the early twenty-first 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.

Notes

- 1 This topic was dealt with extensively in the PBS program *The Jesus Factor*. For full transcripts, see: www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jesus. For newspaper articles dealing with this topic, see the list at: www.religionandpluralism.org/ANC_ArticleList.htm. For an academic analysis, see Maddox (2003).

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- 2 Perlstein (2004) reports that Christian pro-Israeli lobby group The Apostolic Congress has regular meetings with key Bush advisers. Lampman (2004) reports that such groups can mobilise huge email campaigns from their evangelical base in support of pro-Israeli policies.

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