Apocalypse now: popular eschatologies in news media, literature, film and television in a post September 11 world.

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"I say to myself that the earth is extinguished,
though I never saw it lit."

– Clov in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*.

Study overview

The study will explore the relationships between the interlocking fields of news media, literature, film and television drama. While each of these cultural fields are defined by their particular forms and inherent possibilities, their boundaries are permeable and each functions as part of the network of sense making structures available to postmodern "nomadic subjects" (Braidotti 1994; Brown 1996).

Specifically the study will focus on an analysis of eschatological narratives of apocalypse in a series of case studies from each of these genres.

Although it will not focus exclusively, or primarily, on texts that explicitly evoke the events of the September 11 attack on the World Trade Centre, this event and the subsequent "war on terrorism" provide a compelling contemporary political and cultural context for an examination of apocalyptic narratives.

Research objectives

1. To develop a model of journalism as popular culture, which reads it intertextually with other forms of cultural production.

2. To further develop an effective model of myth as a heuristic device for journalism and cultural studies, building on my previous work (O'Donnell 2003, 2004a; 2004b).

3. To delineate a contemporary typology of the apocalypse myth.

4. To develop a set of case-study readings, consistent with the theoretical model outlined, of the apocalyptic in contemporary journalism, film, television and literature.

Journalism, cinema and popular culture

Most of the research that has been carried out on journalism and popular culture to date has focused on 'tabloidisation' (Sparks & Dahlgren 1992; Langer 1998; Lumby 1999; Sparks and Tulloch 2000) and its various critiques. Even the more sophisticated of these studies tend to focus on the problematics of the popular and attendant influences on changing practices within journalism. Such arguments tend to be framed by traditional democratic theory about civic culture and the public sphere (Sparks 2000: 28-29).

Hartley (1996) has attempted to develop a model of journalism seen as part of a "mediasphere" that includes a variety of popular media products ranging from the serious to the tabloid. While his notion of journalism as the "sense making practice of modernity" is a useful one, most of his analysis is limited to an intertextual analysis of journalistic forms rather than an analysis of linkages between journalism and other popular cultural forms such as film and television drama.

In an introduction to a collection of essays on tabloid journalism Zelizer (2000:x-xi) proposes that the link between journalism and other cultural forms is actually central to the debate about journalism and it's public:

> Tabloids fill a need for moralistic tales and gossip, for stories of human gore and human interest, for sensational and intrigue ridden narratives about both everyday life and the unreachable world of celebrities. Those needs emerge as relevant in every other arena of cultural production: fiction cinema, poetry art. Why then are we so outraged when they surface in journalism?....tabloids offer mainstream news both a way to examine itself and to come to grips with the impulses motivating the world at large. They offer journalism a bridge back to the public and the public sensibility which it is supposed to serve.

Numerous works within cinema studies have attempted to look at narratives of race, (Shapiro 1999; Denizen 2002) gender (Tasker 1998; Wood 1998) and sexuality (Lang 2002). While such studies obviously engage with the evolving social narrative around these issues, as well as their specific encoding in film, few studies have

explicitly explored the interrelationships between journalistic representations of such social narratives and cinematic representations.

Barbara Creed's (2003) recent analysis of the TV news coverage of September 11 from the perspective of cinema studies is one move toward an intertextual analysis of film and news media. Another study, which makes suggestive links between public and cinematic representations, is Rogin's (1987) fascinating "*Ronald Reagan*, the movie". Rogin argues that there is an uncanny slippage between the image created by the actor during Reagan's 1940s film career and the image he cultivated and actions he took as president in the 1980s.

Joseph Natoli (1994) in an eclectic study of early nineties American culture interweaves analysis of news events and film in a series of reflective essays. He writes:

> I crisscross between the lived experiences (I scour headlines, listen to the talk shows, follow the campaign) of our present culture and popular film in the hope of bring to a consumable and respondable level some of what haunts us. The greater the box office success of a film the greater the chance today that this film is trading in haunting material....I see narratives of art, including popular film, not ordering but putting into play the accidentals and contingencies – the disorder – of lived experience. (1994:4)

Similarly, in a cultural history of the American sixties subtitled: "movies, media and the mythology of the sixties," Hoberman (2003) argues that electoral politics, mass media, and popular culture combined in a "new totality – an additional atmosphere, a second nature, the dream life of the nation." (2003:xiv)

> American movies, abetted by the TV shows, news weeklies, Top 40 songs, bestsellers, polls, advertising campaigns, and other scenarios that define the modern polity, produced a social mythology, or realm of shared material fantasy....American democracy was appreciated as a form of theatre in which political leaders assumed the symbolic weight of movie stars, headline celebrities and other media phantasms. (2003:xiv)

My study aims to build on this body of work in order to explicate a contemporary social mythology that delineates some of the "haunting material" that can be found at the intersection of cinema and politics, news and film, the fantastic and the everyday. Notions of narrative and myth will be used to analyse this intertextual cultural storytelling.

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).

Lule (2001: 7) notes that research on myth and news dates from the 1960s; that it became very popular in the 1970s and 1980s but, apart from a few studies, it waned in the 1990s. However Lule's (2001) book length study and a recent special edition of *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* (Vol 79, No 2, Summer 2002), devoted to journalism and myth, is indicative of a recent revival of interest in the usefulness of this concept.

In a classic treatment of myth and news Bird & Dardenne (1988:71) wrote: "news stories, like myths, do not 'tell it like it is' but rather, 'tell it like it means'. Thus news is a particular kind of mythological narrative with its own symbolic codes that are recognized by its audience."

I have previously argued (O'Donnell 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.

Recent work on myth and journalism (Lule 2001; Kitch 1999) concentrates on fitting contemporary stories to traditional categories rather than creating a dialogue, which would allow a two-way interrogation. One of the dangers in this type of analysis is to merely point to a historical mythic precedent as explanatory without examination of the ways the archetypal has been

transformed in relation to current conditions. This is to ignore the ideological function of myth.

While Barthes' (1972) ideological perspective on myth is an instructive counterpoint to such approaches, as Coupe (1997:156) has pointed out, Barthes' ideological emphasis is both his weakness as well as his strength.

Barthes' analysis of everything from haircuts to wrestling to wine are deft, witty and original, and his essential point: that bourgeois ideology sets itself up – through a range of cultural forms – as natural rather than constructed, is impressively made but in a sense ultimately catches itself in the same game. It is a form of "demythologisation propounding its own myth of mythlessness" (Coupe 1997:157). The collapse of myth into ideology not only forecloses any sense of dynamism that the concept might hold but also forecloses on the very term itself as a viable independent analytic concept.

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).

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)

Bird argues the need for multi-site ethnographic audience studies, which would attempt to conceptualise and understand the emergence of broad intertextual "mediascapes". However she also argues that more traditional text-based studies can play a part in this project if they pursue a "thick" description, which looks towards the place of the text in everyday life.

> The holistic, cultural focus of anthropology, reach[es] out from the story itself toward a set of connections between it and notions that are simmering in the culture at large. In this respect although the analysis starts with the text, I believe such a "thick" contextual exploration also sheds light on the relationship between text and reception. (Bird 2003:162)

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).

The ten points below previously outlined in my MA thesis (O'Donnell 2004a) are my attempt to develop a "definitional matrix" for a study of myth in journalism and popular culture. This model will be further developed and used as a theoretical fulcrum for my analysis of the apocalyptic in journalism and other forms of cultural production.

1. Myths are meaning seeking narratives that grow in narrative power through repetition, evolution and adaptation.

2. Myths bring into dialogue past, present and emerging paradigms; they deploy 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.

3. Individual myths are best understood as a node at the centre of a complex network of inter-related stories; as broad, intertextual narratives, myths can act as literary organising devices, which bring different, sometimes contradictory, textual elements into dialogue with one another.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. Myth is a pervasive narrative form: myths and mythic references can be identified in common speech, literary works, religious texts, journalism and other popular cultural forms.

7. Narratives that are not themselves myths can draw on mythic themes and serve mythic functions through strategies of allusion and explicit invocation.

8. Different myths and mythic references function with different degrees of emotional and effective power; they can be used as a simple type of narrative shorthand ('Steve Waugh is an Australian hero') or as a powerful life-changing story ('I've been saved by Jesus').

9. Sets of interlocking mythic stories can act together to form a cohesive mythology, which can work as a powerful ideological framework that underwrites either progressive or regressive directions for personal and cultural change.

10. Attempts to mobilise particular mythic forms can be either intentional or unintentional, however their ultimate interpretation and use is cultural, resulting from unpredictable text audience interactions; any particular interpretation therefore is never completely foreclosed and must be recognised as a possible reading.

The apocalyptic in contemporary culture

Apocalypse – Greek for revelation – is the name given to the final book of the Christian bible. It is a highly symbolic end time narrative that predicts a cataclysmic final battle between the forces of good and evil. This apocalyptic story often has millennial dimensions, which have brought it to the fore at critical junctures of historic transition.

The apocalypse myth has a long lineage in a variety of historic 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).

The apocalyptic is a 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 events 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 Slavojov 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.

In a time of particular crisis, and in one way or another the post-September 11 world must be recognised as a time of crisis, the apocalyptic is easily mobilised, as fantasy, as mission, as diversion. The apocalyptic myth is apparent in President Bush's evocation of a "crusade" against an "axis of evil" but the same myth can also be recognised, in Zizek's broader sense of an "authentic revolutionary state of emergency," in the sites of resistance to such crusades against difference.

This study will attempt to map the complex ways that the apocalyptic myth is being played out in contemporary western cultures.

Case studies

Case Study 1: *The Apocalypse of G.W. Bush*

In this chapter I will approach the figure of Bush and his relationship to the apocalyptic from several angles. Firstly I will look at the key motifs in his public speeches and their relationship

to the language of biblical apocalypse. Secondly I will situate this signature Bush imagery in the context of two contemporary image systems, firstly the burgeoning market of popular evangelical fiction as represented by the *Left Behind* series and secondly the Hollywood film as represented by a number of films released in the wake of the September 11 attacks. I will then look at Bush's relationship to two counter-apocalyptic figures, "peace mum" Cindy Sheehan who spent August 2005 camped on the roadside outside Bush's Texas ranch and secondly Jed Bartlet whose two-term fictional TV presidency has coincided with Bush's own. Bush's response to the second major national catastrophe of his presidency, Hurricane Katrina is also considered as a decisive moment in the evolution of his story and his relationship to the apocalyptic.

By approaching the presidency of George W Bush in such a circuitous fashion a series of images, coincidences and convergences emerge which allow us to map a set of multimodal mythic clusters that have been mobalised around the figure of this president. In the concluding section of this case study I will argue that the Bush presidency has remediated "the war president" through an engagement with a broad apocalyptic narrative and that this has had strategic importance for his administration and has been a key way that his leadership has been constructed in the sphere of public imagination.

Case Study 2: *Jack Bauer Syndrome and apocalyptic masculinity*

This chapter focuses on the multimodal mythic cluster of the smart warrior. *24*'s Jack Bauer, the archetypal post 9/11 remediation of the American outlaw hero, is the embodiment of the smart warrior narrative. Jack is a highly charged contemporary mythic character who exists in powerful relationship to real world and fictional figures from both the present and the past. Just as Rambo and other film heroes of the 80s existed in a symbiotic relationship to Reaganism, the heroics of Jack Bauer exist in a particular relationship to George Bush's war on terror and the production of a technologically-mediated surveillance warfare. I will explore Jack Bauer as a "no-compromises" hero in the context of the "Torture Debate" that has seen the Bush administration engulfed in a series of scandals over the treatment of detainees at Abu Ghraib Guantanamo Bay and a secret network of overseas prisons. Bauer

will be analysed in the context of an examination of apocalyptic masculinities and apocalyptic bodies.

Case Study 3: *The earth has a fever: Al Gore as counter-apocalyptic prophet*

In this case study I will look at the figure of Al Gore as a counter-apocalyptic prophet. Although at first Gore's discourse may seem to fit the model of the "American Jeremiad" (Bercovitch 1978) I will argue that although this is part of the discursive space that he occupies it is the remediation of this discourse that is more significant. I will analyse Gore's *Inconvenient Truth* in the context of Frederick Buell's (2003) typology of environmental crisis discourse as moving from apocalypse to "dwelling-in". I will argue that Gore through both his personal story and his campaigning has become not just a counter-apocalyptic prophet but an "anti-Bush." Gore's language of healing will be contrasted with Bush's language of war. Gore's engagement with climate issues will also be analysed in the context of a set of multimodal mythic clusters emerging from two recent films that can also be read as counter-apocalyptic environmental films: *The Day After Tomorrow* and *Sunshine*. In very different ways both films contrast a psychological or mystical narrative of personal journey with a scientific narrative of disaster tracking and intervention. Both Gore and these two films are involved in the remediation of both fate and hope.

Case Study 4: *Angels of the Apocalypse: AIDS, gay marriage and the threshold of revelation*

The fourth case study will look at Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* as adapted for HBO by Mike Nichols. Kushner's play was released in 1992 and is widely regarded as a groundbreaking representation of the HIV epidemic among gay men in the USA. Thomas Long (2004) has already explored the play's trope of "millennialist ecstasy" in his study of apocalypticism and AIDS my reading will draw on his analysis and others who have discussed Kushner's compelling phrase from the play: "The threshold of reveleation". However I want to read *Angels* in its contemporary (apocalyptic) setting. The Nichols' film was screened on Australian television in the same week as Ronald Reagan's death and amidst a rising controversy world-wide over the legislation of gay marriage. Thus this case study will read the film with the ghost of Reagan and the future promise of domesticity in mind.

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