Visibility, Media Events and Convergence Culture: Struggles for the Meaning of 9/11

18

Kevin Glynn

> *It matters profoundly, we are convinced, that the horrors of September 11 were designed above all to be visible . . . .*
>
> *September's terror . . . was premised on the belief (learned from the culture it wishes to annihilate) that a picture is worth a thousand words . . . .*
>
> *At the level of the image (here is premise number one) the state is vulnerable; and that level is now fully part of, necessary to, the state's apparatus of self-reproduction. Terror can take over the image-machinery for a moment—and a moment, in the timeless echo chamber of the spectacle, may now eternally be all there is—and use it to amplify, reiterate, accumulate the sheer visible happening of defeat.*
>
> (Boal et al. 2005: 25–8)

Introduction

Media events have become important sites of political activity, affective engagement and cultural struggle. They involve (often spectacular) visibility, the articulation and circulation of meaning, and the formation of powerful discourses and counterdiscourses. The imaging technologies at the heart of media events shape our encounters with place and our geopolitical imaginaries. This chapter explores the realm of visual media events through the lens of the attacks of September 11, 2001. These attacks were profoundly mediated, and they generated complex reactions and ongoing political contestation across a diverse array of media realms. I aim to use this event to demonstrate the complicated and contingent politics of visual media at a time when media apparatuses have multiplied and saturated the world as never

K. Glynn (✉)
School of English and Media Studies, Massey University Wellington, Aotearoa, New Zealand
e-mail: k.t.glynn@massey.ac.nz

before. In the age of global visual cultures and media convergence, images and discourses spill interactively across digitalized, networked platforms and a multitude of screens including televisions, computers, tablets and smart phones. The new media geographies to which they give shape become invested with affects and meanings as different groups and agents struggle to promote particular modes of sensemaking and political interests. These geographies define a terrain upon which dominant forces and interests work to establish and stabilize discursive control, but encounter image insurgencies and alternative knowledges that disrupt and contest such control through the disarticulation and rearticulation of its visual and narrative elements.[1]

I will first sketch the broad historical context of contemporary media events through a brief consideration of the centrality of vision and visuality within modernity and postmodernity, which has often been characterized as a state of image saturation and visual overload. I will then briefly consider the affective intensity and complexity of the 9/11 iconography, which mirrored familiar patterns from extant Hollywood templates, and note its relationship to the emergence of an increasingly convergent mediasphere marked by new technological mobilities and interactivities. Finally, I will turn to John Fiske's account of "democratic totalitarianism" and theory of media events as sites of discursive contestation between forces of domination and countervailing, democratizing energies. In the case of the 9/11 attacks, one of the most interesting formations of alternative discursivity and popular skepticism toward officialdom is that of the so-called 9/11 Truth movement, which alleges some degree of US government complicity with or involvement in the attacks. The 9/11 Truth movement has found resonance with some of the most historically marginalized elements of US society (African Americans, for example), and raises interesting questions about the production and circulation of alternative discursive and knowledge formations on the terrain of media convergence. I will conclude with a few closing remarks about the emergent geographies and topographies of the new convergent media environment.

Modernity and the Visual

The modern age gives a special place to visuality, to human vision, and to the process of visualizing, and this characteristic of modernity has played a prominent role in shaping the contemporary world as we experience it. Hence the defining philosophical movement of early modernity was significantly called the Enlightenment, a designation that highlights the importance of vision and visuality

---

[1]I intend "articulation" in the theoretical sense this term has acquired within cultural studies, where the simultaneity and conjoint productivity of its dual meanings (*contingent linkage* and *expression*) are given emphasis. When signifying elements or agents are contingently linked (articulated) to one another, this linkage generates particular meaning effects (articulations) and mobilizes particular actions and agents (to which these meaning effects are in turn articulated or contingently linked). See Grossberg (1996).

as central metaphors within the modern epistemologies of the West, for which the "mind's eye" becomes a central figure. Early modern philosophers such as Descartes and Locke placed visuality at the apex of our senses, where it stood as a badge of rationalism and clarity of thought (see Jay 1993: 85). Hence we refer to important thinkers as "visionaries" or "luminaries," we describe ways of understanding as "worldviews," we talk about the importance of "keeping things in perspective," of not "losing sight" of our objectives and priorities. When we're looking for solutions, the first thing we do is try to "shed some light on the problem." When we achieve mutual understanding with another we often proclaim "ah yes, I see," or "I get the picture." The predilection for the visual, which Jay (1993) and others call modernity's "ocularcentrism," impelled Martin Heidegger (1977: 115–154) to characterize the modern epoch as "The Age of the World Picture." In contrast, medieval thinkers such as Thomas Acquinas maintained a hermeneutic of suspicion in relation to the visual (Mirzoeff 1999: 5). Heidegger writes that "a world picture . . . does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as a picture . . . . The world picture does not change from an earlier medieval one into a modern one, but rather the fact that the world becomes picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age" (p. 129–30, quoted in Mirzoeff, p. 5). Calling our attention to the distinctive modern nexus of visuality and subjecthood, Heidegger (1977: 131) observed that the ancient Greeks characteristically understood "man" as "the one who is looked upon by that which is" (though he went on to note that Plato's allegory of the cave foreshadowed the modern thinking that would not become dominant until more than a thousand years later).

Michel de Certeau (1984: 187) states that while premodern cultures required of their members a belief in what cannot be seen, contemporary ones insist upon accession to all that can. He argues that technologically driven processes of visualization and the forms of narration they entail thereby become core means for the creation of "facts" and so for the production and regulation of what we take to be "real" in contemporary times. For "what can you oppose to the facts?" he asks. "You can only give in." Hence, "the fabrication of simulacra . . . provides the means of producing believers," and "the establishment of the real" becomes "the most visible form of our contemporary dogmas" (de Certeau 1984: 186–7). Similarly, according to Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999: 6), the tendency to visualize the world and to conceptualize human understanding in terms of vision has in contemporary times become something of a compulsion. "Human experience is now more visual and visualized than ever before," he writes, so that "seeing is much more than believing. It is not just a part of everyday life, it *is* everyday life" (Mirzoeff: 1, emphasis added). As a consequence, contemporary societies invest astonishing levels of energy and resources into making things visible that otherwise wouldn't be. Such investments both symptomatize and intensify ocularcentrism, as an ever more dizzying array of new media technologies work overtime to deliver images of the insides of bodies, the furthest reaches of the galaxy, and the diverse spaces and surfaces of our planet, which are continually scanned, monitored and subjected to the power of vision by increasingly sophisticated surveillance and

remote sensing technologies, whether for purposes of investigation, examination, security-enhancement, reconnaissance, or entertainment. In the process, the development of such image-generating apparatuses and practices reveals that the drive to extend our "world picture" knows few boundaries; this drive is transforming our existing media environments in fundamental ways as it swamps distinctions such as public/private, interior/exterior, and surface/depth in orgiastic "rituals of transparency" and ecstasies of communication (Baudrillard 1988).

For example, in 2003 the New York Times reported that the Pentagon is working on a radar-based surveillance device designed to identify individuals from 500 ft away on the basis of how they walk, using methods of "gait recognition analysis" and "3-D body tracking" under development at MIT. A US Congressional report subsequently confirmed that the goal of the surveillance program "is to identify humans as unique individuals . . . at a distance, at any time of the day or night, during all weather conditions, with noncooperative subjects, possibly disguised" (Dowd 2003). In short, this program dreams of making individual identity visible, even at a significant distance and under low-visibility conditions, and thus illustrates the use of visualization as a technique of security. While on one level such imagistic expansion of our contemporary "world picture" constitutes the development of new ways to exert and consolidate social control by intensifying the mechanisms of surveillance and reifying the identities it thereby establishes and catalogues (see, e.g., Andrejevic 2007), on another level the dialectics of this expansion lend to it a self-destabilizing dimension. Lisa Parks (2005: 183) notes that the multiplication and refinement of satellite imaging technologies, for instance, "amplifies the possibility of alienation or difference within the field of the televisual," as in "the haunting possibility that events on the earth could always be seen and encoded from anOther (nonhuman) point of view," as well as "by virtue of the satellite's own limitations in representing events on the earth," which "is, of course, experienced all the time in unseen, unknown, and untold ways." Along similar lines, Mirzoeff (1999: 8) notes that contemporary levels of image saturation, overload and hypervisuality in a world where pictures are increasingly made to circulate everywhere instantaneously, mean that we have surpassed the concept of the "world picture" in our development of a constantly swirling global image flow. We have thus entered "an era in which visual images and the visualizing of things that are not necessarily visual has accelerated so dramatically that the global circulation of images has become an end in itself, taking place at high speed across the Internet."

In order to stand-out amidst such seemingly self-justifying and self-perpetuating image flows (Mirzoeff 1999), any particular picture or set of pictures must work extremely hard to capture peoples' overloaded attentions. The images associated with the attacks of September 11, 2001 were supremely effective in this regard, having been engineered for maximum visual impact and constituting something like a two-billion gigawatt jolt to the global image circulatory system. At the World Trade Center, the timing and sequencing of the attacks was in itself enough to ensure their spectacular instantaneous global visibility. The impact of American Airlines Flight 11 with the Center's North Tower, more than 15 minutes prior to United Airlines Flight 175's collision with the South Tower, created an absolute guarantee

that live video cameras would be in place, in abundance, and trained precisely on the second target in advance of its strike, and that the event would therefore be instantaneously visible—live and in real-time—from any position on the planet capable of electronic image reception. The attacks were in this sense produced by techniques of visualization as much as ones of terrorist violence, thus generating an image-event characterized by a strategy of visual terror, or of terrorizing visuality.

The Sublime Power of the Image

Such terrorizing visuality is reminiscent of the postmodern sublime and the technological sublime, which deploy excess, alterity and allegory to "represent the unrepresentable" and thus to express the awesome "complexity and horrors" of an age characterized by blurred categories and multiple boundary implosions (Kellner 2003: 141). The postmodern and the technological sublime build upon traditional Kantian notions of a "strong and equivocal" aesthetic through which, paradoxically, "pleasure derives from pain" (Lyotard 1984: 77) and powerful dread combines with longing in its exploitation of the "sensual immediacy" of the visual (Mirzoeff 1999: 15–6; Freedberg 1991). As Parks (2005: 176) writes, images of the attacks enlisted "the multiple discursive modalities of the televisual . . . in full force," as "commercial entertainment, public education, scientific observation, and military monitoring collided in . . . coverage that lasted not just for days but months," notably disrupting various familiar networks, circuitries and rhythms of everyday life.

If the sublime technological power conveyed through the live, instantaneous and global dispersion of images of the attacks combined pleasure with horror for some of their audiences, that pleasure led ultimately, and perhaps by way of the death drive and whatever requisite detours involving the serpentine and circuitous pathways of displacement and repression, to "the aesthetics of destruction" associated with visions of "wreaking havoc, making a mess" (Sontag 2004 [1965]: 102). Susan Sontag (ibid.: 101) notes that science fiction films (along with those of certain other genres) provide a kind of "sensuous elaboration" that is unavailable in written texts, whereby "one can participate in the fantasy of living, through one's own death and more, the death of cities, the destruction of humanity itself." According to Sontag (ibid.: 103), the spectacular and increasing "visual credibility" of contemporary films indexes the extent to which "modern historical reality has greatly enlarged the imagination of disaster, and the protagonists—perhaps by the very nature of what is visited upon them—no longer seem wholly innocent." Such dynamics of the destructive image complicate and potentially intensify the critical charge associated with events such as the hypervisual 9/11 strikes against central icons of US imperialism and global finance.

As Slavoj Žižek (2002b: 15–6) would write in a short piece that circulated widely through cyberspace in the days immediately following 9/11,

> to us, corrupted by Hollywood, the landscape and the shots we saw of the collapsing towers could not but be reminiscent of the most breathtaking scenes in big catastrophe productions.

> [. . .] Not only were the media bombarding us all the time with talk about the terrorist threat; this threat was also obviously libidinally invested—just remember the series of movies from *Escape From New York* to *Independence Day*. That is the rationale of the often-mentioned association of the attacks with the Hollywood disaster movies: the unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise. [Žižek 2002b: 15–6].

Or, as Jean Baudrillard similarly put it,

> the fact that we have dreamt of this event, that everyone without exception has dreamt of it—because no one can avoid dreaming of the destruction of any power that has become hegemonic to this degree—is unacceptable to the Western moral conscience. Yet it is a fact, and one which can indeed be measured by the emotive violence of all that has been said and written in the effort to dispel it.
>
> At a pinch, we can say that they did it, but we wished for it. . . . Without this deep-seated complicity, the event would not have had the resonance it has, and in their symbolic strategy the terrorists doubtless know that they can count on this unavowable complicity. [Baudrillard 2003: 5–6.]

Notably, for Baudrillard (2003), the universality of complicit desire for this "'mother' of all events" (p. 4) does not require us to posit a death drive at its base. Rather, he asserts that the "countless disaster movies [that] bear witness to this fantasy" register instead an all-inclusive urge "to reject any system . . . as it approaches perfection or omnipotence," a universal "allergy to any definitive order" or power (pp. 6–7). This of course is not to negate the difference between the experience of such images in fiction/fantasy and that of their "real" counterparts generated by the 9/11 attacks, nor to deny the incredibly shocking and disturbing force of the latter. Geoff King argues that as the 9/11 images were repeatedly reedited and replayed in the days following the attacks, they were increasingly transmitted through familiar codes associated with Hollywood continuity editing and thus rendered less disturbing and perhaps even reassuring by their subjection to processes of ordering and control. In this way, television's treatment of the 9/11 images both provoked and assuaged intense shock and disruption (King 2005).

The San Francisco authorial collective that calls itself Retort (Boal et al. 2005: 26) suggests that the long-term geopolitical consequences of the worldwide circulation of images of a global superpower "afflicted" as on 9/11 are ultimately unpredictable. The animation of alternative possible eventualities depends in part upon the contingencies whereby such images are laden with meaning through their various subsequent discursive activations or, in other terms, subjected to the practices of semiotic struggle, which is why Žižek (2002a) exhorts us "precisely now, when we are dealing with the raw Real of a catastrophe," to "bear in mind the ideological and fantasmatic coordinates which determine its perception." But whatever narrative grooves may have been historically prepared in advance for the arrival of the attacks have also, through historical processes, been constituted in diverse and contested ways. For Žižek's "ideological and fantasmatic coordinates" are, as Boal et al. (2005: 26) put it, "bound up, in the longer term, with circuits of sociability—patterns of belief and desire, levels of confidence, degrees of identification with the good life of the commodity" and so forth, which are in their

Fig. 18.1 The Devil in the Towers
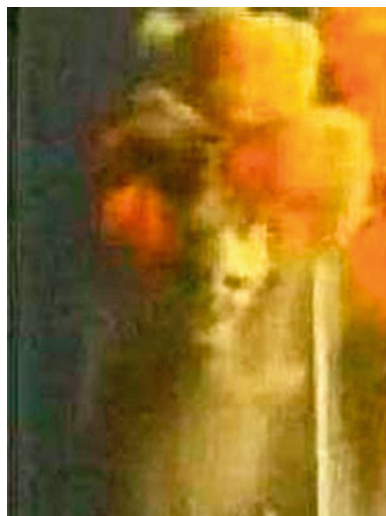
turn "aspects of the social imaginary still (always, interminably) being put together." They are, that is to say, always in process, subject to the conflicts and struggles of sociality, and thereby constituted in heterogeneous and contingent forms.

A key consequence of these struggles, heterogeneities and contingencies is that images of the attacks on the Twin Towers are widely available for a range of alternative discursive practices and enactments. For example, consider the famous "Satan in the smoke" (Phillips 2011) images that circulated widely on TV, in newspapers and through the Internet, such as Fig. 18.1, which was taken from CNN's live coverage of the attacks (a similar image, taken by photojournalist Mark Phillips, can be found online at http://www.guardianangel.in/ga/268-D-Obituary-Images-of-the-World-Trade-Center-fire-reveal-the-face-of-Satan.html).[2]

This "face of Satan" image is fundamentally ambivalent with regard to its capacity for insertion into alternative and competing discursive structures. Its sensual immediacy and richly polysemic potential to convey powerfully condensed meanings and ideologies is thus available for semiotic and affective mobilization by different social formations and struggles. On the one hand, for instance, this picture of the doomed World Trade Center (WTC) can be readily articulated to well-established Orientalist discourses that construct a racialized opposition between the wondrous achievements of Western civilization and the wicked barbarity of a demonic Other bent on bringing about its demise, all of which is registered in this and similar images of a spectacular yet ultimately fragile architectural grandeur under assault from the embodiment of absolute evil. Mark Phillips reports that he received more than 30,000 mostly emotionally laden messages after the widespread

---

[2]The CNN footage containing Fig. 18.1 is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3nLbc_8wfM.

publication of his "Satan in the smoke" photograph. Some told Phillips that he "had been put on the earth to take this photo and that the photo showed who was really behind the attack" (Phillips 2011: n.p.). One wrote, for instance, that

> if I were you, I would feel privileged (unfortunately) that the Lord used you to shed "the light on" darkness. . . . He used your picture to stir up a lot of Americans, Christian and non-Christian, as to who was really behind this whole traumatic event. . . . We have become so complacent to the fact that there really is a devil loose on this earth and you better believe he was behind this whole thing! The faith of Islam is rebellion towards God that goes way back and what better way to divide people on this earth than to use "religion." [Quoted in Phillips 2011: n.p.]

On the other hand, Fig. 18.1 and similar images can likewise be mobilized within a very different set of discursive practices that associate the WTC with global financial hegemony, whose true face is brought to the fore only upon the breach of its superficial facades. Thus, the Catholic website "Guardian Angel" asks,

> don't these photos of Satan at the World Trade Center catastrophe tell us that the current seat of Satan's power is the World Trade Center? Don't these photos depict Satan being awakened from his hiding place in the World Trade Center? For it is the international bankers who operate from Fed, the CFR and the World Trade Center who create first, second and third world debt. Usury according to the Bible is Satan's method for enslaving the world under his priesthood, the accountants and bankers of the world (IMF, World Bank Group, WTO).[3]

Hence the visuality that is central to modernity is a site of contestation between groups engaged in discursive practices that promote competing understandings of the world and thus advance different social and political interests. This constitutes a *politics of representation* that comprises an important part of the terrain on which the meanings of place and control over space are struggled for. Therefore, the struggle to articulate images to one set of discursive practices or another is an extremely important one within the broader politics of a hypervisual and convergent global media culture (which constitutes, moreover, an increasingly contingent and open-ended cultural-political terrain).

Cultures of Media Convergence

My use of the concept of convergence here is intended to include the various levels of expanding interconnective practices that have become associated with the term in recent media studies (see especially Jenkins 2008; also Meikle and Young 2012). Hence convergence entails geographical, technological, social and political dimensions, as consolidating systems of top-down control intersect with the increasingly interconnected yet multivalent and participatory practices and emergent mobilities of grassroots media users, giving rise to new forms, levels and degrees

---

[3]Available at http://www.guardianangel.in/ga/268-D-Obituary-Images-of-the-World-Trade-Center-fire-reveal-the-face-of-Satan.html.

of transmediation. Convergence here also entails then the strange complicities and intersections noted above between, for example, Hollywood cinema audiences and Islamic fundamentalists (just as it entails the circumstance whereby in some cases these two identities are in fact the same convergent one). As Jenkins (2008: 3) notes, "convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" and across different media platforms. Convergence brings cultural consumption and production together in ways that mobilize synergistic new regimes of "collective intelligence," which operate on the principle that, although no individual can possess complete knowledge, all have access to some; therefore, resource-pooling and task distribution across a broad base of people with unique and distinctive skills can generate alternative sources of media power (Jenkins 2008: 4). In an environment of intensifying media-cultural convergence, the field of potential discursive articulations into which images enter is a markedly expansive one. Thus, in relation to 9/11, as we'll see, new knowledge formations have exploited the affordances associated with media convergence to generate and share forms of collective (counter)intelligence regarding the nature and perpetrators of the attacks.

Jenkins (2008: 1–2) cites the case of Dino Ignacio, a US high school student who playfully created a photomontage that depicted Bert from *Sesame Street* cavorting with Osama bin Laden for his "Bert is Evil" website. As a consequence, an anti-American activist in Bangladesh wound up plastering images of Bert (and bin Laden) on placards and t-shirts that were distributed for use by marching protestors in numerous Middle Eastern countries. When global cable news networks transmitted the images of Bert and the protesters, *Sesame Street*'s producers were outraged at the apparent tastelessness of this IP infringement, which in turn led tech savvy observers to create new websites associating more *Sesame Street* characters with Al-Qaeda. Thus, "from his bedroom, Ignacio sparked an international controversy. His images crisscrossed the world, sometimes on the backs of commercial media, sometimes via grassroots media. And, in the end, he inspired his own cult following" (Jenkins 2008: 2). Here, media mobilities, images, discourses, platforms, connectivities, far-flung social collectives, political constituencies, articulations and complicities, combine and combust in ways that are anything but predictable and that challenge traditional ways of understanding power, control, and meaning production in media culture.

"Democratic Totalitarianism," Media Events and Image Insurgency

John Fiske (1998) has noted an expanding regime of "democratic totalitarianism" in the US that operates most intensively around racial difference and whose core attributes include rampant technologized surveillance, escalated policing and "appeals to moral totalism." Under such conditions, the power-bearing dimensions of visuality are exerted asymmetrically across racially differentiated populations. Fiske characterizes this social environment as "democratic totalitarianism" because

its capacity to exert control depends upon the extent to which its key techniques of power can be operationalized "underneath the structures of democracy" (p. 69). For example, in November 2000, less than a year prior to the 9/11 attacks, the new millennium threw up its first major media megaspectacle: the intensively racialized Florida election debacle that swept Bush and Cheney into the White House by 537 votes, standing on the backs of tens of thousands of eligible African American would-be voters who were purged from the state's digital electoral rolls when a private computer firm hired by Jeb Bush falsely designated them to be convicted felons (Palast 2006: 240–6). Moreover, on election day, there were reports of the intimidating use of police roadblocks near polling places in Black neighborhoods of Miami, and seven whistle-blowers from the GOP-connected Sequoia Voting Systems, Inc., would reveal in 2007 that defective ballots designed to produce "hanging chads" were deliberately manufactured and shipped only to Palm Beach County, a large, heavily Democratic district with a significant nonwhite population (Glynn 2009: 229, 232). Thus would commence a decade that was soon to yield an even more disruptive media mega-event that would provide the basis and justification for manifold enunciations of moral totalism and media spectacle, and myriad extensions of imperializing surveillant, policing and war-making powers that reached across geographical space and multiple axes of social difference while extending the gulf between the haves and have-nots to levels unseen in the US since the Great Depression, and perhaps since the Gilded Age of the late nineteenth century Robber Barons.

In *Media Matters*, Fiske (1996) explores the characteristics of media events and their relationships to the complex currents of meaning that comprise contemporary media cultures. Updating Raymond Williams (1997), Fiske argues that a media culture can be likened to a river of discourses that includes dominant, residual and emergent streams that jostle, contest and unsettle one another. A calm surface may at times mask and belie the churning forces and complexities below, though unexpected turbulence may suddenly bring to the surface deep, powerful and well established currents that had previously been all but invisible. Spectacular media events become focal sites of discursive activity, maximal turbulence, and competing bids and counterbids for meaning and knowledge as they resonate powerfully with a culture's deepest fears, desires and anxieties; the most powerful media events may therefore lead to significant shifts in a culture's overall structure of feeling. And yet to do so, they must break through a surface that is more image-saturated than at any time in human history.

The culture of the contemporary US is one of "extreme multiplicity . . . of images, of knowledges, and of information technologies" (Fiske 1996: 239). Contemporary strategies for its hegemonization must therefore seek to exert control over technology, visibility, knowledge and information, and yet the multiculturalism implied by multiplicity means that such control can only ever be achieved in precarious, unstable and contested forms. In such an environment, countersurveillance might contest and disrupt the imperializing management of visibility, and counterknowledges might be assembled through the technologically mediated disarticulation and rearticulation of fragments of information or repressed facts,

perspectives and images (Fiske 1996: 191–2). Practices of countersurveillance and the production of counterknowledge can become valuable weapons of the socially weak and of emergent social formations in the creation, expansion and defense of localized and increasingly networked social spaces against incursion by colonizing and controlling forces.

Media and cultural theorists have noted the decline of what Daniel Dayan (2009) has called "central TV" as a source of hegemonic consensus, widely shared spaces of discursivity, and a sense of coherent national cultural vision. In the shift from central television to post-broadcasting, post-national and convergent, networked digital media environments, multiplicity, contestation and discursive collage have expanded possibilities for the rearticulation of information and images into contestatory counterknowledges and alternative, countersurveillant practices of monstration and remonstration (Dayan 2009). Spectacularly disruptive media mega-events such as the 2000 presidential election and the 9/11 attacks may paradoxically re-center national attention for a time and, as Lynn Spigel (2004: 260) has observed, create opportunities for the mediated performance of "myths of reunification and nationalism"; but they also inevitably provoke counternarratives and establish new terrains of political contestation, negotiation and dialogue, particularly in the context of the "multitiered public sphere" (Dayan 2009) of the contemporary media environment of convergence, digitalization and post-broadcasting. While this necessarily gives rise to a degree of fragmentation often discussed in terms of media tribalism (Dean 2009) or referred to as "communities of dissensus" (Birchall 2006: 79), the contemporary media environment also creates new pathways for the assemblage of collective counterintelligence, new articulatory possibilities for alliance formation, and new techniques of countervisualization. The contemporary mediascape of "technostruggles" thus remains a politically vibrant terrain of contestation, where the motivation to participate in the formation and circulation of counterknowledges, alternative visibilities and articulatory alliances is driven by and through the social relations and positions occupied by those engaged in these practices (Fiske 1996). The means and ways of engaging in such technostruggles have expanded rapidly in the past decade.

If Al-Qaeda drew upon and rearticulated a deeply familiar repertoire of Hollywood narratives and images to orchestrate a hypervisible spectacle of vulnerability that lay at the very core of the world's most powerful empire—an empire advanced by image-power as well as by economic and military might—then this might be understood as a kind of *image-insurgency*. As Marc Redfield (2009: 3) writes, the "space inhabited by the World Trade Center was (and is) so heavily mediatized, so utterly penetrated by representational technologies of global reach, and so symbolically at the heart of the world's various political, financial, and semiotic webs of power that the destruction of the towers could not help being at once the ultimate media event and (therefore) a haunting image of the deracinating force of communicational technology at work." The Bush/Cheney regime's response to the WTC's collapse relied in turn upon the rearticulation of equally familiar and phantasmatic media images to imperializing discourses and narrative grooves capable of countering the event's disruptive force by reasserting Orientalist sense-

making categories organized around moralistic binaries such as "civilization versus barbarism" and "good versus evil." The cultural work of this moral totalism was to at once performatively constitute, underwrite and justify the extension of new powers and expanded geopolitical practices of global and domestic policing and surveillance, and thus to initiate new modes of power-bearing visuality and control. The benefits and impacts of these measures were distributed in a wildly asymmetrical and disproportional manner across the social differences that regulate access to alliances that establish the corporate power-bloc whose relations and interests were most active at the center of the Bush/Cheney regime.

Popular Counterknowledge: The 9/11 Truth Movement

In the face of this imperializing hegemonization of the 9/11 media event, another alternative image insurgency has formed that also appeals to a certain familiar media phantasmagoria and to an established counter-reading of US history. The 9/11 Truth movement (9/11TM; see Bratich 2008) is a diverse global collection of people and organizations that reject the official accounts of the 9/11 attacks. Most adherents allege complicity of one sort or another in the planning and/or execution of the attacks by elements within the Bush Administration motivated primarily by the potential to reap a variety of political, economic and military opportunities and advantages in their wake. Some within 9/11TM articulate the spectacle of the collapsing towers to the counter-histories that have been generated in response to unresolved questions and suspicious circumstances around the assassinations of Presidents Lincoln and Kennedy, and of RFK and MLK, to evidence of the provocation of a Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor by the Roosevelt administration, and to suspected or actually documented "false flag" operations such as the attacks on the USS Maine and the Lusitania, the Gulf of Tonkin incident, and Operation Northwoods.[4] 9/11TM thus draws upon, appeals to, and expands an established stock of popular skepticism around the secretive machinations and treachery of the powerful. It does this by articulating well-established histories of power-bloc misdeeds and corruption, and of the exploitation and endangerment of the socially subordinated by the dominant, working through the established institutions and agencies of its domination, to the serious questions raised by willful gaps, shortcomings and deep flaws in the official investigation of 9/11, and to a substantial body of evidence, much though by no means all of it circumstantial, that has been amassed by a loosely affiliated group of 9/11TM researchers, including both lay *and* well-credentialed, expert investigators, a significant number of whom are university professors working within and beyond the US.

---

[4]Operation Northwoods was designed to involve terrorist attacks by the US government on major US cities and the false attribution of the attacks to Cuba as a pretext for the invasion of that country; the operation was approved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1962 but rejected by JFK. See http://en. wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Northwoods.

The sprawling and expanding body of counterdiscourses and counterknowledges that are being generated and circulated through 9/11TM's articulatory practices and processes can be understood as both offensive and defensive weapons of sorts—weapons against the imperializing reach of hegemonic power, weapons of countersurveillance and countervisualization, weapons or tools for the expression of democratic impulses, of desires, anxieties and refusals, for the assertion of claims on behalf of particular normative visions of the world, and for the production of communal spaces, identities, affective energies, solidarities, and transformative popular imaginaries.

In this regard, 9/11TM has interesting affinities and points of overlap and intersection with the ambitions, networked informational flows and operational modalities of the multitude that articulated itself around and emerged expressively in the form of the Obama movement in 2008. As W.J.T. Mitchell (2009: 126) notes, Obama attained the presidency "on the crest of a wave of popular feeling that he helped to create, but that largely pre-dated his candidacy"; the "aura of a social movement being born" (Mitchell 2009: 126) that surrounded the spectacular rise of the Obama phenomenon was grounded in a deeply rooted and broad-based sense of popular longing for political transformation and for the rejection and expulsion of Bush-Cheney-ism. Obama was a product first and foremost of grassroots activism (Bobo 2009). Obama achieved deep resonance with many who felt alienated by the political system and cynical about the depths to which it and US society descended under the calamitously transformative Bush regime, which "in every conceivable way set the conditions for Obama's emergence" (Mitchell 2009: 128). Like the 9/11 Truth movement, the Obama movement made itself partly through mobilization of the affordances of convergent media (see, e.g., Everett 2009; Castells 2009; Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011; Harris et al. 2010). Moreover, like widespread reactions to the 9/11 Truth movement (see Bratich 2008), conservative reaction to the social movement that emerged around candidate Obama figured the phenomenon as a collective failure of political rationality that threatens the body politic (Spicer 2010).

The production and circulation of popular counterdiscourses and counterknowledges around 9/11 has stepped up considerably since 2005, the year of the release of both "Bin Laden," by Mos Def, Immortal Technique and Eminem, and of the first of four versions of the feature-length film *Loose Change*, a kind of grassroots *Fahrenheit 9/11* for the convergence culture generation that was created on a laptop computer by 21-year-old Dylan Avery with a total budget of about $2,000.[5] The viral YouTube vid of "Bin Laden" features deep bass beats and a rapid-fire assemblage of miscellaneous images including heavy doses of TV journalists and Fox News commentators, Bush administration politicians, the WTC attacks,

---

[5]Mos Def, Immortal Technique and Eminem are hip-hop artists; "Bin Laden" is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJ4iZE2yoLk. *Farenheit 9/11* is a film by Michael Moore that won the Palme d'Or at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival and went on to become the highest grossing documentary of all time.

corporate logos, third world military interventions and death squad victims; all of these are set to fiercely sardonic lyrics about "fake Christians" and "fake politicians . . . in mansions," the ongoing fight for survival in the ghetto, US war mongering and covert paramilitary actions, and the recurring lines: "Bin Laden didn't blow up the projects . . . Bush knocked down the towers." The feature-length *Loose Change* has circulated globally on the Web, where it has, as Avery told *ABC News Nightline* in 2010, "gone viral and back." It is, in the words of *Vanity Fair*, "the first Internet blockbuster" (quoted in Dean 2009: 156). The film has been translated into 26 languages, sold more than a million DVDs, aired on TV in the US, Portugal, Belgium, Ireland the Netherlands and elsewhere, and purportedly been watched more than 155 million times.[6] It is a central node in what Jack Bratich (2008: 135) calls the "conspiratology archipelago" that constitutes the discursive spatiality of 9/11TM, which has emerged as a rhizomatic set of sites, researchers, knowledges and practices linked through decentralized media distribution. Mark Fenster (2008: 278) suggests that among the core messages of the film "is that we are all Dylan Avery now—a laptop battalion prepared to go into battle, armed with information, insight, and an interpretive method that *Loose Change* has provided." By 2006, the virality of 9/11TM had made multiple incursions into media outlets such as CNN, HBO, Comedy Central and ESPN, as the movement's celebrity spokespeople (including Ed Asner, Rosie O'Donnell, Ed Begley, Jr., and Martin Sheen) and nationwide commercials imparted to it a different form and level of visibility (see Bratich 2008: 132–3). That same year, on the fifth anniversary of the collapse of three WTC towers, thousands marched on New York City from around the world wearing the movement's trademark black t-shirts emblazoned with the words "Investigate 9/11."

In November 2007, the third version of the film, entitled *Loose Change, Final Cut*, was released with an eye toward the 2008 US campaign season. In this third version, several speculative assertions about the 9/11 attacks from the film's first two editions were dropped and the film's arguments were honed in response to criticisms from within and beyond the 9/11 Truth movement. As well, the element of political critique directed against the Bush administration was sharpened. *Final Cut*'s closing lines of narration state that "the government designed by the people, for the people, has turned its back on us. Or have we turned our backs on it? They spy on us. They torture and imprison innocent civilians. Ask yourself: what's happening? Where are we headed? And would we be here today without 9/11?" The *Loose Change* films incorporate images from Google Earth and NASA satellites to enact a kind of countersurveillance that questions the *official* conspiracy theory of 9/11—the one about a conspiracy among 19 Islamic terrorists armed only with box-cutters who successfully demolished three WTC towers and a sizeable chunk of the Pentagon before any effort at a US military intervention could be mustered. *Loose Change: Final Cut* also samples and mashes up clips to illustrate the inadequacies of mainstream media coverage of the attacks and their 6-year aftermath, thus

---

[6]See http://www.loosechange911.com/about/faq/.

performing a kind of media criticism that might also be read as countersurveillance. The soundtrack over the final credits consists of a hip hop theme song whose chorus announces, "We say no more! We're gonna fight back! We want the truth out, we want our rights back! . . . Change is loose don't stop it now!"

Like the YouTube vid by Mos Def, Immortal Technique and Eminem, the *Loose Change* series draws on a remix aesthetic with a very long history that passes through the Caribbean, and includes the creation of Haitian vodou from a hybrid assemblage of West African, Indigenous Hispaniolan, and Northern as well as Southern European Christian religions, and to which some scholars attribute the social solidarities, communities and identities necessary for the eventual emergence and success of the Haitian Revolution, which gave the world its first Black people's republic in 1804. This long history of remix culture also passes through Jamaica and New York in the birth of hip hop, through the culture of vidders,[7] through that key site of Bush era social commentary, political critique and satire, the *Daily Show*, and through the Internet branches of the Obama movement throughout 2008. The multifarious instantiations of this variable remix culture must be understood as being rooted in the specific social relations of particular historical and geographical conjunctures and material conditions of existence. In their 2007 appearance together on *Real Time with Bill Maher*, Mos Def and Cornell West provide a glimpse into the articulation of material conditions of existence to the forms of 9/11-oriented popular skepticism that are expressed through remix practices in the "Bin Laden" vid:

Maher:	You have to admit that there are people who do want to kill Americans.
Mos Def:	Yeah, some of them are called the police. . .
Maher:	But you don't want to get blown up by a bomb.
Mos Def:	Listen, I'm Black in America. I live under *constant pressure*. I don't believe in that bogeyman shit. . . . I don't believe that was bin Laden [in a videotaped message] today. I don't believe it was ever him. . . . I'm from the projects—I *know* danger. . . .
Maher:	You don't think bin Laden knocked down the World Trade Center?
Mos Def:	Absolutely not! . . . Go to any barber shop. I am *so* not alone! . . . Highly educated people in all areas of science have spoken on the fishiness around the whole 9/11 theory. It's like the "magic bullet" and all that shit! . . .
Cornel West:	I think that bin Laden . . . had *something* to do with the buildings, 'cause he said so, and I believe it. But the thing is that if at the

---

[7]"Vidding" involves the production of music videos through the appropriation of material from media sources such as TV shows and news reports. By recontextualizing music and media images in this way, vidders comment on the music, the imagery, or both. Vidding (the production of "vids") has become a common practice within contemporary fan cultures and has had an influence on practices of political remix videomaking: the appropriation and recontextualization of media source material to make political or critical arguments (see McIntosh 2010).

same time, you have multiple sources of force, coercion and terror coming at you, which many Black Americans do—prison-industrial complex, racial criminal justice system, . . . disgraceful school systems—to what degree do you begin to think: my paranoia is actually justified, because if *they* can sustain this level of psychic and physical terror against *me*, and *they're* obsessed with the terror that's against *them*, then maybe they might not be believable and credible.

Geography of the New Media Environment

This leads me toward my final observations on the relationships between the different elements of the contemporary media environment—that is, of Dayan's "multitiered public sphere," with its remnants of "central TV" in the major networks, and its exuberantly expanding rhizomatic margins which, through their constant fragmentation and dispersal of attention, increasingly threaten to swamp the center out of existence. One key feature of this environment is the role of spectacular media events as rejuvenators of attention centers, where centralized dominant forces concentrate their efforts to re-stabilize hegemonic regimes of power, social formations and discourses, and to repress or vanquish marginal ones. The relatively socially weak forces and voices, in turn, radiate outwards toward the networked margins, which provide a kind of safe harbor of enclaves and opportunities for growth and development through processes associated with convergence culture (Jenkins 2008) such as collective intelligence and creative remix, which are increasingly important to the production of counterdiscourses and counterknowledges, to the practices of rearticulation and resignification, and to the generation of oppositional identities and the maintenance or protection of endangered solidarities. I want to suggest that there is a growing traffic between the rhizomatic, deterritorialized, networked margins consisting of podcasts, blogs, vid sites and social networks, on the one hand, and the mid-sized juncture points that provide what I would like to call (with pun intended) *medium visibility*, on the other. The latter might include, for instance, cable TV outlets such as HBO, Comedy Central, MSNBC and Fox News, as well as non-prime-time programming such as *Nightline* and *The View*. Though such sites of medium visibility may be consumed "tribally" by relatively homogenous niche audiences, they nevertheless expand visibility in relation to the smaller clusters on the deterritorialized margins and so provide opportunities for the formation of new alliances across social difference, and perhaps for eventual break-through emergence within the attention centers associated with "central TV."[8] The appearance of professional physicists, architects and engineers in media such as CNN and national network breakfast TV

---

[8]See, e.g., *Geraldo at Large* (13 Nov. 2012), available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature= player_embedded&v=pFPobKeSzKQ.

to discuss the publication in 2009 in a peer-reviewed scientific journal of an article offering strong evidence of the use of super- or nano-thermite, a high-tech explosive produced by only a handful of military contractors such as Livermore Labs, in the destruction of the three WTC towers represents one such moment of *medium visibility* capable of generating new articulations and political alliances across social differences.[9]

The first decade of the new millennium in US culture was in many ways book-ended and defined by two key, counterposed spectacular media events: the collapse of the WTC in 2001, and the twin moments of high spectacle associated with the hopeful transformation of the dark nightmares of the Bush/Cheney regime into the age of Obama: Obama's speech accepting his party's nomination for the presidency at Denver's Mile High Stadium during the 2008 Democratic National Convention, and his electoral victory speech in Chicago's Grant Park just over 2 months later.[10] The attacks of 9/11 constituted a media megaspectacle that generated struggles to put its images into discourse in a manner capable of shifting the US culture's central structure of feeling—whether this is understood to entail an effort by Al-Qaeda to shift it away from an interventionist, Orientalist, and American exceptionalist swagger toward a newfound sense of vulnerability and humility in the face of an angry world and God, or alternatively to entail the Bush/Cheney regime's efforts to shift this structure of feeling through shock and awe toward a sense of deep and widespread fear in the service of democratic totalitarianism and war without end. By contrast, the remix-driven counter-mobilizations of this media event by 9/11TM and the mashups and counterspectacles that constituted the high moment of the Obama movement (which re-formed subsequently in the Occupy movements) must be read as major popular efforts to reclaim and redirect the structure of feeling and to reconstitute the political conditions of possibility within and beyond the US for the new millennium.

References

Andrejevic, M. (2007). *iSpy: Surveillance and power in the interactive era*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

Baudrillard, J. (1988). *The ecstasy of communication* (S. Lotringer (Ed.); B. Schutze, & C. Schutze, Trans.). New York: Semiotext(e).

Baudrillard, J. (2003). *The spirit of terrorism* (C. Turner, Trans.). London: Verso.

---

[9]See, e.g., Richard Gage on Fox TV affiliate KMPH's breakfast show (May 2009), available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oO2yT0uBQbM.

[10]These were arguably the two key moments of high media spectacle in the US in 2008. Obama's speech at Mile High Stadium on 28 August was delivered to an estimated crowd of 84,000 people in attendance, and his 4 November electoral victory speech was delivered to a Grant Park audience estimated at 240,000. Countless millions around the world watched both events on TV.

Birchall, C. (2006). *Knowledge goes pop: From conspiracy theory to gossip*. Oxford: Berg.

Boal, I., Clark, T. J., Matthews, J., & Watts, M. (2005). *Afflicted powers: Capital and spectacle in a new age of war*. London: Verso.

Bobo, J. (2009). Impact of grassroots activism. *Journal of Visual Culture, 8*(2), 158–160.

Bratich, J. Z. (2008). *Conspiracy panics: Political rationality and popular culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Castells, M. (2009). *Communication power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cogburn, D. L., & Espinoza-Vasquez, F. K. (2011). From networked nominee to networked nation: Examining the impact of Web 2.0 and social media on political participation and civic engagement in the 2008 Obama campaign. *Journal of Political Marketing, 10*(1–2), 189–213.

Dayan, D. (2009). Sharing and showing: Television as monstration. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 625*, 19–31.

de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life* (S. Rendall, Trans.). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Dean, J. (2009). *Democracy and other neoliberal fantasies: Communicative capitalism and left politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Dowd, M. (2003, May 21). Walk this way. *New York Times*. http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/21/opinion/21DOWD.htm. Accessed 1 Dec 2013.

Everett, A. (2009). The Afrogeek-in-chief: Obama and our new media ecology. *Journal of Visual Culture, 8*(2), 193–196.

Fenster, M. (2008). *Conspiracy theories: Secrecy and power in American culture* (Rev. and Updated Ed.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Fiske, J. (1996). *Media matters: Race and gender in U.S. politics* (Revth ed.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Fiske, J. (1998). Surveilling the city: Whiteness, the black man and democratic totalitarianism. *Theory, Culture & Society, 15*(2), 66–88.

Freedberg, D. (1991). *The power of images: Studies in the history and theory of response*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Glynn, K. (2009). The 2004 election did not take place: Bush, spectacle, and the media nonevent. *Television & New Media, 10*(2), 216–245.

Grossberg, L. (1996). On postmodernism and articulation: An interview with Stuart Hall. In D. Morley & K. Chen (Eds.), *Stuart hall: Critical dialogues in cultural studies* (pp. 131–150). London: Routledge.

Harris, H. E., Moffitt, K. R., & Squires, C. R. (Eds.). (2010). *The Obama effect: Multidisciplinary renderings of the 2008 campaign*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Heidegger, M. (1977). *The question concerning technology and other essays* (Trans. and with an Introduction by Lovitt, W.). New York: Harper Torchbooks.

Jay, M. (1993). *Downcast eyes: The denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Jenkins, H. (2008). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide* (Rev. Ed.). New York: NYU Press.

Kellner, D. (2003). *Media spectacle*. London: Routledge.

King, G. (2005). 'Just like a movie'?: 9/11 and Hollywood spectacle. In G. King (Ed.), *The spectacle of the real: From Hollywood to 'reality' TV and beyond* (pp. 47–57). Bristol: Intellect Books.

Lyotard, J. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* (G. Bennington & B. Massumi, Trans. and with a Foreword by Jameson F.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

McIntosh, J. (2010, December 20). Interviewed by Henry Jenkins about DIY remix video. *Rebelliouspixels*. http://www.rebelliouspixels.com/2010/henry-jenkins-interview. Accessed 17 Dec 2013.

Meikle, G., & Young, S. (2012). *Media convergence: Networked digital media in everyday life*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mirzoeff, N. (1999). *An introduction to visual culture*. London: Routledge.

Mitchell, W. J. T. (2009). Obama as icon. *Journal of Visual Culture, 8*(2), 125–129.

Palast, G. (2006). *Armed madhouse*. New York: Dutton.

Parks, L. (2005). *Cultures in orbit: Satellites and the televisual*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Phillips, M. (2011). *Satan in the smoke? A photojournalist's 9/11 story*. Brooklyn: South Brooklyn Internet. Ebook available from www.amazon.com

Redfield, M. (2009). *The rhetoric of terror: Reflections on 9/11 and the war on terror*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Sontag, S. (2004 [1965]). The imagination of disaster. In G. Rickman (Ed.), *The science fiction film reader* (pp. 98–113). New York: Limelight Editions.

Spicer, R. (2010). The Obama mass: Barack Obama, image, and fear of the crowd. In H. E. Harris, K. R. Moffitt, & C. R. Squires (Eds.), *The Obama effect: Multidisciplinary renderings of the 2008 campaign* (pp. 190–208). Albany: SUNY Press.

Spigel, L. (2004, June). Entertainment wars: Television culture after 9/11. *American Quarterly, 56*(2): 235–270.

Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Žižek, S. (2002a). Welcome to the desert of the real. *The symptom: Online journal for Lacan* 2. http://www.lacan.com/thesymptom.htm. Accessed 17 Dec 2013.

Žižek, S. (2002b). *Welcome to the desert of the real! Five essays on September 11 and related dates*. London: Verso.