Superheroes and the Bush doctrine: narrative and politics in post–9/11 discourse
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Conclusion

During the final days of the George W. Bush presidency, after Barack Obama had roundly defeated Republican candidate John McCain in the 2008 elections, Der Spiegel revisited the 2002 “Bush Warriors” cover that had sought to parody the superheroic rhetoric with which the government had started the War on Terror. The cover image that I referenced in the opening passages of my introduction portrayed prominent members of the Bush administration as comic book superheroes and action movie icons. Of those original five politicians, only Bush, Dick Cheney, and Condoleezza Rice remained; Colin Powell had abandoned the stage, leaving behind an empty Batman suit, and “Rumsfeld the Barbarian” is visible only as a battered, muscular arm, symbolizing his ignominious departure from the Bush cabinet. The remaining “warriors” are bruised and battered after six years of seemingly fruitless and increasingly unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the president whose popularity had soared in the wake of 9/11 now serving as the punchline to a bad joke. Fittingly, the cover’s design mirrors that of an aging movie poster, a banner across it announcing the “end of the engagement.”

This magazine cover is but one of many cultural indicators that the end of the George W. Bush presidency signaled the end of an era. Just as the 2001 attacks had created the illusion of an historical rupture that now divided history into pre- and post-9/11, the 2008 elections were presented again in terms of their epochal
qualities. But as events in the subsequent years have shown, Fredric Jameson’s truism that “historical events are never really punctual” and that cultural life does not turn on a dime continues to hold true (2002a: 301). The cultural anxieties that fuelled 9/11 discourse are not removed by a change in government, for their roots lie neither in the supposed trauma of the attacks themselves nor in the ongoing military conflicts and government policies that followed them. As the case studies in this study have shown, the deeper cause of these symptoms is located in the system of global capitalism and commodity culture that makes up the Lacanian Real underlying these fantasies.

It is therefore not surprising that the utopian fantasy of a post-racial, non-partisan America that informed Barack Obama’s successful presidential campaign has not materialized under his actual administration. Indeed, the rhetoric and aesthetics of his campaign depended on the very same cultural logic that is so often associated with the neoliberal policies of his predecessor: from the icons and slogans that transformed the candidate into a marketable brand to the superheroic fantasies that quickly accumulated around his public persona as a near-messianic figure with comic book appeal (figure 2).

The superhero movie genre meanwhile has maintained its central position within contemporary popular culture, providing images and events that offer viewers the opportunity to traverse the fantasy that underlies our fascination with the 9/11 attacks while keeping intact the historical vacuum that contributed to the cultural trauma they caused. Even as critical voices continue to predict that the now ten-year-old phenomenon of the superhero movie must now finally be nearing its end, companies like

Figure 2: Obama as superheroic figure on the cover of Amazing Spider-Man #539 (January 2009).
Marvel and DC/Warner are in fact successfully transforming themselves from comic book publishers to multimedia conglomerates on the basis of their ongoing superhero chronologies. Individual films in established franchises increasingly serve as platforms to publicize upcoming ventures, like for instance the critically disparaged but commercially successful Iron Man 2 (dir. Jon Favreau, 2010). And while attempts are also made to reinvigorate the genre with fresh approaches such as Kick-Ass (dir. Matthew Vaughn, 2010) and Scott Pilgrim vs. The World (dir. Edgard Wright, 2010), their general lack of commercial success seems to confirm the absolute hegemony of the superhero genre as a form of commodity culture that trades exclusively in repetitive formulas and astronomic budgets.

As an ongoing indicator of shared cultural anxieties and public fantasies, the superhero movie would thus seem to indicate that little has changed since the establishment of the 9/11 episteme as outlined in the first chapter of this study. The dramatic contradictions that continue to define American culture, its dominant role in global politics and entertainment, and the popular methods of symbolically representing its role in the global arena still result in an intensely polarized national culture. The postmodern erosion of the boundaries between history and representation, politics and entertainment, and the real and the virtual, has resulted in a situation in which the terms of the political debate are now defined primarily by television personalities like Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, Jon Stewart, and Stephen Colbert. The Tea Party movement may be the most alarming manifestation of this kind of hyperreality, its resolute, intensely nostalgic embrace of comic book vocabulary identifying new heroes and villains as in the self-evident moral logic of a superhero narrative.

The four central themes discussed in this study also continue to suture the gap between fiction and history by providing fantasies that disguise their ideologically defined contours. The subjects of trauma, the city, panoptic surveillance, and apocalyptism that I have described individually in the preceding four chapters remain the central nodes around which forms of contemporary subjectivity are constructed. Just as the events of 9/11 did not constitute a moment of historical rupture, the end of the George W. Bush presidency has not ushered in a sudden
change in the social and cultural vocabulary. For just as 9/11 discourse can be viewed as an intensification of the crises of postmodernism, the issues surrounding the presidential elections and the Obama administration revolve around the same issues that make up the Lacanian Real of globalized capitalism.

All the attempts to enter into a bilateral form of communication between the United States government and Islamic states notwithstanding, the dominant narrative of American selfhood remains that of the traumatized victim: the “common-sense” history of 9/11 is still repeated over and over again as one of a trauma narrative in which an evil aggressor had attacked a self-evidently innocent larger “us.” As I argued in my chapter on the trauma narrative as the first essential theme in 9/11 discourse and superhero narratives, both “high literature” and popular culture have contributed strongly to the natural association of 9/11 with issues of both personal and national trauma, most notably by the repetition of traumatic experience as the motivating force behind every heroic origin story.

In my second chapter, I argued how crucial the public imagination of the postmetropolis remains within contemporary cultural discourse. Ongoing social and political debates on immigration and city planning illustrate vividly how threatened people feel by the idea of Islamic culture being associated with the public perception of a Western metropolis, like for instance New York City. This may be due in large part to the way in which popular culture in the 21st century has presented New York as a site that is defined by its abundance of corporations and available commodities instead of by any noticeable variety of cultures and ethnicities. While films such as Spider-Man have contributed to the successful rebranding of Manhattan as a safe and attractive global village shortly after the terrorist attacks, these films focus have systematically rearticulated the postmetropolis as a playground for identities firmly anchored in forms of white, heterosexual masculinity.

The third chapter focused on issues of surveillance and visibility, emphasizing the notion that the superhero figure in most cases functions as the embodiment of panoptic forms of discipline and control. As my chapter on panoptic discipline and post-9/11 surveillance culture has shown, most superhero narratives transform surveillance technologies into sympathetic human form. Benign authority figures
are systematically associated with the visible, while those that seek to avoid surveillance and public visibility are associated with danger and evil. This form of narrative logic implies that dominant (visible) forms of identity are inherently superior over those that lack representation, as the latter are automatically associated with forces that seek to pervert or disrupt the “natural” order. Most forms of popular narrative thus ultimately help to legitimize the panoptic and synoptic forms of coercive discipline and normative behavior associated with 9/11 discourse and the Bush doctrine.

Finally, the fourth theme I developed dealt with the topic of apocalyptic narratives, and the postmodern tendency to perceive our own time as being at the end of history, or even beyond it. As the many obvious examples from Cold War popular culture illustrate, the cultural fascination with visually spectacular end-of-the-world narratives has been a relatively stable element in the post-WWII cultural vocabulary. As a growing number of critics point out, this fascination for apocalyptic imagery is perhaps better understood not so much as the literal representation of fears related to the threat of nuclear annihilation, but more as the result of the postmodern crisis of agency. The anxieties caused by the systemic hegemony of capitalism and commodity culture seem to create a desire for narratives that give history a nostalgic “reboot,” restoring a lost sense of identity and community that is then associated with pre-modern forms of culture and subjectivity.

Although this study has shown that there are also instances in which the superhero figure has lent itself to negotiated readings of contemporary culture, the overwhelming majority of narratives and characters analyzed here points toward a more problematic worldview in which the nostalgic desire for an earlier form of modern capitalism is accompanied by patriarchal forms of authority. These figures display an attitude towards other cultures and ethnicities that is usually patronizing at best, and openly racist at worst. And although these franchises certainly provide the individual subject with a site where the contradictions of postmodernity can be negotiated metaphorically from within the safety of an unrealistic, allegorical context, it does so in a way that is entirely dictated by the text’s status as a branded commercial commodity.