Contemporary Apocalyptics: crisis and revelation in the sphere of public imagination. *Case-studies in journalism and popular culture in a post-September 11 environment.*

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Prologue & Introduction

In Roland Emmerich's 2004 extreme weather disaster film, The Day After Tomorrow, *quite early in the film, a massive tornado runs through Los Angeles as climate change begins to wreck havoc in American cities. As the storm builds, a flabbergasted newscaster looks up at Mt Lee and realises to his horror that Griffith Park's famous sign is taking a tumble: "Oh my god," he cries, "the Hollywood sign is being erased."*

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

As Isabelle Freda has noted, 9/11 brought its own erasure or at least its own inversion:

> *Nine-eleven was, in part, such a shock because of the force with which it brought death – American mortality – into the carefully guarded world of American irreality, one policed by a commodified news media. The attacks seemed to invert outside and inside, "them" and "us" or fiction and reality, providing a potent site of (potential and actual) destabilisation of "American spectatorship." (Freda 2003: 227)*

Those of us old enough, all have our memories of those days in September 2001: where we were when "it" happened, how much of it we saw and how we reacted when we saw those images replayed again and again in the hours, days and weeks that followed.

In Australia "9/11" "happened" at night, not as the morning began to bustle. I uncharacteristically turned on the TV late that night and it was immediately apparent that something big, catastrophic, awesome, was

happening. Then about five minutes after I tuned in, it happened: that scene, the crash, the confusion, and then the fall. I saw the second plane hit the tower, then I saw the tower collapse, then I saw it replayed again, again and again.

I sat glued to the television into the very early hours of the morning. My main emotion during that time was not horror but a type of shocked awe. I distinctly remember thinking, quite literally, in the first few minutes after I tuned in, before I had fully made sense of what was going on: "Oh my god it's the end of the world." I knew that it wasn't, but it felt like I was closer to that script than I had ever been before. This was my own unconscious melodramatic response that arose from a contemporary culture steeped in the drama of endings. After seeing that tower collapse, after the crosses backwards and forwards from the towers to the Pentagon, it was hard to imagine what would happen next. Suddenly these images made anything imaginable and anything imaginable possible.

"What is it about that scene that makes us want to look at it again and again?" a friend asked me some time later; neither of us could find a satisfactory answer to that question. But the answer has something to do with the fact that the crash and the collapse (and the cycle of the replay itself) are all so utterly familiar but in this instance so incredibly strange or, one might say, strained. Reality seems stretched because its primary reference becomes not other historical events but fiction, because the place we have seen this all before is at the movies.

The constant replay of the falling towers was only the first of a continuing cycle of repetitions that the events of September 11 set to play. The images of that morning are still constantly before us, not as they were back then, in real time or its immediate approximation, but in our memories, in the discourse of politicians and in the haunting resonances that we wilfully or subliminally detect, construct or recognise in film, fiction and the news. In

the domains of both popular culture and current affairs it often seems, even ten years after the event, September 11 is still everywhere you look.

1. Introduction: study aims and method

1.1 Apocalyptic mythic clusters and the war on terror

This thesis will examine a number of political, journalistic and popular culture texts in the context of what film maker Tom Tykwer (in Maher 2002) has called the "aesthetic memory" of September 11. It is not a comprehensive analysis of the cultural field but seeks to identify a number of mythic patterns that can be identified across a range of genres. Specifically I am interested in exploring the way these texts relate to deeply embedded Western cultural narratives of the apocalyptic and identifying some of the ways this apocalyptic myth is being reimagined in contemporary cultures, and particularly how it is contributing to a new "war on terror" discourse. I will analyse the apocalyptic myth as a template for the construction of contemporary storytelling and the wider deployment and resonance of apocalyptic rhetoric in contemporary stories and politics. However I do not wish to merely identify and catalogue a set of correspondences between traditional and current mythic storytelling with September 11 as some kind of mediating axis, nor do I seek to identify a definitive new contemporary structure of an older mythic form. I will argue that the radical dynamics of contemporary mediascapes (Appadurai 1996) demand a more fluid approach.

Although in the contemporary vernacular to speak of the apocalypse is to speak of catastrophe, apocalypse is Greek for 'revelation' or 'unveiling'. It is the name given to the final book of the Christian bible[1] – alternatively known by its Greek title as *The Apocalypse* or by its English title, *The Book of*

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[1] The last book of the bible is also known as *Revelation* or *The Revelation of John*. It is thought to have been composed at the end of the first century CE. Its author is identified as John – "your brother who shares with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance…on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Rev 1:9). Traditionally this "John" has been associated with the apostle John also the reputed author of the fourth Gospel. Although the exact authorship of these Johannine texts is disputed by contemporary scholars, the book is thought by some to have emerged out of a "Johannine" school within the early church, while others point to affinities with the Pauline and Synoptic traditions. (Schussler-Fiorenza 1998: 85-113)

Revelation. This book unveils a highly symbolic, end-time narrative of "blood-drenched scenes of nature gone deadly, war, and famine" (Quinby 1999:283). Images from this book – such as Armageddon (the site of final conflict between the forces of good and evil) and the four horseman of the apocalypse who bring famine and plague – have been familiar motifs in popular culture from the prints of Albrecht Durer to the Hollywood blockbusters of Michael Bay. But this story is not just catastrophic it is also freighted with utopic millenarian promise rooted in the book's culminating prophecy of the thousand-year kingdom of the saints and the restoration of the holy city of Jerusalem (Rev 20:1-7). It is a story of redemption and transformation butted up against condemnation and destruction. It dramatises the dialectic between hope and fatalism, the end and the beginning, annihilation and transformation. It is a story with immediate political implications even though its baroque style produces hybrid forms and paradoxical motifs.

In biblical and other scholarship a distinction is generally drawn between three ways of talking about these narratives:

- *Apocalypses* refer to specific texts belonging to and defining the genre;
- *The Apocalyptic* designates motifs or patterns found in such texts or influenced by them; and
- *Apocalypticism* denotes a system of belief or ideology rooted in the apocalyptic;
- *Millenarianism* is also used to denote this ideological view particularly in sociological studies. (cf. Webb 1990: 115-7).

Although on occasion I do use all these terms, in this thesis I tend to use "apocalyptic," "apocalyptic narratives" or "apocalyptic discourse/ideology" as the simplest and most descriptive terms. This avoids the implication in terms such as "apocalypticism" that there is a singular or generic apocalyptic ideology rather than a variety of lived expressions. I also generally avoid the term "apocalypses" as denoting a particular literary or cinematic genre. Although I do discuss the key genre definitions, as they have been formulated

by biblical scholars, my concern here is not in following a restrictive genre based approach to apocalyptic narratives.

Eugen Weber has argued, that the "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). I will argue that in both subtle and not so subtle ways the apocalyptic retains much poetic, religious and political power and is still a key influential individual and collective ordering force. Although the apocalypse myth is only one of a number of dominant cultural myths, it is a particularly important one. It can be read at the heart of a number of significant contemporary political events and debates including: the war on terror (Keller 2005), the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Long 2005), and climate change (Skrimshire 2010). It is deployed as a trope in many prominent pop cultural productions of recent times including major cinematic blockbusters like *Lord of the Rings*, *The Matrix* and *Avatar* and prize winning literature such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*.

My contention is that we can trace a range of apocalyptic motifs, and a range of explicitly developed apocalyptic story structures, in contemporary culture. Some works, like the burgeoning field of evangelical fantasy fiction, are engaged in a deliberate dialogue with the traditional biblical story while other examples, such as Hollywood disaster films are more loosely engaged with a broader cultural tradition. Some complex works like Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales*, which I will analyse in chapter seven, draw directly from the book of *Revelation* for its structuring motifs but construct a very contemporary satiric critique of the homeland security state. Often (but certainly not always) in our current culture these stories and mythic structures have a direct or indirect resonance with the events of September 11 and the ensuing war on terror. As I will describe further below, the apocalyptic has been a dominant part of 20th and early 21st century culture, and as I have

already noted other significant themes apart from terrorism and war, such as climate change, the environment and global health epidemics contribute to the "proliferation and persistence" (Quinby 1994:xv) of this myth in our time. However, in this thesis I have primarily focused on the stream of apocalyptic storytelling that begins its contemporary lineage with the events of September 11 and is thus focused on the apocalyptics of terrorism and war.

I will look at these contemporary expressions of the apocalyptic as a set of dynamic mythic clusters that can be followed across interlocking cultural sites, or fields, including politics, news media, literature, religion and popular televisual and cinematic entertainment. These post-September 11 apocalyptic narratives contain a complex set of competing stories where rhetorical impulses act to both reify tradition and to simultaneously open new possibilities for public debate, belief and action.

In this thesis I will use the phrases "post-September 11;" "post-9/11 culture" and "post 9/11 America" together with other similar variations as a useful shorthand. As will become clear through the detailed argument presented by the thesis as a whole this is by no means meant to infer a singular or universilised experience of "9/11". Even in "the West" or in "America" there are many cultural responses to 9/11 and many cultural communities with divergent responses. Equally I am aware that not everything that happened "after" the 9/11 attacks should or can be designated as "post 9/11," so my use of this term does not indicate an essentialist, easy, cataclysmic division between a before and after the event. However as I will argue there is a body of mainstream cultural products and a specific set of political strategies that can be usefully dissected as a response to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and it is largely this body of work and this set of cultural markers – complicated though they are – that I signpost with phrases like "post 9/11 culture".

Similarly the term "war on terror" is a heavily contested term that I sometimes use as a shorthand for "war on terror discourse," which I conceive of broadly in the Foucauldian sense. As Adam Hodges (2011) has recently described it in

his excellent analysis of the "war on terror narrative," a discourse, in this Foucouldian sense, indicates the rhetorical regulation of "the way a topic can be talked about meaningfully in a particular culture at a particular time" (Hodges 2011:6). The term "war on terror" was first used in a speech by George Bush nine days after September 11 in his address to Congress: "Our war on terror… will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated" (Bush 2003:14). The term went through several iterations and although it was not undisputed, even within the administration, it remained a key phrase used by both Bush officials and the media. Wilson and Kamen (2009) note:

> Critics abroad and at home, including some within the U.S. military, said the terminology mischaracterized the nature of the enemy and its abilities. Some military officers said, for example, that classifying al-Qaeda and other anti-American militant groups as part of a single movement overstated their strength. Early in Bush's second term, then-Defence Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld promoted a change in wording to "global struggle against violent extremism," or GSAVE. Bush rejected the shift and never softened his position that "global war" accurately describes the conflict that the United States is fighting. (Wilson and Kamen 2009)

President Obama has adopted a strategy of not using the phrase – he consciously refers to a war on al-Qaida rather than an abstract war on terror or war against jihadists (Farley 2011) however the term is still widely used in the media[2]. In this thesis I generally refer to "the Bush administration's war on terror" or "the war on terror discourse" to indicate that the term is a complex discursive rhetorical structure rather than a common sense description of an easily definable geopolitical strategy. However at times I will use the phrase "war on terror" as a shorthand for this broader more concise concept.

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[2] A search of Factiva databases Major News and Business Publications for the year 2011 reveals 2579 articles that continue to use the phrase.

1.2 Study aims

Taken together, the case studies in this thesis present three key arguments about apocalyptic narratives and how they are mediated in post 9/11 contemporary Western culture. Before proceeding I will briefly outline the broad sweep of my arguments:

1. The contemporary apocalyptic is a dynamic hybrid form that can best be understood as a set of dialectical relations across a number of cultural sites, forms and modes of representation and is most likely to emerge not as a stand alone mythic form but as part of a cluster of mythic stories. In looking at these mythic clusters across both fiction and non-fiction narratives, in mainstream and alternative popular culture, in visual and written forms I will argue that the contemporary apocalyptic is best understood through its juxtapositions, contradictions and overlapping layers: through the liminal points where fact and fiction, past, present and future intersect. The dynamics of these mythic clusters can be seen in the work of contemporary cultural producers – writers, artists, filmmakers and journalists – and the variety of narratives they have created in response to the pervasive sense of crisis that has characterized the late twentieth and early twenty-first century and that has been particularly acute in the post 9/11 war on terror era. Although the range of these mythic clusters is broad, I will argue that there are recurring clusters that revolve around various combinations of the following mythic forms:

- the dynamics of "cosmic war" in the Christian apocalypse myth;
- the hero myth and dialectic of heroic endurance and heroic action; and
- contemporary myths of technology and the "techno-thriller imaginary" (Davis 2006), particularly as they relate to surveillance, secrets and the covert.

2. The apocalyptic is not merely a vision, myth or narrative form but it draws its evocative power from a unique interaction between its symbolic and material forms. The apocalyptic is "a network of discourses and practices in

social and political use and circulation" (Stewart & Harding 1999: 290) and it is made visible in places and bodies. I will argue that an apocalyptic "system" or set of political strategies is both the underpinning and product of apocalyptic mythic traditions and that both the apocalyptic vision and the apocalyptic system are constructed through particular symbolic and physical geographies or zones. This is seen very clearly, for example, in the movement from the messianic, apocalyptic rhetoric of the Bush administration to the bodies and locations of Abu Ghraib. I argue that this intersection of symbolic narratives, the accompanying set of political practices and their spatial and geographic organization take on particular shape in the Bush administration's creation and prosecution of the war on terror. I term this the interaction of *apocalyptic terrorvision, the apocalyptic terrorsystem and apocalyptic terrorzones*.

3. Because these hybrid apocalyptic narratives are at the heart of key political events and major cultural products, analysing them also provides a perfect window for a broader examination of the dynamic nature of contemporary cultural and media systems which I term *spheres of public imagination* to distinguish my analysis from a rationalist Habermassian approach (Habermas 1991). These spheres of public imagination are produced at the intersection of a variety of cultural texts and artefacts but in this thesis I am particularly interested in the intersection of journalism, popular screen culture, and political and religious rhetoric. Each of these fields can be defined by their particular forms, and inherent possibilities, but their boundaries are permeable. I will argue that they function as part of a constantly intersecting network of sense-making structures available to postmodern "nomadic subjects" (Braidotti 1994; Brown 1996).

1.3 Chapter outline

This chapter outlines my general theoretical approach to the study of contemporary apocalyptics, while the next chapter outlines some of the key

developments in the historic evolution of apocalyptic literature. The five chapters that follow explore a series of case studies which both flesh out this understanding of apocalyptic narratives and illuminate some of the dynamics of the contemporary sphere of public imagination.

Each of the chapters discusses a number of cultural texts and an associated series of mythic clusters that illuminate the contemporary apocalyptic. As I have argued the apocalyptic is best understood as a baroque hybrid narrative that persists and proliferates (Quinby 1994:xv) over time and over a variety of cultural fields. So while each of the chapters function as quasi independent case studies, the thesis as a whole is an extended case study (Burawoy 1988) in the sense that its themes and arguments recur, interact and accumulate meaning over the course of the five chapters.

The next chapter explores the biblical origins of the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic tradition and focuses particularly on the evolution of apocalyptic ideas as both a mythic or visionary form and as a strategic discourse which achieved certain ends within the various communities of Jews and Christians for whom the biblical texts were written or collated. I argue that we can see here in the early development of apocalyptic literature the way that this narrative is used strategically to bolster particular theo-political positions as well as a narrative that contributes to an evolving cosmology and spirituality. Paul Hanson (1979), for example, argues that early apocalyptic ideas evolved from sectarian power struggles between a priestly and a visionary view of Judaism. In this chapter I also further develop an analysis of the aesthetic form of apocalyptic narratives and discuss the implications of its open baroque structure.

Chapter three explores the contemporary theo-politics implicit in the apocalyptic rhetoric of the George Bush presidency. This provides the political context for the creative works analysed in the rest of the thesis. In this chapter I outline the apocalyptic rhetoric of presidential speeches – particularly those Bush made in the immediate aftermath of September 11. I argue that these speeches show:

- An underlying appeal to religious rhetoric with a strong grounding in the Christian apocalyptic tradition;
- The use of the apocalyptic as a strategically deployed rhetoric that highlights a dualistic, sectarian worldview; and
- The way contemporary apocalyptic rhetoric draws on both traditional religious source material as well as a range of other mythical and popular motifs to produce new mythic clusters.

The following chapter analyses a series of popular texts in film, journalism and popular religious culture that imaginatively buttress the rhetoric of the Bush speeches and share a congruent imaginative infrastructure. This chapter demonstrates a set of dynamic interactions across the spheres of politics, media and popular culture that I will trace throughout the thesis. I argue that a number of very different rhetorical systems: the Judaeo-Christian bible and contemporary Christian fundamentalisms; the post 9/11 speeches of George W. Bush; the journalistic mediation of these speeches; and the image rhetorics of recent Hollywood film produced a powerful set of mutually reinforcing frameworks during the emergence of the "war on terror". Woven through these different forms is a clear narrative of apocalyptic cosmic war between good and evil, patient endurance and millennial promise. I argued that this was in fact a deliberate "rhetorical use of calamity" (O'Leary 1994) and that collectively and individually these rhetorical systems premediated (Grusin 2010) a sense of crisis and fear that was used to justify a political program.

My analysis in chapters five and six focuses on the Fox TV series *24* and the work of *Washington Post* journalists Dana Priest and Bill Arkin and their investigations into the top-secret world of America's post 9-11 homeland security agencies. The significance of *24* is not just in its deployment of resonant mythic themes: of various apocalyptic scenarios confronted and averted. It is not only the *figure* of Bauer that is important. I will argue that taken as a whole the series is also a complex investigation of what I call the apocalyptic terrorsystem. Through staging the heroic actions, confrontations and life-or-death quandaries of its hero figure *24* explores key themes of torture, surveillance and human rights in an apocalyptic context. I argue that

three key motifs: the secret, the conspiracy, and the invisible constitute a common "imaginative infrastructure" that creates a set of connections across the dramatic imagined worlds of a series like *24* and the fact-based story worlds of investigative journalism about homeland security and the war on terror produced by journalists like Arkin and Priest.

Apocalyptic narratives can also function as powerful forms of resistance to current power structures and in my final chapter I examine Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales* and Alfonso Cuaron's *Children of Men* as examples of what theologian Catherine Keller calls the "counter-apocalyptic" (Keller 1996:19-20). In situating these text as counter-apocalyptic I want to imply that they both resist the apocalyptic impulse however they are also located within it. Kelly's *Southland Tales* is a parody that stages a chaotic multiscreen, multilayered narrative that provides an unsettling insight into the apocalyptic terrorsystem. Cuaron's *Children of Men* reimagines a hero narrative in a world blighted by pervasive yet ambiguous apocalyptic forces.

1.4 Method: spheres of public imagination, nomadic reading and intertextuality

I have described the apocalyptic as a hybrid, flexible, baroque narrative with multiple expressions in both history and contemporary life. I am arguing in this thesis that, as "a network of discourses and practices in social and political use and circulation" (Stewart & Harding 1999: 290), the apocalyptic has a particular set of relationships to the development of the Western war on terror as both vision and system. In the chapters that follow I will situate this analysis with reference to a range of cultural texts – particularly examples of journalism and screen culture – and their interaction with wider political and religious narratives. I frame this investigation of contemporary apocalyptic narratives and their cultural expression as an investigation of contemporary *spheres of public imagination*. In the next section of this chapter I will outline this theoretical framework. I will also argue that such an investigation

demands a flexible method of analysis: one that I call *nomadic reading (Braidotti 1994).*

1.4.1 Imagination and public spheres

The apocalyptic terrorvision, terrorsystem and terrorzone as I delineate them in this thesis are all imagined realities, which is to say they are artefacts of both imagination and the realities of geopolitics. A number of scholars (Bogues 2006; Daniels 2010; Hawkins 2010) have argued that the imagination is a critical, and often overlooked, element in understanding such geopolitical realities and the way "publics" produce and process such realities.

In a recent essay on "geographical imagination," for example, Stephen Daniels (2011) argues that, in western thought, imagination is granted a "mercurial presence" and is associated with creativity and inventiveness on the one hand while it is also marginalised as the site of illusion on the other. He writes:

> The place and status of imagination is shaped by the position and pressure of an array of contrapuntal concepts such as reason, experience, reality, objectivity, morality and materiality; the imagination has conventionally taken up a location somewhere between the domains of the factual and fictional, the subjective and objective, the real and representational. (Daniels 2011: 182)

For Daniels attention to imaginative processes enlarges both the metaphorical and methodological capacity of cultural analysis. He writes that the idea and practice of "geographical imagination" has, firstly, "the metaphorical capacity to refigure a larger conceptual field, to bring material and mental worlds into closer conjunction, to connect the mythical and the mundane" (Daniels 2011: 182). And secondly, as a method, it denotes:

> specific techniques of knowledge, often forms of visual media and image-making, or overarching, theoretical modes of comprehension and experience. In this bigger picture imagination is a way of encompassing the condition of both the known world and the horizons of possible

worlds. (Daniels 2011: 183)

I take imagination as the best metaphor and method to describe the complex processes of contemporary geopolitical-media-culture [3] and the way its cluster of ideas and images are signposted for public consideration, assent and resistance. These "modes of comprehension" constitute the processes within what I am calling *spheres of public imagination*. Significantly this concept is a way of seeking to go beyond the standard idea of "the public sphere" (Habermass 1989), which has been one of the key ways that sociologists and media scholars have explained the circulation of political ideas in public life. Unlike the imaginative sphere, that Daniels describes, which seeks to bring the "mythical and the mundane" into conversation and to map the shape of both "known and possible worlds," the Habermasian public sphere is envisioned as one shaped exclusively by "critical judgement of a public making use of its reason" (Habermas 1989: 24). Habermas makes specific note that his German use of "rasonnement" includes both the idea of polemical reason and of "malcontent griping" (Habermas 1989: 27). This rightly emphasises that the public sphere is a site of struggle, however it also points to the narrowly polemical and oppositional version of reason that the Habermassian concept deploys. [4]

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[3] I will use the terms geopolitical, media and culture as individual descriptive terms at different points in this thesis, but I also use the hyphenated phrase geopolitical-media-culture as a way of signalling the broad systemic context in which my arguments take place. It is meant to be indicative of an interconnected web of cultural and symbolic systems operative in contemporary life rather than a full or inclusive descriptor. I could for example have chosen an array of terms to connect: geopolitical-media-entertainment-religious-techno-culture might for example have been a fuller capture of the diverse areas of concern in this thesis but for the purpose of readability I have chosen the shorter phrase as the stand-in nomenclature for this larger hybrid.

[4] Habermas is not oblivious to the imaginative or cultural sphere. Part of the process of "structural transformation" that he describes is the gradual emergence of a public around museums, concert halls and libraries, as art and music began to take on a life independent from the royal courts. (Habermas 1989: 38-43). But his concern with culture is instrumental

As Sharon Crowley (2006) has suggested, when it comes to apocalyptic rhetoric – based on passion and faith beliefs – a model of purely reasoned argument is a particularly inadequate framework for analysis. Apocalyptic narratives use highly charged symbolic structures that seek to convince not by a set of rational arguments but by engaging their audience in a process of imaginative participation. This apocalyptic style is not just effective with specific faith communities, who already organize their lives around a set of symbolic belief structures, it has much wider affective implications because, as Keller notes, the "apocalypse habit" (1996:11) is widespread and draws on a wealth of deeply entrenched symbolic resources.

DeLucca and Peeples (2002) also contend that a notion of the "public sphere" that finds its key metaphor in the voice or the vocalisation of dialogue is outmoded in the age of visual culture. They suggest that it has been superseded by the "public screen". This shift in metaphor is important, they argue, not just because it reflects the dominance of screen media but because it moves our understanding of public political processes forward. It delineates a move away from a necessarily nostalgic idea of public life dominated by the idea of the *voices* of rational dialogue to one that emphasises the power and the hypermediacy of the *image* and the conscious and unconscious public work of the imagination. Unlike many critics (Boorstin 1961; Postman 1985;

and institutional, as a precondition for his essential argument about a *public sphere constituted by private individuals coming together in public to exercise their critical reason on matters of common concern*. This spirited debate that he describes as having arisen in the newly formed coffee houses, salons or other public spaces of the eighteenth century may be a result of the emergence and the evolution of an independent cultural public sphere, and may involve a discussion of these works of art, but the dynamics of reasoned public discussion is his central idea. He pays no attention to the affective dynamics of art itself and its potential to form public identities, communities and powerful ideas outside or parallel to the dialogue of critical reason. The Habermasian idea of the rational public sphere has been critiqued from a range of perspectives including, its over-reliance on reason, its conception of only a single public rather than multiple publics and counter-publics, and its elision of gender and class (cf Calhoun 1993 for the best collection of critical essays).

Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995) who describe a similar shift in public discourse – to image culture and tabloidization – DeLucca and Peeples hold that the dynamics of the "public screen" and its multiplying image events/effects are not necessarily negatives for political participation and cultural change, rather the public screen "entails different forms of intelligence and knowledge" (2002:136).

John Ellis's analysis of television gives further insight into the ways that screen culture produces these "different forms of intelligence and knowledge." His analysis of television culture can be applied more broadly to what DeLucca and Peeples call the public screen and what I am calling the spheres of public imagination. He argues that television as a whole – from current affairs to soap opera to reality shows – is a primary cultural mechanism that allows us to "work through" the various contradictory fragments that come to us initially as "news".

> Indeed, television can be seen as a vast mechanism for processing the raw data of news reality into more narrativized, explained forms. This can be likened to the process of 'working-through' described by psychoanalysis, a process whereby material is not so much processed into a finished product as continually worried over until it is exhausted. Television attempts to define, tries out explanations, creates narratives, talks over, makes intelligible, tries to marginalize, harnesses speculation, tries to make fit and, very occasionally, anathematizes.....Television does not provide any overall explanation; nor does it necessarily ignore or trivialize. Television itself, just like its soap operas, comes to no conclusions. Its process of working-through is more complex and inconclusive than that. (1999:55)

In an analysis of changing forms of news Michael Schudson (2002) contrasts Habermas' (1989) theory of the public sphere and its concentration on the development of a "free domain of reasoned public discourse" with that of

Benedict Anderson's (1991) "imagined communities," which exist as "objects of orientation and affiliation." While he credits the Habermassian model with a critical place in media studies, he argues Anderson's framework is more productive for future research.

> Anderson's work potentially promotes a much more expansive reading of news than Habermas inspires, a recognition that news is not only raw material for rational public discourse but also the public consideration of particular images of self, community and nation. It implies that the study of news should be kin to other studies of the literary or artistic products of human imagination more than to studies in democratic theory. (Schudson 2002:484)

I conceive of the spheres of public imagination as a set of processes and sites which bring together the two sides of Schudson's framework: the democratic work of journalism and political discourse as well as a broader range of creative and affective elements within popular culture. The spheres of public imagination are sites where the raw material of news and of other media and artistic productions work together to produce "images of self, community and nation".

1.4.2 Nomadic reading and intertextuality

Each chapter in this thesis presents an exemplar reading that focuses on an intersecting set of cultural texts and explores a cluster of contested images, ideas, myths and cultural formations. They each provide a case study of a particular aspect of contemporary apocalyptic narratives and they each demonstrate the dynamics of spheres of public imagination. The hybrid, baroque structure of the apocalyptic and the polyphonic logic of the spheres of public imagination call for a particular approach to textual analysis: one that privileges intertextuality and connections across texts, genres and forms. A number of authors (Grossberg 1987; Grossberg 1988; Radaway 1988; Braidotti 1994; Brown 1996; Tamboukou 2008; Tamboukou 2009) have used Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the "nomadic" to describe the shifting,

fragmentary and dispersed nature of contemporary subjectivity, narratives and media and this thesis adopts a nomadic method in the production of its case studies.

Larry Grossberg argues that the contemporary experience of fragmentation is not merely a matter of subjective individual experience but rather our experience of subjectivity "functions as, and is articulated out of, a nomadic wandering through ever-changing positions and apparatuses" (1987: 11). Fragmentation or dispersed attention is thus both a fundamental contemporary experience as well as a way of ordering or coping with this very experience. He continues by delineating what this means for cultural analysis:

> The critic has not only to map out the lines of this mobility, but also recognise that only by entering into this nomadic relation to the media can they map the complex social spaces of media effects. We need a vocabulary to describe the shifting and contradictory partial relations of nomadic subjectivity, a subjectivity which is always moving along different vectors and changing its shape, but always having a shape. (1987: 11)

Mary Ellen Brown has used the notion of the nomadic subject in research on the consumption of television texts. She writes of a kind of "grazing" of these texts pursued by viewers:

> The nomadic self must continue to act and seek out new representations to temporarily "complete" and center her or himself. This respite is only temporary however, and after a short time, the nomadic subject must continue to move. (Brown 1996: 57)

Similarly Janice Radway writes of how this nomadic style of negotiating modern identity and modern media can produce "active individuals who productively articulate together bits and pieces of cultural material scavenged from a multitude of sites and who, in doing so, nomadically, perhaps even slyly, take up many different subject positions with respect to the dominant cultural apparatuses" (1988:368).

This notion of the nomadic is particularly pertinent to the study of the contemporary formation of the apocalyptic. As I have already indicated one of the propositions of this study is that the contemporary apocalyptic is a highly dynamic, hybrid, baroque narrative. So in this sense it can only be traced *nomadically*: that is by wandering across a series of different sites, modes and forms of expression. Michael Barkun's "improvisational millennialism" (2003:19), a highly personalised form of apocalyptic belief sutured together by contemporary subjects from a variety of religious, popular and political sources, is only the most obvious version of this nomadic tendency within the apocalyptic. In one sense what I am arguing is that all contemporary forms of apocalyptic are in fact improvisational or nomadic but as Grossberg reminds us in the quote above, just because the apocalyptic is constantly changing shape does not mean that as a series of cultural formations it is not also always taking specific shapes.

Grossberg argues that taking the nomadic seriously has implications for both conceptualizing the cultural sphere and for the way that cultural criticism works:

> Thus the task of cultural criticism is less that of interpreting texts and audiences than of describing vectors, distances and densities, intersections and interruptions, and the nomadic wandering (whether of people in everyday life or as cultural critics) through this unequally and unstably organized field of tendential forces and struggles. To describe a practice is to consider its place within this dispersed field and how it occupies that space in relation to structures existing at different levels of abstraction. (1988: 383)

This call to describe "vectors, distances and densities, intersections and interruptions" rather than simply account for statements, arguments or even symbols is particularly pertinent when dealing with apocalyptic narratives, which by their very nature are coded, visionary stories.

The nomadic reading that I employ seeks to trace the shape of the apocalyptic across a range of different domains. It is nomadic, circular, and ruminative

but it does proceed from an understanding that these domains can at least be partially mapped and named. Kathleen Stewart and Susan Harding (1999) in a major review of studies dealing with the apocalyptic and millenarian themes, from a range of disciplines, provide one way of describing the apocalyptic across these multiple domains. As I noted above they argue that the apocalyptic is more than a simple set of stories and beliefs, rather it is "a network of discourses and practices in social and political use and circulation" (290). They argue that as a discursive field apocalypticism has a number of formal qualities which include: "(a) conditions of possibility, (b) histories of use, (c) symptoms, (d) precise social and institutional locales and modes of circulation, and (e) politics" (290). However even though these contemporary manifestations of the apocalyptic can be recognized and mapped by attention to this or similar heuristics Harding and Stewart also argue that it is fundamentally "contestatory" and surprisingly flexible. They continue:

> In fact, it is often precisely through contest and political conflict that it has gained its charge, spread across domains, and, in some cases, taken extreme forms. As a rhetoric, it is a strategy of persuasion or coercion that interrupts routine and acquiescence with a call of alarm….Yet its very claim to Truth incites competing, often equally totalizing, counterclaims and creates dialogics, multivocality, and multiveiling…at the heart of the apocalyptic. What is more, the very structure of any particular apocalyptic discourse is dialectical, oscillating between opposing poles of darkness and light. (290)

I frame this thesis as a *nomadic reading* because my analysis concentrates on the contestatory elements and the "dialogics, multivocality, and multiveiling…at the heart of the apocalyptic". In Maria Tamboukou's phrase, nomadic narratives "unfold in the intermezzo of a variety of literary genres" (2008:290). By bringing into conversation a diverse range of cultural texts and media forms my nomadic readings analyze the sites of such interstitial activity.

My readings are nomadic in the sense that I roam across texts, media forms, and genres and I also roam theoretically, deploying a wide range of theoretical

tools and concepts that are appropriate to the analysis of a diverse set of texts. So in developing these nomadic readings this research utilises a range of analytical tools, techniques and theoretical perpectives drawn from narrative studies (Riessman 2008), journalism and media studies (Zelizer 2004; Altheide 1987; Hall 1975), discourse analysis and sociolinguistics (Fairclough 2003), and cultural and film studies (Kellner and Ryan 1988; Gray 2002).

Theoretically, what links the approach in all these instances is my privileging of intertextuality as a key dynamic in understanding both specific mythic formations, political rhetoric and other discourse structures. Intertextuality is a broad term that was introduced by Julia Kristeva in her discussion of Mikhail Bakhtin's approach to the dialogical text. In her seminal essay "Word Dialogue Novel" Kristeva writes:

> Bakhtin was one of the first to replace the static hewing out of texts with a model where literary structure does not simply *exist* but is generated in relation to *another* structure. What allows a dynamic dimension to structuralism is his conception of the 'literary word' as an *intersection of textual surfaces* rather than a *point* (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character) and the contemporary or earlier cultural context.
> (1969/1986: 36)

As Daniel Boyarin has written, history is in effect intertextuality: "Intertexuality is, in a sense, the way that history, understood as cultural and ideological change and conflict, records itself within textuality" (Boyarin 1990:94 in Keller 2005:83). Intertextuality involves not just hearing the echoes of predecessor texts but also looking at the way contemporary *context* shapes readings of historic text and vice versa.

1.4.3 Imaginative infrastructure and a note on some key terms

Within the media and communication studies literature the terms narrative, story, myth and discourse are used in a diverse and often confusing range of ways. This confusion is further heightened when in an interdisciplinary work

such as this the specialist language surrounding myth in religious studies is also considered. In this study I use these terms to identify different aspects of the *imaginative infrastructure* of the contemporary apocalyptic, which is to say I use them to describe certain aspects of the processes that contribute to the sites I have defined as the *spheres of public imagination*.

Before concluding this introductory chapter I will briefly outline my approach to these terms. Following the common usage describing newspaper articles as "news stories" I use *story* to designate the specific content of media texts[5]. Thornborrow and Fitzgerald (2004) have recently defined stories in this context as including: a person and/or place, a related action and a reason for their interaction. They argue that even the tightly written paragraphs of news articles can be regarded as self-contained micro-stories. Equally a larger or continuing story may be told across a number of articles over time. I use *narrative* as an overarching collective term to describe patterns and the structural devices that govern storytelling. I use *myth* to describe a particular narrative structure that allows a group of stories to be recognized as symbolically significant within a particular cultural context. Finally I use the term *discourse* to describe the embodiment of broader socio-cultural structures and practices in texts. One further term, *rhetoric*, is used, particularly in regard to presidential and political speeches. I use the notion of rhetoric to identify sets of persuasive linguistic devices particularly in political speeches but also in other forms. Thus for example, the reports of an accused terrorist such as the Australian Jack Thomas who was arrested in Pakistan in January 2003 are *stories* that tell of a set of related facts: an Australian convert to Islam, apprehended and imprisoned by Pakistani authorities. But over time these simple stories start to adhere to a *mythic* pattern in that they resonate with a larger narrative of the local boy who goes on an adventure and is forced to confront danger that impedes his return journey. But this is not the common hero's journey myth (Campbell 1993) because it is embroiled in a broader *discourse* that designates Thomas' adventure as part of the "war on

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5 I use the term "media texts" to refer very broadly to cultural artifacts across factual and fictional media ranging from journalistic accounts through to cinematic features.

terror". The structure of this discourse can be partially uncovered by an analysis of the *rhetorical* construction of the ensuing legal case and the play between ideas and phrases like "terrorist threat" and "civil liberties".

However in the context of contemporary media systems this analysis of story, myth and discourse is even more complex and that is why I refer to the combined effect of these storytelling devices as constituting an overarching *imaginative infrastructure*. The reports of terrorist arrests and trials can no longer be analysed in isolation as news stories alone. The story of Jack Thomas took place within the broader sphere of public imagination that I have been describing. Thomas' story is played out in the same multimedia space as for example the stories of other high profile Australian terror suspects such as one time Australian Guantanamo detainee David Hicks and both these stories play against broader more general mythic archetypes of *the* terrorist familiar from both news, novels, film and TV. Each of these stories resonate with other stories of western Islamic converts caught in Afghanistan and Pakistan such as the high profile American case of John Walker Lindh. Since 2001 the archetype of the terrorist interacts with other cultural figures such as the oriental other and Muslim extremist (Said 1978; Winch 2005) and symbolically all these events are set against the impact of the falling towers of September 11. Thus the simple story of each of these figures is implicated in the wider discourse of "terrorvision" that I have described.

In a dynamic situation like this, particular storytelling motifs are easily leveraged to produce a range of interacting effects. For example, one of the critical arguments in the Thomas trial, when he was eventually tried, was that he had been set up by Osama Bin Laden to come back to Australia as a "sleeper" agent. The sleeper agent argument gained frisson through its easy association with this motif in popular culture. The sleeper agent has been a key element of popular TV series that dramatise the terrorist threat. A Muslim sleeper cell is central to the fourth season of the hit Fox series *24* (2005) and Showtime have produced two seasons of *Sleeper Cell* (2005/2006), in which an African-American Muslim FBI agent goes undercover to infiltrate a sleeper

cell planning attacks in America. Both the new film version of *Manuchurian Candidate* and these TV series were screening in Australia during key moments of the Thomas trial and its coverage. In this instance the motif of the sleeper is also clustered together with that of the convert and in the public performance of the Thomas story the mythic figure of the trickster and its Australian vernacular version the larrikin also become apparent (see O'Donnell 2008 for a full analysis).

It is because of these complex interactive dynamics that I have adopted the term *spheres of public imagination* and describe the collective interaction of various story and narrative devices as constituting an *imaginative infrastructure* operating across a range of intersecting factual and dramatic media. My analysis of the war on terror and the contemporary apocalyptic in this thesis will deploy a broad analysis of this type which emphasizes the way contemporary myths, stories and discourses work together as an intersecting set of images and idea clusters rather than as predetermined frameworks of given archetypes.

1.4.4 Culture and media

My argument that spheres of public imagination exist as sites of cultural exploration and contest, and that a series of symbolic devices that I call an imaginative infrastructure operate fluidly across a range of factual and fictional media to produce the dynamics of these sites, is formulated as an alternative way of conceiving the dynamics that have traditionally been analysed in media studies through a Habermassian lens. However before concluding this introduction I want to note that it draws on and is congruent with three well established bodies of thought which will play a part in my analysis. Firstly the field of cultural studies which has long established that the realm of popular entertainment not only can but must be read for its ideological or political messages (Storey 2003; Hermes 2005; Van Zoonen 2005). Secondly the field of new media studies which suggests that all contemporary media remediates other media (Bolter and Grusin 1999). Thirdly the field of neo-baroque studies which draws on both cultural studies

and new media studies and highlights the polycentrism, seriality and labrynthian intertextuality of contemporary media forms (Ndalianis 2004).

The concepts of cultural studies are now well established and do not have to be rehearsed here. The concept of remediation as it is developed by Bolter and Grusin is dealt with in more depth in the final section of chapter four but to prefigure that argument I will make note of one of their central concepts here. According to Bolter and Grusin (1999) all media "remediates" other media. This logic of remediation includes the intertextuality of repurposed content from one medium to another, through to the ways in which mediums themselves can be seen to both succeed and remodel one another. While the internet can be seen to refashion the liveness of TV's live broadcast, TV quickly adopted the windowed hypertextual presentation of the web-screen and increasingly social media or web 2.00 is eclipsing the real time capacity of broadcast TV news. But more importantly, they argue that each medium, or more generally media and mediation, can only be understood in contemporary culture not as static ideas or entities but as forms in constant response to one another:

> Our culture conceives of each medium or constellation of media as it responds to, redeploys, competes with and reforms other media... No medium, it seems, can now function independently and establish its own separate and purified space of cultural meaning. (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 55)

This theory of remediation is in turn one of the bodies of theory drawn on by Angela Ndalianis in her formulation of the contemporary neo-baroque. This is an idea that I return to at several points in the thesis to explore particular dynamics of the apocalyptic in the spheres of public imagination. It is particularly helpful in formulating an approach to the "phantasmagoric" aesthetics (Warner 2006) of the apocalyptic which I analyse in the next chapter. I have used the adjective "baroque" to describe the apocalyptic style in several places so far. This description can be taken in its vernacular usage where the art-historical term has taken on an everyday meaning of ornate and elaborate. But I will also argue that the hallucinatory vision of the apocalyptic

is an example of what Ndalianis (2004) and other scholars (Calabrese 1992; Cubitt 2009; Egginton 2009) have described as the contemporary "neo-baroque".

Ndalianis (2004) argues that the baroque is a cultural form which has continued to "have a life" (8) beyond its canonical form in the seventeenth century. She defines this neo-baroque style as labyrinthian, hypertextual, allegorical, polycentric, serial and visually spectacular. In its contemporary guise it is also a mediation of the "technological sublime" and can be recognized in the technological and economic organization of media forms as much as in the specific formalist qualities of cultural artifacts. In tracing the history and etymology of the baroque Ndalianis notes that from its emergence as a term in the eighteenth century it carried not just a descriptive meaning, which defined a period or style, but that it carried a "derogatory" imputation which contrasted seventeenth century affective excess with Enlightenment reason. (Ndalianis 2004: 7) In this sense, we see in the eighteenth century "invention" of the baroque, a clash between critical reason and affective ways of world making, similar to the one that I outlined above in my critique of "public sphere" theories. This is why the "neo-baroque" in its contemporary guise provides both a set of methodological tools and an astute theoretical lens through which to view the dynamics of both the spheres of public imagination and the apocalyptic. The contemporary neo-baroque style can be noted in a range of media from the architecture of theme parks, through to the excesses of Hollywood blockbuster special effects. But it is also a more general pattern in the contemporary mediascape which Ndalianis characterizes as a refusal "to accept the limitations of the frame" where "closed forms are replaced by open structures that favor a dynamic and expanding polycentrism" (Ndalianis 2004: 25). As such it provides a range of analytical tools to understand both the excesses of the apocalyptic style and the intertextual dynamics of the spheres of public imagination.

1.5 Conclusion

In concluding this introductory chapter I will reiterate my key terms and main arguments.

In this thesis I will argue that the apocalyptic remains a powerful contemporary mythic structure that can be traced across a variety of cultural fields and products.

In the post 9/11 context this apocalyptic myth has helped shape the production of the western war on terror discourse.

I situate my analysis of the apocalyptic and the war on terror as an intertextual production across a broad set of cultural sites, expressed through a range of factual and fictional modes and genres. I call the sites and processes of this intersection: spheres of public imagination.

Myth, narrative, discourse, rhetoric and story, as I have explained above, are each particular lenses through which we may understand aspects of this interaction in the spheres of public imagination. These modalities of storytelling produce a set of motifs, tropes and frames which create what I call an imaginative infrastructure which builds links between ancient and contemporary understandings of the apocalyptic and synergies across factual and fictional modes of cultural production.

My analysis of the apocalyptic is rooted in key motifs that can be traced to biblical texts of the Judaeo-Christian apocalyptic literature such as the New Testament *Book of Revelation*, however my analysis is not based on a mix and match identification of such motifs within contemporary and originary texts. I argue that the "proliferation and persistence" (Quinby 1994: xv) of the apocalyptic is not limited by these original motifs, but they provide a skeletal underpinning for the broader imaginative infrastructure of the contemporary apocalyptic which has taken on its own form in response to the current "rhetorical situation" (Schussler Fiorenza 1991).

In the next chapter I will trace the evolution of major aspects of the apocalyptic literature and identify several key motifs and modes of production that will be central to my ongoing analysis. The isolation and interaction of the catastrophic and the millenarian aspects of the apocalyptic; the dominant motif of the cosmic war; the visionary dynamics of revelation and the sense of a cosmic secret; and the strategic production of division and difference, will be identified as key aspects of the biblical apocalyptic literature which have particular relevance for the analysis in this thesis and the production of the contemporary apocalyptic. I will also identify the coded baroque style of apocalyptic literature as a critical aspect of both its ancient and contemporary formations.