

## Film and TV in Anxious Times

*Thomas S. Hibbs*

In the days and weeks after the terrorist atrocities of September 11, Americans gathered around their TV sets in shock, grief, anger, and admiration. Many had watched live TV coverage of the second plane striking the Twin Towers and of the towers collapsing. Of course, Americans did much more than watch TV. They sought out information from print media and on the Internet, listened to talk and news radio, made generous contributions to newly established charities, and sought consolation in conversations with neighbors, friends, and family. But TV broadcasts supplied the most compelling stories, the most terrifying and most moving images. And Americans did what they have done in times of national crisis since the assassination of President Kennedy. They watched.

Some critics of American culture saw the TV presentation of 9/11 and its aftermath as media hype, the transformation of real-life tragedy into a Hollywood blockbuster with grand special effects. But this judgment evinces too much cynicism about American culture. Americans did not experience the suicide hijackings as entertaining diversions from the anomie of their bourgeois lives. Many Americans, especially in the Northeast, either knew people who were murdered or had friends who knew victims. Americans who travel by air with regularity knew that they could have been on one of those planes. As the stories of cell phone calls, of noble rescuers, of loss, grief, and righteous anger multiplied, Americans increasingly identified with and even participated in the stories.

The media itself was remarkably restrained and somber in its reporting. In a rare exercise of humility, the media seemed to sense that the magnitude of the events unfolding was beyond their comprehension or manipulation, and so they simply reported and let those with direct experience tell their stories.

In many ways, 9/11 seems a long time ago, fostered in part by an unspoken media interdiction on broadcasting the images of the planes hitting the towers and in part by how many other arresting images have been broadcast in the interim. We have seen footage of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, videotapes of Osama joking about the success of the attacks, the

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toppling of the Baghdad statue of Saddam, scenes of injured and mutilated soldiers and citizens, and orchestrated footage of terrorist beheadings of innocent westerners.

After initial proclamations of the death of irony, the nightly news and political talk shows have increasingly become, or returned to being, fora for shrill rhetoric in our culture wars. Initial calls for unified support of President Bush have given way to Michael Moore's propaganda film *Fahrenheit 9/11*. In the midst of our divisions, we long for an experience of unity or at least a respite from the present overdose of anxiety and division. The reverent, bipartisan celebration of the life and political achievements of President Ronald Reagan revived, if only momentarily and by a willing forgetfulness of the acrimony that often characterized his time in office, a sense of that lost unity. But this moment soon faded, replaced by the partisan spectacle of the Democratic and Republican national conventions.

And so Americans live, for now, in a new normal. Terrorism and war have found their places alongside and often subordinate to the entertainment industry. Howard Stern's soft porn routines have earned censure, as did the "wardrobe malfunction" of the Janet Jackson half-time breast exposure. Although serious issues—from free speech to the erosion of cultural mores and the exposure of vulnerable children to corrosive material—are often at stake in these debates, the shocks seem as ephemeral as the indignant calls for reform. Through it all, we witness the continuous presence of what radio commentator Laura Ingraham calls "tragedy TV," in which the Scott Peterson murder trial replaces "All O.J. all the time" and CNN's Larry King interviews Jeffrey Dahmer's parents who offer practical tips on how not to raise a cannibalistic serial killer.

Drama and news, documentary and sporting competition, all come together in the now dominant genre of reality TV, which feeds a hunger for community, a desire for stories about folks just like us, a craving for authenticity and the unscripted. In film, however, American appetites seem to head in quite a different direction: an omnivorous desire for larger-than-life fairy tales like *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* and comic-book heroism like *Spider-Man* and *The Matrix*. These films have reshaped the market of filmmaking, as will the unprecedented success of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, which became the highest grossing R-rated film in history and held a number one ranking on two separate occasions until it was permanently dethroned by Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill Vol. 2*. The ascendancy of reality TV and fantasy films, the popularity of a premodern religious narrative and postmodern ironic wallowing in violence—so com-

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plex and contradictory are our cultural products, so many and varied are the markets, mainstream and niche, that one is tempted to swear off making any judgments at all about American popular culture.

And yet certain judgments, however tentative, can be made about the shape of our popular culture and the paradoxes and contradictions embedded within it. We seem suspicious that what we take to be real in our experience is in fact a fiction, that technological construction obscures what is natural and authentic. We are also anxious that technology, the chief instrument of progress in our culture, will be turned against us by terrorists, destroying our entertainment-seeking way of life. We hunger at once for restored innocence and unifying epics; we lament what we are and we fear losing what we have. Taken together, film and television seem to mirror the confusions of our age. Real love, real danger, and real grief intermingle in the popular imagination with pulp fact and pulp fiction, with the worst delusions and highest aspirations both taking shape on the big and little screen.

### **The Quest for Innocence**

Of course, these contradictions did not surface for the first time in our post-9/11 society. Ten years ago, in the summer of 1994, the summer O.J. Simpson was revealed as a kind of demonic double, a celebrity construct concealing a murderous dark side, two of the biggest films were *Forrest Gump* and *Natural Born Killers*. Gump remains one of the highest grossing films of all time; it traces American life from the 1950s into the 1980s and covers significant cultural and political events: Elvis, the Beatles, civil rights, Vietnam, the birth of the Apple computer, and every president from Kennedy to Reagan. Forrest travels through this America, finding himself, Zelig-like, in the midst of every great event. He suffers from a mental disability that ends up being a great blessing. Unable to comprehend the world around him, Forrest is often bemused by events and innocent of any deep understanding of their significance. He is the exact antithesis of the consciousness raising protest leaders of the 1960s. Supplied by his mother with a set of platitudes—"stupid is as stupid does" and "life is like a box of chocolates"—Forrest faces each situation with good will and deep-seated optimism, rooted in a faith in divine providence. Void of critical reflection, Forrest is never confused, never hesitant about what he ought to do. As the rest of America explodes, Forrest's faith preserves him and anyone who associates with him. In the end, Forrest has it all: fame, wealth, and ultimately love.

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Noting that Forrest's good will and trust lead to success and that characters such as anti-war protesters typify the bad guys in the film, some conservatives praised Gump for its celebration of innocence and old-fashioned virtues like self-reliance, loyalty, honesty, and patriotism. Writing in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Pat Buchanan said the film "celebrates the values of conservatism, of the old America, of fidelity and family, faith and goodness. And the way of life this film holds up to be squalid and ruinous is the way of Woodstock."

Interestingly, Gump treats precisely that period of modern American history that has preoccupied the revisionist films of Oliver Stone, whose *JFK* and *Nixon* tell the tale of the downward thrust of American public life. *Natural Born Killers* marks a sort of culmination of that history, depicting the 1990s as an "age of absurdity." Abused by their parents, Mickey and Malory are the central characters in Stone's story of love at first sight, followed immediately by a murderous rampage. Fawned over by the media, Mickey and Malory become cult heroes, with adoring fans holding up placards reading, "Kill Me, Mickey." With alternating footage of contemporary murders and 1950s families gathered around TVs, Stone wants to impart the message that characters like Mickey and Malory are the results of our media- and television-obsessed era. Even if it remains unclear what lesson Stone ultimately wants us to derive from his film, his focus on our violence-saturated media culture has lost none of its punch, as we have moved from O.J. TV to the almost non-stop coverage of the Washington-area snipers, the Scott Peterson trial, and now regular footage of terrorist beheadings.

On the surface, these two films seem to be polar opposites. But in reality they share core romantic assumptions: the belief that civilization, calculative reason, self-consciousness, and technology are sources of evil, alienating human beings from nature and putting them at odds with one another. The only escape seems to be a kind of primitive and inveterate innocence. Indeed, *Natural Born Killers* has its own analogue to Forrest's innocence: an American Indian whom Mickey and Malory encounter in the desert, an individual who does not own a TV and who speaks no English, is portrayed as the only "innocent" character in the film.

If some conservatives affirmed Gump's celebration of the virtues of innocence, Stone's critique of media culture and gun-obsessed violence finds a welcome reception on the left, which sees an alienating capitalism turning human life itself into entertainment for profit. This theme has been prominent on the left since at least the 1960s, especially in rock music, where the romantic myth of human desire and competition as corruptive

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of nature is a persistent theme. It is there in John Lennon's "Imagine" and CSNY's "Woodstock," which urges us "to get ourselves back to the garden," or in Don Henley's Reagan-era lament, "The End of the Innocence," with its longing for a place "still untouched by man."

But none of these romantic pleas can show us the path back to unreflective innocence. We are saddled with a harsh dilemma: we must and yet we cannot return. So elusive seems this innocence, so thoroughgoing our saturation in the technological, the calculative, and the instrumental, that we may be tempted to adopt an antithetical conception of human nature, as violent, chaotic, and amoral. This contradiction infects the very title of Stone's film, *Natural Born Killers*. Although the surface of the film seems to say that such characters as Mickey and Malory are media constructs, the title hints at some deeper perturbation in nature as the source of their destructive mayhem.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the tensions within American popular culture reflect deeper tensions in our modern way of life, tensions going back to the very origins of modern society. Reacting against the rationalism and instrumentalism of his modern predecessors, the Swiss philosopher Rousseau took direct aim at the central thesis of early modern political theory: the idea that the state of nature is marked by acquisitiveness, competition, and perhaps even war. According to Rousseau, the competitive passions are initiated and inflamed only in advanced civilization. The state of nature was the childhood of the human race, when desires were simple, when human beings sought only their "true needs," when "self-preservation" was least prejudicial to the well-being of others. Only with the development of reason could human vanity develop, along with a growing sense of the indefinite number of ways in which our desires can be satisfied and frustrated.

The result is that we seem trapped in a state of permanent frustration. We become more acutely aware of our alienation but we cannot cure it. We seem simultaneously impelled to return to Rousseau's "nature" and yet unable (and frankly unwilling) to do so. We seem forced to use the very instrument, human reason, that is the source of our dissatisfaction as the only tool available to remedy our situation. We see technology as an enemy, yet we subject ourselves to its creations, in the forlorn hope that we can re-create the visceral pleasures of pre-technological life.

### **Make-Believe Authenticity**

In the aftermath of 9/11, the romantic impulse in popular culture has arguably grown even stronger. It is visible in our desperate hunger for the

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authentic and unrehearsed, for the non-staged and non-constructed, for an experience of intimacy that peers beneath or behind the public persona. The ever growing phenomenon of reality TV feeds precisely such longing, as does the confessional character of so much of contemporary television—from the daytime shows such as *Oprah* to primetime specials with Barbara Walters to the narrative structure of *The Sopranos*. The most well-known and most enduring of the reality TV shows, *Survivor*, offers an artificial return to a state of nature, in locales such as Borneo, the Amazon, and the Outback, with groups of contestants organized into “tribes.”

One of the attractions of reality TV is its apparently ruthless combative structure, which feeds a desire for pure competition and for a kind of meritocracy. Often quite arbitrary and pointless, the contests (like seeing who can stand on a tree stump the longest) supply clear rules and most often clear victories. Yet, the rule of competition and merit is ultimately brought under the sway of democratic voting, as the members of the existing tribe determine, by popular vote, who goes and who stays. Other important communitarian or therapeutic elements also remain. Most of the characters want acceptance and understanding; they expend energy, when given the chance, trying to justify their acts to others. Both rival competitors and audience members exhibit an appreciation of cunning, but they also appreciate the leveling that occurs when the most ruthless are eliminated and publicly vilified. Just in the past year characters from *Survivor* and Donald Trump’s *The Apprentice* became public villains because of their ruthlessness. In general, reality TV feeds our desire to make judgments about characters and personalities, about physical appearances and personal tastes—matters we are expected to avoid commenting on in polite company. Especially popular are shows that allow us to judge that other people are just like we are or worse.

Other reality TV shows center on the gap between a media star’s public image and what the camera reveals. Particularly noteworthy in this mode is MTV’s *The Osbournes*, whose comic success rests largely upon the incongruity between Ozzie’s rock persona—he was band leader of the notorious heavy metal band Black Sabbath—and his pathetic ordinariness at home. In a Homer Simpson sort of way, Ozzy is endearing. He’s a physical wreck, walks like E.T., and mumbles incoherently, except when saying “f\*\*k.” His kids treat him with an indiscriminate mixture of affection and derision, while his wife, Sharon, runs not only his life but also his career. In response to her suggestion that bubbles should become a regular part of his concerts, all he can muster is the feeble objection: “I won’t have f\*\*ing bubbles! I’m the Prince of f\*\*ing Darkness, Sharon!”

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With his stumbling and bumbling Ozzie is great reality TV, a character who seems to provide the direct, unmediated confrontation with unscripted reality, the ever-elusive goal of all reality TV. So great is the appetite for authenticity and so acute is our sense that we have never quite achieved it that MTV has established a website for characters in *The Real World* to describe the real stories behind their reality TV show.

Other reality shows, particularly those having to do with home improvement such as *Extreme Makeover*, tap into what David Brooks calls the “mystical element in consumer longing.” According to Brooks, Americans persistently construct fantasies of what their lives might be like, fantasies fed by magazines and TV ads. Our inveterate American “future-mindedness,” our sense that bliss lies just around the corner, is currently exhibited in dreams of upward mobility, of life in a slightly better neighborhood with a kitchen and bath of our dreams.

As Brooks notes, such fantasies also have their downsides, in the form of “salvation panic,” the anxiety that we will never reach our dreams or that we will fail to reach them in the most seamless fashion. In the Fox plastic surgery show, *The Swan*, extreme makeover moves from one’s property to one’s body; indeed, the show reconceives the body as property, a kind of raw material amenable to technological reconstruction. Billed as a “fairy tale” become “reality,” the show purports to offer ordinary looking women a chance to look like beauty contestants. Like *Survivor*, it is a competitive “boot camp” that promises to eliminate the undeserving.

The quest for authenticity can also be seen in some of the most popular teen and young adult shows, which aim to create make-believe worlds uninterrupted by adult supervision and moralizing. The popular sitcom *Friends*, for example, featured six young adults in the period between college and marriage. It gave viewers a largely sunny picture of interchanging relationships and satisfied sexual appetites, of immediate passion without the demands of maturity. Going into the final episode this past spring, the big unresolved issue was whether Rachel and her baby would leave for Paris or remain in New York and thus continue the hope of a reunion with Ross, the child’s father. It is instructive that amid all of Rachel’s “should I stay or should I go?” deliberations and Ross’s conniving to keep her from going, the baby is barely even mentioned. What matters most is the revitalization of shared passion and authentic feeling.

Perhaps the most influential teen show in the past few years was *Dawson’s Creek*, whose teenage characters spoke in complete paragraphs and with great psychological sophistication. Almost every episode fea-

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tures one of the teens saying to another, “Don’t you see what you’re doing?” and then proceeding to offer an astonishingly detailed analysis of motives and behavior. *Dawson’s Creek* characters talk like divorced 40-year-olds with 20 years of therapy under their belts. Dawson himself embodies the romantic tension of the artist, desperate to lead an authentic life, unable ever to quite free himself from his childhood soul mate. A fan of Spielberg from his youth, Dawson’s goal is to become a filmmaker. His romantic quest for authenticity is nearly always short-circuited by his (also romantic) desire to be an artist. In this, he typifies the characters on *Dawson’s Creek* who never really live because their self-consciousness always interjects itself. They are doomed to self-conscious interpretation even before they have finished experiencing anything.

Ironically, the superficial sophistication of the *Dawson’s Creek* characters indicates not just the elusive nature of our quest for authenticity but also our societal retreat from childhood innocence. The characters are detached, abstract, and hyper-reflective. Deprived of their childhood by irresponsible and usually sexually unfaithful parents, they are old before their time, trapped in an abusive history that deprives them of any genuine hope in the future.

### **From Horror to Farce**

The experience of entrapment finds a different expression in the horror genre, which has become both more mainstream and more focused on young adult characters in the past twenty years. Going all the way back to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the horror genre’s central insight concerns the tragic and unanticipated consequences of the Enlightenment project of controlling nature through technology. At its best, the horror genre is a striking reminder that not every kind of evil is susceptible to technological or medical diagnosis and treatment; it suggests that our very pursuit of the elimination of certain evils may give rise to greater evils; it points to the limitations of human power over nature.

But over time, the horror genre has gone largely from realism and warning to grotesquerie and farce. Jaded audiences become increasingly attentive to the surface aesthetics of the genre, to the one-upmanship in which filmmakers engage, competing to out-do predecessors in both the quantity and quality of acts of violence. Inevitably, the horror film becomes a kind of comic commentary on the genre itself, as in the *Scream* films from the late 1990s and the *Scary Movie* films more recently. Horror movies now feature a surfeit of allusions to other horror movies, a series

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of inside jokes shared by filmmakers and viewers alike. As horror becomes farce, there is a set of rules that governs the action. As one of the *Scream* characters warns the others: “If you want to survive in a horror film, never drink, have sex, or say ‘I’ll be right back.’” And for the sequel there must be an increase in the body count and greater artistry in the mechanisms of torture.

The best recent examples of the aesthetics of evil can be found in Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill*, Vol. 1 and Vol. 2 (2003-2004). Tarantino attained fame in the 1990s with a trailblazing and hyper-ironic mix of humor and violence in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994). About his female stars in the *Kill Bill* films, he comments, “There’s something intrinsically cool... something intrinsically more painful about beautiful women being abused that way, all right?” Of his preoccupation with various stylistic representations of blood, as it seeps, drips, and cascades from victims, Tarantino has said, “Japanese blood is the prettiest. It’s like nice, and it has a scarlet redness about it.” Chinese blood is “like Kool-Aid almost.” And American blood is “more syrupy kind of stuff.” Tarantino thus turns unremitting violence into a sort of religious spectacle, a liturgy that appeals as much to the intellect as to the imagination.

Since the 1980s, filmmakers, especially in the horror genre, have sought to overwhelm the imagination of viewers with a magnification of evil. But Tarantino is doing something more than simply competing for the title of most violent director. He is, as he recently said, in the business of making viewers aware of precisely how the films work on them. Trying to follow *Kill Bill*’s art and action—from humor to excruciating vivisection back to humor—forces viewers to “turn on a dime” and switch emotions. *Kill Bill* is so stylized and so ironic that viewers cannot help but be aware of how the film is working on them. And, as always with Tarantino, there is a litany of allusions to other films, as if nothing existed outside the world of popular culture, and as if cleverness in catching the allusions is the best we can do in the way of wisdom.

Taken together, the contemporary horror genre demonstrates how our failed quest for innocence can engender a sense that nature is really the antithesis of innocence. This flipping from one extreme view of nature to its polar opposite surfaces in the treatment of sexuality, where the playful, romantic fantasies of *Friends* or *Sex in the City* become dark sado-masochistic rituals. Culture critic Camille Paglia argues that this is the revenge of Marquis de Sade upon Rousseau, the latter of whom “seeks freedom by banishing social hierarchy and worshipping uniformly benev-

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olent nature.” But when political and religious authorities weaken, hierarchy reasserts itself in sex, especially in the shifting hierarchies of power involved in sadomasochism. Sade, who sees cruelty as natural and construes murder as a potentially erotic activity, is not so much the antithesis of Romanticism as its radicalization. Sade subjects the amorality of nature to a cold, calculating analysis in which “fantasies” are brought out “into the cold light of consciousness.” He makes “visible” the results of the natural unleashing of egoistic appetite: the recognition that the body is nothing more than raw material, an instrument of subjection and subjugation for the satisfaction of one’s desires, a satisfaction that gleefully obliterates the body’s natural contours.

### Simulation and Myth

The idea that reality is simply a construct runs through much of our popular culture, but it is nowhere more dramatically exhibited than in the hugely successful *Matrix* trilogy. The three films draw upon a variety of classical myths, echo passages from Plato and Descartes, and allude frequently to themes from eastern religion and the Christian gospels. A Gnostic version of the gospels is on display in the apocalyptic battle at the end of the trilogy, where symbols of the cross abound. The plot also plays into adolescent fantasies about an individual’s ability to see through the tissue of lies that constitute conventional society. The rebel leader Morpheus asks the chosen one Neo whether he senses that “something is wrong in the world,” something that you “cannot explain but that you feel.” It turns out that what we think we are experiencing is simply a construct imposed upon us or implanted within us by the Matrix, a system of artificial intelligence made by men that eventually took control of humanity. By stressing the way utopian politics and modern science create a monster that rebels against and enslaves its maker, *The Matrix* stands firmly within the original tradition of modern horror.

But the quest for something real rather than constructed does not lead to a romantic return to a state of innocence. Instead, *The Matrix* attempts to distinguish between the human and the man-made, the natural and the artificial, by stressing the complexity and individuality of human beings in their embodied state. This humanity stands in contrast to the generic and essentially disembodied manifestations of the Matrix, an endless number of replicating programs named Agent Smith, devoid of passion or any sense of love or suffering. The alternative to the comfortable, unreflective world within the Matrix is the “desert of the real.”

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*The Matrix* thus sets up one of the most nuanced science fiction plots in the history of the genre; it seeks a more complicated account of the human or natural and the constructed or technological. But in the end, it fails more than it succeeds in portraying what is truly human. As Neo does battle with artificial intelligence, the vulnerable body, purported to be distinctive of humanity, is left behind. Neo becomes a sort of invulnerable machine, impervious to physical attacks and able to defy a variety of bodily limitations. The decisive action of the film takes place not in the desert of the real but in a computer-simulated world, precisely the sort of world in which today's adolescent boys experience an utter transcendence of bodily constraints, living in and through a video-game reality. Neo becomes competitive with the agents of the Matrix only after his body takes on the features of a post-human machine, a body freed from the constraints and conditions of living human bodies, a fully virtual being.

Such narratives seem to confirm the negative judgment of contemporary Hollywood found in John Lawrence and Robert Jewett's book, *The Myth of the American Superhero*. Lawrence and Jewett argue that the "rituals, symbols, and myths" of popular culture both reinforce traditional ways of thinking and "anticipate" forms of living in the future. American culture, they insist, is saturated with a peculiar myth, the myth of the American superhero, who uses violence to purge society of clearly identifiable evils that democratic institutions and ordinary citizens are incapable of combating.

Lawrence and Jewett are highly critical of this recurring allegory, which they think embodies a simplistic dualism of good and evil, a naïve faith in human heroes endowed with miraculous powers, and an affirmation of violence as the only effective means of purging society of evil. Sensing the pointlessness of democratic institutions and practices, citizens await the intervention of a superhero. The result is a "spectator democracy," where institutions are seen as oppressive and alienating forces.

Jewett and Lawrence see the superhero myth as a sort of surrogate for religion, and indeed a number of recent books argue that there is a close connection between cinema and religious experience. Some observers point to the fact that most movies are about some sort of redemption, about something that has been lost, which is either miraculously recovered or tragically gone forever. Others argue that the ritual of watching films—a communal activity that takes place in a dark and quasi-sacred space—constitutes a sort of religious experience.

In *Film as Religion*, John Lyden argues that different films, like different religions, offer a pluralism of worldviews. But the more truth there is to

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Lyden's thesis, the less significant it seems. The more vague our conception of religion, the less formative its impact. On Lyden's syncretistic view of films as modes of religious expression, it is difficult to see how cinema (or faith) could form the habits or the imagination of citizens. With no central myth, one that is available repeatedly to a wide audience, films could at best suggest contradictory images and stories, so intermittent and so distant from the world of human action, that they could not inform and shape our ways of being in the world. Lyden's argument for the overlap between film and religion works to the extent that religious experience itself becomes a spectator sport for consumers seeking merely consoling entertainment.

### **The Mirror of Television**

Neil Postman adopts a similarly critical view of the role of television in contemporary American life in his famous critique of popular culture, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Much more than film, TV shows have a wide, regular, and habitual viewership. Television offers a ritual experience of certain kinds of plots, with reality TV now the most influential genre. It provides cultural benchmarks about which viewers speak and argue, sometimes with great knowledge and passion.

In our culture, Postman argues, television has a kind of mythological status, a "way of understanding the world that is not problematic." We are not fully conscious of how TV shapes our perception of reality, and so it seems wholly "natural." We rarely "talk about television, only what's on television." Since at least the death of JFK, our central and most significant cultural stories have been mediated to us through TV, as has certainly been the case for all major events since 9/11. Television, Postman claims, is "our culture's principal mode for knowing itself."

Postman prefers Huxley to Orwell and argues that there is no need for Big Brother to conceal anything from citizens whom technological diversion has largely narcotized. Postman's thesis is more about the form of TV viewing than its specific content, but it dovetails with Lawrence and Jewett's analysis of the dominant narratives in our culture. In both cases, the result is spectator democracy.

When it comes to the actual content of contemporary television, however, things are more complicated than Postman allows. The condition of detached, indifferent irony that our culture fosters in so many ways and in so many venues can itself be the subject of ironic treatment, suggesting a transcendence of that very condition. The prime contemporary example is the enormously popular and longest running sitcom of all

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time, Fox's *The Simpsons*. The show begins each episode with an ironic reference to our familial formation through TV, with a depiction of the Simpson family rushing to gather together around a television set. Although it lacks the overt moralism of many classic American sitcoms, *The Simpsons* regularly finds a way to encompass our cynicism about contemporary institutions—from big government and big business to local schools and police departments—while still affirming family life and local communities. In nearly every episode, *The Simpsons* takes us giddily to the brink of family anarchy and then shows how the family can avert, if not eliminate, the spirit of narcissism and cynicism. In one episode, Homer becomes a devastating restaurant critic whose negative reviews so inflame the local chefs that they plot to kill him at a town fair by poisoning a giant éclair they know Homer will be unable to resist. As he overhears the plot, Homer's son Bart laughs cynically, "Ha, ha, ha. They're going to kill Dad." He pauses, then shouts, "Oh, no, they're going to kill Dad" and runs off to save his father.

On *The Simpsons*, father rarely knows best, but the family endures as an anchor to our sense of identity and as the object of our deepest affections. A similar case could be made for another Fox sitcom, *Malcolm in the Middle*, which features the enduring love and affection of the parents of five boys in the midst of the comic insanity of contemporary family life. Such shows offer comic realism about who we are, and we are thankfully still more than ironic spectators, sexual narcissists, or natural born killers. We may be ridiculous and often decadent, but we are not entirely deprived or incapable of true fidelity.

Television also aims to confront the darker side of modern life. And not surprisingly, after 9/11, terrorism has become a plotline in various TV series, including *The West Wing* and *24*. *The West Wing* may well have the best writing and the most supple character development of any current TV show, but *24*, a kind of TV noir, captures the dramatic and moral complexities of American life in the age of global terrorism most fully.

Each season of *24* is structured around a day in the life of counter-terrorism expert Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland), never flinching from the unsavory consequences of fighting terror. It illustrates not just the sacrifices that must be made by those who would defend us from terrorists, but also the ethical compromises that necessity may force upon the defenders of public order. Last season featured the plot of a vicious terrorist ready to unleash toxic chemicals in Los Angeles. At a certain point, the president finds himself with no alternative but to comply with the terrorist's

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demands and thus orders the execution of a prying government investigator, an execution carried out by Jack Bauer. A previous season opened with the gruesome torture of a prisoner possessing information about an imminent attack on U.S. soil by a Middle Eastern terrorist group. One might be tempted to see parallels here to Abu Ghraib, but the TV show is actually much more complex and morally responsible than the activities of American troops in Abu Ghraib, where there appears to have been no necessity, no great store of information to be gained, from the gratuitous acts of torture and humiliation.

The American leaders in *24* are repeatedly put in unprecedented situations, calling for quick judgments made in full knowledge that their decisions may never be justifiable in a court of law, and that they may have to endure consequences for their actions. In this and other ways, *24* calls to mind classic American noir's sense of entrapment, of the elusiveness of personal happiness and public justice. It does so not just in its plotting, but in its complex stylistic elements as well. Each episode is presented in real-time, corresponding to one hour in the day, illustrated with apocalyptic expectation in the form of an on-screen ticking clock. *24* also makes exquisite use of multiple and frenetic camera angles and split screens to keep viewers off-balance and anxious; it enables them to participate in the disorientation, fear, and anxiety of the main character. More broadly, the show taps into an anxiety that has afflicted American self-consciousness since 9/11: the sense that our technology, the source of much of our pride and self-confidence, could be turned against us on a massive scale.

### **Fantasy Epics and Heroic Virtue**

The best of popular culture, like *24*, presents us with a question: Can film and television help us to confront the problems of modern life? Or will they only reinforce our sense of paralysis in the age of technology and terror? Clearly, there is ample cause for despair, but there is also some reason for optimism. Over the last few years, we have seen a series of heroic fantasies and epic tales that celebrate the possibility of human virtue in the face of great danger, and the possibility of heroism in face of mortality. We have witnessed the remarkable success of film versions of J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, and J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books and movies. Other bestselling films in the last two years have included the second of the Star Wars prequels, *Spider-Man*, *Signs*, and the final two Matrix films. At the same time, Hollywood has produced a host of historical epics, like *The Alamo* and *King Arthur*, in the tradition of *Braveheart* and *Gladiator*.

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No doubt one could take a cynical view of this upsurge in interest in films that feature cosmic battles between good and evil and between heroes and villains. Perhaps these films simply provide more evidence of the escapist dreams of jaded, complacent Americans. Perhaps they represent the succumbing of the citizenry to an anti-democratic dream world, promising an easy resolution of conflicts through antinomian violence. But such sweeping negations would be misguided, missing the important cases where these films have something genuine to teach us even as their artistry delights us. As screenwriter Erik Jendresen, who wrote *Band of Brothers*, recently put it, the stories on the rise in Hollywood are “about men and women of unusual vision, individuals who stand for something greater than themselves. Right now Hollywood may have detected a need for stories like that.”

Many of these stories also reflect upon our obsession with technology, which might help explain the recent rise in tales about the use and abuse of magic. As Tolkien noted some time ago, magic is often a surrogate for technology, representing both its remarkable powers and its remarkable powers of corruption. This corruption is symbolized in *The One Ring*, which tempts its possessor into believing that the virtuous and well-intentioned might put its powers to good use. Tolkien explains the link between magic and machinery in terms of the desire for immediacy, for “speed, the reduction of labor, and reduction also to a minimum of the gap between the idea or desire and the result or effect.”

Yet Tolkien’s works do not wallow in the romantic view that human consciousness and activity are necessarily corrupting of an innocent nature. Indeed, the corruption that most concerns Tolkien is that of the rational creature, who wreaks havoc not just in the natural world but also and especially in the community and in his soul. We need only think of the deterioration of poor Smeagol-Gollum or the tragic results of Boromir’s well-intentioned attempt to control the Ring in order to assist his people. But Tolkien’s tales are also about ordinary creatures, the Hobbits in particular, who respond courageously to the disruption of their common lives; in so doing, ordinary citizens discover unknown resources in themselves and thus realize an extraordinary calling.

Although not as complex in their mythology, the Harry Potter books and movies likewise attend to the uses and abuses of magical powers. At the center of the Potter universe is the issue of choice and virtue. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, Harry confronts Professor Quirell, a servant of Harry’s nemesis, the demonic Lord Voldemort. Quirell, who had

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seemed mild and innocuous, explains his tutelage under the instruction of Voldemort, who disabused him of his “ridiculous ideas about good and evil.” Voldemort taught him that “there is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it.” By contrast, Harry’s noble and prudent mentor, Dumbledore, instructs him that choices must be made in light of the common good, in conjunction with the virtues of friendship, courage, and trust rather than the vices of discord, envy, and enmity.

Neither of these films is vulnerable to the sort of criticisms Lawrence and Jewett level against the “monomyth.” In fact, these films directly undermine the notion of spectator democracy and the naïve faith in resolution through violent weaponry. Similar lessons could be drawn from the two *Spider-Man* films, which describe heroism not so much in terms of comic book superpowers or technological virtuosity, but in terms of the willingness of ordinary citizens to embrace a life of arduous sacrifice, whose costs are often hidden from the wider world.

### **Our Hunger for Meaning**

Film and television are modern civilization’s central ways of making sense of itself, leading us and taking us in myriad directions: the misplaced hunger for restored innocence (as in *Forrest Gump*); the depravity of technological society (as in *Natural Born Killers*); the conflation of real life and make-believe, combined with the desire to live vicariously through others (as in reality TV); the ritualized watching of television as a pseudo-religion (as in the opening scene of *The Simpsons*); the turning of violence into comic fodder (as in *Kill Bill*); a sober look at the demands and moral complexities of life in the age of technology and terror (as in *24*); and the search for new epics that celebrate human virtue in the face of real dangers and mortal limits (as in *The Lord of the Rings*). Film and television are at their best when they do not seek or promise an easy escape from the dilemmas of modern life or cheapen the human drama in which we participate, but when they provide a deeper sense of the comic, the tragic, and the possible in our puzzling times.

Of course, it is always difficult to determine the degree to which our culture is formed or informed by any of this. As is true of the images of 9/11, whose events prompted promises “never to forget,” so too with the best Hollywood productions: the impact on the wider culture is perhaps temporary and superficial. It is doubtful that Tolkien’s lessons about the corrupting force of powerful technologies will ever directly impact our deliberations about bioethics or that Harry Potter will sharpen our

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thinking about virtue in battle. These are species of entertainment, not intended to provide a unifying cultural vocabulary. Indeed, the fact that we wonder about their impact on the national soul suggests the significant absence of anything other than entertainment as a shared vehicle for understanding our modern condition.

Yet it also indicates something quite positive about American culture. Far from being the “bimbos of the world,” we hunger for myths and narratives that might enable us to understand the great questions and grand battles of this age and every age. Even the best film and television may ultimately fail us, but the presence of noble desire is better than its absence, and a popular culture that embraces both sober realism and heroic virtue will, at the very least, not make matters worse.