Introduction

September 11, we were told repeatedly, had created a "new normal," an altered condition in which we were supposed to be able to see, as the *Christian Science Monitor* explained a month after the events, "what is—and what is no longer—important."

—Joan Didion, "Politics in the 'New Normal' America," *The New York Review of Books*, October 21, 2004

Even in this post-9/11 period, Senator Kerry doesn't appear to understand how the world has changed.

—Vice President Dick Cheney, Republican National Convention, 2004

The more that I look into it and study it from the Taliban perspective, they don't see the world the same way we do.

—Rear Admiral Stufflebeem, Deputy Director for the Joint Chiefs of Staff

WRITER: First of all, this is a story about what used to be called "the pictures," which were never ostensibly taken to be the "world" but hopefully an escape from it. I say "story" about movies because I am not a film historian perpetrating upon an innocent readership a definitive, determinate history of film. This is a story I, an inveterate expounder of postmodernity . . .

PRODUCER: Cut! This is dead. I mean postmodern anything in a post-9/11 climate. We're premodern if anything. Certainly post-history.

WRITER: But I need it to describe how we see the world differently. 9/11 caught us at a postmodern hyperconscious moment. We're aware of spins and spinmeisters but ironically . . .

PRODUCER: Irony is dead also. Roger Rosenblatt said so in *Time* magazine.

WRITER: May I go on? Ironically we're obsessed with "raw reality." We're living in a picture of a post-9/11 America and we know it.

PRODUCER: The blue states know it. Maybe. But the red states don't.

WRITER: Everybody knows it. But at the same time we're going at things as if we were rational and realistic. We're fighting a War on Terror based on very poor picturing of the world. We're being led by a president who we all know has only a paint-by-numbers ability to picture the world. If this isn't an ironic situation, I don't know what is. You know why it all has the feel of a Hollywood movie? Because when we go to a movie we know this is a picture and not the world. When we watch TV, cable smashmouth news or reality TV or listen to squawkbox radio or watch a presidential press conference or a Rumsfeld war briefing we also know this is a scripted picturing and not the world. We're not naïve realists anymore.

PRODUCER: So it's all a movie? Flying planes into the Trade Towers was a movie?

WRITER: No, but we've been picturing it differently since 9/11. Western Europe, Middle East, the United States. And in the United States itself. If you picture things via the scientific method, the reality of 9/11 is open to investigation. The president served it up immediately in an older frame—a moral frame. This was evil and you don't scrutinize evil; you eradicate it. As it turned out, the reality of 9/11 succumbed to neoconservative politics, fitting in nicely with the dreams of the *Project for the New American Century*.

PRODUCER: And the movies reveal all this?

WRITER: No, actually post-9/11 movies, like post-9/11 TV, have adopted the naïve realist stylings of the Bush administration. We're not deconstructing the programming coming out of the White House.

PRODUCER: That's because deconstruction is dead.

WRITER: How often did the Catholic Church say the Enlightenment was dead? Unfortunately for the Church, the Enlightenment mindset was already occupying cultural brainspace. Look, contemporary movies have been picturing a shifting from realistic and modernist mindsets to a postmodern one. The planes that flew into those towers flew into an America that brought the world to meaning in a style learned from Hollywood movies, and those movies have often in the last twenty-five years been reflecting how we picture and narrate the world and then live within those depictions. Some movies were drawing attention to their

own constructive ingenuity, to their own reality-making powers. And some movies were all about the Hollywood magic of convincing us this picture we're watching *is* reality. If you investigate that change, you're automatically investigating a changing America. And since 9/11 had been a culturally traumatizing event, we can't picture the world or talk about any past picturing of the world without those 9/11 lenses on. That's postmod too.

PRODUCER: Did we get this on film? Okay, make it part of the intro. Intro. Take 2.

WRITER: This is a story I, an inveterate expounder of postmodernity, tell about the screen without concealing that what I have already seen on the screen adjusts the lens of my seeing and telling. I look at movies within the horizon of all movies I've gone to. My moviegoing, like yours, contributes greatly to what you could call an a priori mindscape. I could claim that I rise above and out of the way I see, the dispositions and predilections, the curvature of my lens, but that's a story I've neither been able to verify in my own life nor in any account of the day's news, including Fox News.

As a postmodernist then I admit that the way I look at the world and think about the world has a lot to do with the big screen. Simply telling myself that this is a picture and not the world doesn't at all prevent me from linking picture and world, from adopting the reality-making ways of movies in my real life, in my life outside the movie theatre. Most of how I hook up with the world has to do with not what I've directly observed in my life outside the movie theatre but what I've gleaned from stories and pictures, words and images, of the world. Perhaps then if I didn't read or go to the movies or watch TV or listen to others, including my parents, I would have a way of looking at the world that was totally shaped by my direct encounters with the world. However, at the getgo, my mother and father started telling me things about the world and about myself so that I have a suspicion that the very first time I ventured out into the world there was already the beginnings of a filtering process, a cultural lens shaping, that has matured into the extreme myopia of my adulthood.

So pictures have done a lot to picture me as I now represent myself. But this book's title is not a lie: As a postmodernist I believe that there may be something as big as the Grand Canyon between how the world is pictured—in film, photograph, painting, book, newspaper, magazine, lecture, sermon, formula, campaign speech, blueprint and so on—and what the world may actually be. Every picture tells a story—and every story has no way of validating its accuracy except by offering yet another story.

This is a picture and not the world, and now I mean my account of how movies reflect and pilot changes in American culture. I tell that story through Hollywood's own formational system: film genres. They were created in response to what kinds of pictures audiences seemed to want, and, in turn, Hollywood mapped out its pictures of the world within this genre grammar. Because it was an audience-response grammar, genres changed, faded away, returned remodeled, or blossomed. There's no such categorization of human life in the world that these modes correspond to or reflect. And they weren't created, as for instance Northrop Frye's anatomy of literary criticism was created, in response to what he thought was an inhering structure in literature. Genre categories responded to a commercial need; they were a marketing device, very convenient hooks to haul in the ticket buyers.

I'm just as pragmatical: I take advantage of these Hollywood categories in order to focus on changes in their presentations, their picturing, of the world. My premise is that you can trace the ways we bring the world to meaning through these genres, and that because we have gradually shifted toward a postmodern way of representing ourselves and the world we are within, we're going to find signs of this shifting in the genres themselves. I am primarily concerned with this paradigm shifting, an ontological as well as epistemological shifting. Both surround and players change over time, and chance, as in 9/11, plays a hand, but none of this necessitates a change in how we perceive and think about these changes. Such a cataclysmic perceptual revolution occurred from medievalism to modernity, but unfortunately we have no movie archive of this. However, the change from modernity to postmodernity has been captured and is being captured on the screen. Indeed these are pictures and not the world, but they are pictures *of* the world. If we look carefully, we can see the postmodernizing of our picturing and our viewing. Because genres were created in the beginning by Hollywood to tap into a world, an audience, outside Hollywood, we can continue to look at the audience—ourselves in the world now—in order to recognize and confirm changes on the screen. This is my license to venture into "off-screen" reality, which is of course no more than venturing into "off-screen" pictures of reality. These are all pictures and not the world, but we and our mediations, our scripts and directing, are what is pictured.

At this point I admit that the pragmatics of my own project here do not entirely correspond with the pragmatics of the old Hollywood studio system. I start with an "outtake" I call postmodern screwball, by which I mean the multiple clashing realities of classic screwball comedy combined with the ludic nature of a postmodern awareness come close, I imagine, to a micro-atomic chaos. It's an "outtake" because it's best in this sort of book to begin with a beginning that removes itself as a begin-

ning. Beginnings often promise to lay a cornerstone that ends with a cap-stone conclusion or experience, and I certainly don't want to promise that. And whether we're now prepared to see it or not, screwball creates at least part of the atmosphere of our post-9/11 world.

The next chapter, entitled "Futurescape," concerns our need to picture and then live in our own cultural paranoia. Like the Krell in *Forbidden Planet*, we have been creating our own monsters. Or have we? "Frontierscape" traces the Western iconography that runs from the Lone Ranger to George W. Bush. "Noirscape" refers to the film noir genre, style, and period. How is classic film noir's dark angst from 1941 to 1955 different from post-9/11 dread? Writing this after the 2004 Christmas holiday shopping frenzy that took so many working class Americans into Wal-Mart, I wonder if the film noir's "sympathetic fugitive," disenfranchised by fate and corporations and hounded by a class-stratified "order of things," has any parallel in this post-9/11 world where fear is a political orchestration—that makes a two-term president of George W. Bush—as well as creating a market opportunity to get Americans "shopping for security."

The chapter I call "Magic Town" delves into the "Heartland of Security," a Disneyland/Main Street that is no more illusionary or less real than the paradise of many virgins pictured in the Koran. But this is not a genre any film genre scholar has ever heard of, although in a terrified world this idea of a "magic town" where life is not threatened, the atmosphere is not heating up, and one's job and one's future are secure may yet take the twenty-first century American psyche by storm.

The Shortscape chapter on melodrama faces the dilemma of being outrageously "unrealistic" at a moment when "reality TV" assures us that all the flim-flam of fiction and spin have been deleted. Melodrama unapologetically creates, directs, and produces a picture of reality, whereas "reality TV," as we all know, serves up Reality Raw. We Americans were "just for the facts" long before 9/11; to paraphrase a wonderful moment in a wonderful film, *Sideways*, a moment when would-be novelist Paul Giamatti is asked what kind of book he's writing and he replies a novel, an admission that produces frowns. He reassures his friends by saying that a good part of the novel is based on the facts of his own life. *That's fine*, is the reply, *because there are too many serious things going on in the world right now for us to be wasting time with make-believe*. The "Never Far from Melodrama" chapter reviews the United States since 9/11 as mounting one melodrama after another, some over-the-top such as our memories of the 2000 Florida chad count, some so tragic that we would as a nation weep if our much-touted compassion had not been detoured already by presidential campaign strategies and shopping manias.

Following the bombast of melodrama, we run a documentary entitled "The Short-Term Memory Detective," which does a close-up of a post-9/11 American attentiveness, or lack of. This might be called a subgenre of mystery, and it may prove to be a short-lived affliction of our cultural historical memory.

The next chapter, "This Genre Does Not Exist," struggles to picture a film genre that exists perhaps only as a subgenre of the Thriller, namely, the Political Thriller. However, distinguishing such a genre at a moment when "everything is political"—and therefore all movies are—is an impossible task. At the same time, because "everything is political," it would be absurd not to have a chapter on what is so pervasively present, especially at a moment when we are exporting our nation-building politics throughout the world. I would argue that even two 2004 blockbusters—*Shreck 2* and *The Incredibles*—though delightful family animations, suit the regnant political mood of the country.

The chapter "Fearscape/Thrillscape/Nightscape" probes into the heart of our post-9/11 fears, tracing the continuum of fear, both personal and cultural, as revealed on the screen. Even pre-9/11 films awakening pre-9/11 fears are re-seen and infused with new fear. In *The Sixth Sense*, for instance, Bruce Willis tries to help a young boy filled with fear because dead people seek him out. In the end the boy helps Willis realize that he is one of those dead people, that he had not indeed survived being shot by a deranged patient, that there was no post-shooting existence. Post-9/11 we hook up this way: Did we really survive? And where are we now? Is this what survival looks like?

I present another trailer at his point—the first being the trailer midway in the Frontierscape chapter, a trailer called "Dead Man." The trailer here is entitled "The Jesus Genre," the nonexistent genre that may have mobilized the red states in the 2004 presidential election but certainly knitted nicely into President Bush's "faith-based" theme, from "faith-based" prisons and pharmaceuticals to "faith-based" national parks and wilderness areas.

The last chapter, appropriately, brings to our attention another fictitious genre, "American Cool." However, American "cool" is the "soft power" that the United States peddles throughout the world. What is "cool" in a post-9/11 world, and what can Madison Avenue peddle but the escapism of narcissistic self-stylings, from botox and colonic treatments to collagen and silicone supplementations? The bedrock foundation of the "Ownership Society" must be "American Cool."

PRODUCER: Okay, that's a wrap. Let me get this straight. You're writing about post-quantum screwballness, fear and paranoia, short-term memory loss, "coolness" in an age of terror, Jesus power, cartoon politics,

Cowboy George W. Bush, dead as a doornail melodrama, and magic towns, whatever they are. These are cockamamie, no?

WRITER: In screenplay format. I'm writing about them in screenplay format.

PRODUCER: Okay, here's what I'll need. Every script has to be doctored. I want the script doctor rewrites along with your screenplay. Also, you know that you're going to be blogged to death by every crank who ever saw a film. Plus, you diss film genre, so the real and serious film scholars will also jump in with their blogs.

WRITER: You're giving me writer's blog.

PRODUCER: Here's what we'll do. We'll put the bloggers' reviews into the production. Okay, redo the ending.

WRITER: Finally, I tell this story of film genres and bogus film genres by using what I call "filmscapes" (think of the family of scapes: landscape, seascape, cloudscape, dreamscape, timescape, mindscape, filmscape). Each filmscape presents parodies of characters from the films of that genre as well as contributions from the producer, a stable of script doctors, and assorted members of the tech crew. A voice-over sets the scene and establishes the approach, an approach that may at once be challenged by a script doctor. The writer behind the scenes is a postmod cultural commentator who began in *Hauntings* in 1992, a project in which "I crisscross between the lived experiences (I scour the headlines, listen to the talk shows, follow the campaigns) of our present culture and popular film in the hope of bringing to a consumable and respondable level some of what haunts us" (94). The writer continued that project in *Speeding to the Millennium* (1995), *Postmodern Journeys* (1998), and *Memory's Orbit* (2002), intent on finding in popular film of the 1990s the outline of changing American realities, of an American cultural imaginary daily altering its mix of conceivables and inconceivables, of the privileged and the haunting.

PRODUCER: It's a wrap. Run the bloggers before the credits.

THE BLOGOSPHERE

Blog: www.postmodisdead.com

Hello? Irony is dead. Postmod is dead. I quote: "Whatever may be said of the perpetrators of Tuesday's slaughter, they're not cowards." Susan Sontag, *The New Yorker.* So they were brave, heroically brave? It's this sort of offensive

interpretation that results from Natoli's postmodern nominalism: It's possible to produce in a post-9/11 America a movie that sees the devils of 9/11 as "not cowards" and to have *that* devilish "picture" of reality trump reality and find a hospitable place within what he calls the American "imaginary." He goes on as if an imaginary filled only with Hollywood B movies swept aside our sense of realism and rationality as well as every bit of our moral sense. Sure, we suspend all that briefly for entertainment's sake, but we don't go back to being a tabula rasa. This is just another Baudrillard spin: The hyperreal has replaced the real world. Here's news: Critical realism has replaced the hyperreal with the real; critical realism has deconstructed deconstruction. President George W. Bush's second term isn't proof that a spin reality can replace reality. It's yet another indication that we're going to elect a man who doesn't confuse being in a movie theatre with being in a real post-9/11 world.

Blog: www.antirelativism.com

Thoughts on Natoli's project:

"Academia . . . is a hotbed of fancy foreign notions, a den of dangerous relativists who can't talk straight, can't think straight—and don't even want to try. . . . Very little harm would be done if literary critics and postmodernist anthropologists, lawyers and the like were told to go and get real jobs" (A. C. Grayling, "Relative Thinking," *The Guardian*, November 18, 2004).

Blog: www.ironyisneeded.com

Irony can't be dead just at the very moment we need it the most, Joan Didion mused in her piece for *The New York Review of Books*: "Fixed Ideas: America Since 9.11" (January 16, 2003). It would indeed be ironic if it was.

Whoever named Bush's still murky plans of retaliation "Infinite Justice" was dangerously devoid of irony, not to mention a sense of Islamic theology. Here is one definition of irony: "Incongruity between actual result of a sequence of events and the normal or expected result." That kind of irony might note that America, for all its efforts to shine a beacon of freedom throughout the world, is seen as an empirical oppressor by large swaths of the Islamic world. That kind of irony would wonder if, in this new battle on behalf of freedom, we may rush to strip away civil liberties. That kind of irony would wonder whether this new kind of war, waged to make us safe from terrorist attacks, might plunge the world into a far more dangerous conflagration.

Blog: www.postmodtracker.com

The latest jihad against the signifier "postmodern" is our post-9/11 jihad as the conservative right invokes the September attacks in an effort to score a decisive victory in the culture wars. The postmodernists would be unable to condemn the attacks in any unqualified way, since they reject universal values and ideals. "There Are No Postmodernists in a Foxhole" was the title of a *Fresh Air* commentary on August 20, 2002. *U.S. News & World Report* announces that colleges are preaching "the postmodern conviction that there are no truths or moral norms worth defending." It's a slippery slope after this. *National Review Online* publishes pieces titled "Postmodernism Kills" and "Dangerous Ideas." Stanley fish comes to the rescue in the *New York Times* and then in an article in *Harper's*: Everybody has postmod wrong. Sure it holds for universal values and ideals, but the problem is we can't justify "our response to the attacks in universal terms that would be persuasive to everyone, including our enemies" ("Condemnation Without Absolutes," *New York Times*, October 15, 2001).

THE BLOGOSPHERE

Bog: www.showmetheresearch.com

Here's what I get out of the intro to *This Is a Picture*:

1. Postmodernists say we live in pictures of the world we ourselves create;
2. We go to the movies to find out what reality is, and in turn we make movies to show us that reality;
3. If you want to find out what post-9/11 America is like, go to the movies;
4. If you look at film "genres"—mostly not real film genres but ones made up by script doctors—you'll see not only how we've become hyperconscious and deconstructive (that is, postmod)—but also how we've changed as a country.

I totally disagree. First, sane, rational people live in reality first and then picture it; second, we go to the movies not to find reality but to escape it; third, if you want to find out what post-9/11 America is like, don't go to a place that's trying to get as far from that as possible, namely, the movie theater; fourth, if you want to know what finally killed off postmodernism, check out 9/11. And if you want to study the difference between pre-9/11 America and post-9/11 America, wait for the real research to be done.

Blog: www.moralclarity.com

If irony hadn't been declared dead by Roger Rosenblatt, I would dare to say that it's ironic that Hollywood and its moral decadence—which the red states triumphantly turned away from in this election—is what the writer here advises us to look to in order to see what we've become as a country after 9/11. My response: We've become a moral country that doesn't need to go to the movies to find our moral compass. No moral clarity can emerge from this book, or screenplay, or whatever it is.

Blog: www.blowingsmoke.com

Joan Didion found some smoke!
    "Postmodernism was henceforth to be replaced by 'moral clarity' and those who persisted in the decadent insistence that the one did not necessarily cancel out the other would be subjected to what William J. Bennett would call—in *Why We Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on Terrorism*—'a vast relearning' . . . the reinstatement of a thorough and honest study of our history, undistorted by the lens of political correctness and pseudo sophisticated relativism" (Joan Didion, *The New York Review of Books*, January 16, 2003).

Blog: www.realityisreal.com

The writer should preface his screenplay with this from Aldous Huxley, but of course he won't:
    "If films were really true to life, the whole of Europe and America would deserve to be handed over as mandated territories to the Basutos, the Papuans, and the Andaman pygmies. Fortunately, they are not true. We who were born in the West and live there, know it. But the untutored mind of the poor Indian does not know it. He sees the films, he thinks they represent Western reality . . ." (*Jesting Pilate*, 1926).

Blog: www.cheapcommercialism.com

I thought Leftists were dead way before irony and postmodernism were dead. Both the Old Left and the New Left were buried with the Soviet Union. Now here's a Leftist who factors economics out of the equation. I mean, is Hollywood all about profit to shareholders? How come we're looking to movies—which will "picture" anything as long as it goes over on a mass-market crowd—to see how America has changed since 9/11? If you want to look at aesthetic changes, or computer-generated changes, or distribution changes and all

that, okay. But you can't stretch movies into the real world, especially not into post-9/11 America. Anyway, here's what Nick Clooney says in a book worth reading about how movies changed us:

"[S]o many of us actually saw on our television screens the second sleek jet liner slice cleanly through the splendid geometry of the remaining World Trade Center Tower. . . . For many, that chilling, indelible picture made cheap and vulgar the guilty pleasure we had derived from watching dozens of similar pictures created by Hollywood in an increasingly frantic effort to shock us into buying tickets" (Nick Clooney, *The Movies That Changed Us*, 2002).

Hollywood films cheapen reality; they don't reflect it. And if they try to change us, it's something our real values and moral sense will resist.

Blog: www.everythingispost.com

In writing about horror film as "postmodern" Andrew Tudor points to three levels of analysis, the third being what I think the writer is up to:

"At the third level, the argument is as much about postmodernity as postmodernism. Yes, it claims, there are aesthetic attributes properly to be considered as postmodern [in recent horror film]; yes, there is an emergent pattern of postmodern cultural and moral change; however, all this must be seen as part of the historical social transition from modernity to postmodernity. To this extent, postmodernity is indeed 'post,' markedly different to what has gone before'" ("From Paraonia to Postmodernism? The Horror Movie in Late Modern Society," in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale, BFI, 2002).

Blog: www.thisisapremodernworld.com

I ask my reader: what's easier to parody than film genres? They're recognizable. This from *www.filmsite.org/genres.html* (a real Web site unlike most in *This Is a Picture*):

"[Film genres] are various forms or identifiable types, categories, classifications or groups or films that are recurring and have similar, familiar or instantly recognizable patterns, syntax, filmic techniques or conventions—that include one or more of the following: settings (and props), content and subject matter, themes, period, plot, central narrative events, motifs, styles, structures, situations, recurring icons (for example, six-guns and ten-gallon hats in Westerns) stock characters (or characterizations), and stars. Many films straddle several film genres."

THE BLOGOSPHERE

But the writer is not parodying film genres as a way of carrying through in a postmodern form with his view that film has been mirroring a shifting from a modern to a postmodern America. I mean, until 9/11, a moment when we reverted back to whatever the world was before it was modern. But he uses pastiche characters; they're not parodies of well-known film characters because they don't really undermine those characters, or expose their constructed nature, their fabricated "reality." Maybe they are parodic on some really stretched-out connection, but I don't see it. What I see is that using send-ups of recognizable characters to talk about the genres they're connected with confuses film and reality, film research, commentary, criticism, and films themselves. It's like the writer is saying "If you want to talk about film you need characters to do it. You can't have a monologue. You have to produce, direct, script, and shoot your 'account.'"

None of this will work at a premodern moment. Consider this: In presenting his argument to President Bush that the United States should not pre-emptively attack Iraq, Secretary of State Colin Powell was advised to reduce his position to one page and then be prepared to further condense that one page into a five-minute oral presentation. Message? This is not a moment when reading and criticism are in flower. We, in fact, went to war in spite of what knowledge was readily available. No, this is not a time to experiment with boundaries between the discursive and the nondiscursive, between reason and imagination, between fact and fiction, between creativity and criticism.

Hollywood can take over the presidency with a Reagan and probably a Schwarzenegger, and George W. Bush can turn the United States into the world's "nightmare on Elm Street," but if some crazed writer tries to show that we're script-doctoring reality all the time, that there's no place in this red and blue America that's not a Hollywood set, that we're all characters in a Madison Avenue production, that 9/11 was a horror that script doctors were hired to turn into the America in which we're now living—why that writer will wind up on the "No Fly" list, one of those "postmodern intellectuals [who] have weakened the country's resolve." I'm quoting Stanley Fish.

Blog: www.classificationisall.com

Westerns, comedies, and sci-fi are real genres.
    Documentary is a nongenre.
    Trailers are not genres.

The detective film is a subgenre, as are film noir, melodramas, and political thrillers.

Magical towns do not a film genre make, nor does American Coolness or Jesus.

Pace Borges, but rational, well-defined classification is not only possible but necessary at this time in our post-9/11 existence.

THE BLOGOSPHERE