

US Terrorist Attacks: Smashing The Control Images

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Smash The Control Images, Smash The Control Machine.
— William S. Burroughs

After the US terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, Hollywood acted swiftly, halting the release of Arnold Schwarzenegger's new film *Collateral Damage* (2001), deleting a chase sequence from Sam Raimi's *Spiderman* (2002), and changing the ending of *Men in Black 2* (2002). All three films featured sequences based around New York City's beloved World Trade Center.

Hollywood is frequently targeted by conservative critics like David Horowitz and Michael Medved for content that corrupts the social fabric of the American psyche (no-one has yet felt this fabric, however). Their arguments assume a strange *metafictional realism* when we consider that television news coverage of the attacks focused on their Hollywood-like reality. Media scholars like George Gerbner, who founded the Cultural Environment Movement, have pointed out that the blockbuster Hollywood action picture has great potential for global marketing, because the language of violence reaches non-English speaking countries. Finally, military analysts like Lt. Col. Dave Grossman have revealed how the ancillary products spawned by these movies—videos, computer software, and war toys—simulate the desensitization techniques used to train law enforcement and military in how to kill during combat situations.

If Osama bin Laden and the Taliban were students of anything, maybe they were students of the New Hollywood that flourished since blockbuster disaster films like *Airport* (1970) and *The Towering Inferno* (1974) reinvigorated the Hollywood studio system. While it's doubtful that you will find them playing as in-flight movies anytime soon, these films are powerful reminders that our political actions are influenced by the wider cultural environment, and that any symbolism may have unexpected future consequences. The commercial aspects of this phenomenon are well-appreciated: Disney has built an empire on marketing classics like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Fantasia* (1942) to a new generation of viewers. Both George Lucas and Christopher Vogler drew upon Joseph Campbell's structuralist mythology studies for their inspiration. But what if our cultural imagery has Shadow aspects that are beyond our conscious knowledge and beyond our controlling influence?

The multimedia streams of World Trade Center and Pentagon wreckage evokes in my mind's eye the stark black-and-white imagery of Roberto Rossellini's *Open City* (1945) and *Germany: Year Zero* (1947). The World Trade Center attacks sound eerily like a scenario taken from *Die Hard* (1988) and *Die Hard 2* (1990), films with a uniquely black humour about exploding skyscrapers and lax airport security (don't expect Bruce Willis on your in-flight movie anytime soon, either). Most of all, I found myself recalling Dominique LaPierre and Larry Collins' early 1980s novel *The Fifth Horseman*, which depicted a plausible attempt by Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi to hold the US and Israeli governments to ransom via a hidden nuclear bomb that has been smuggled into New York City. Did the Reaganite entertainment-through-oppression of the 1980s help mould the Afghani mujahadeen of the 1990s?

The answer may not simply be censorship, but greater awareness of how memes can propagate themselves across the 'ecologies of mind' and how deep symbolism can redirect the cultural gaze (recall the 1970s ecological disaster film cycle or the 1983 anti-nuclear film cycle). The US terrorist bombings *definitely* featured a symbolic component as part of their planning: planes from two American airlines were hijacked, and the targets included financial power (the World Trade Center), military power (the Pentagon), and political power (the White House, Congress, and Camp David). The initial anti-Muslim backlash that occurred within days of the attacks replayed ideas explored in *The Siege* (1998) and *Arlington Road* (1999).

If you want to *really* understand the shadowy spectre behind the US terrorist attacks, get hold of the classic BBC series *Edge of Darkness* (1986), a grim tale of triple-crossed spies and the interlocking interests of governments, spy agencies, and multinational corporations. While focusing on the early environmental movement and the spectre of dirty uranium, *Edge of Darkness* captures the climate of compromise and unpredictability that will shape the looming War on Terrorism.

Maybe it's time to permanently dismantle the Military-Industrial or the Military-Entertainment Complex before the War on Terrorism catches us in the self-serving simulacra of another politician's blurred vision.