When Defensive Nationalism Morphs into Aggressive Imperialism: Perpetuation and Destruction of the American Creation Narrative in Popular Culture since 9/11

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It took just four planes and a handful of operatives to jeopardise American national identity. Although 9/11 was successfully incorporated into constructions of American nationalism, the subsequent ‘War on Terror’ exposed many of its deep seated paradoxes. According to Tom Engelhard, the United States of America was formed to defend against undemocratic tyranny; to protect a peace-loving society even if such protection involved the reluctant use of violence.¹ Over time, this narrative has expanded to focus on the tenets of American exceptionalism: liberty, equality and self-government.² This creation narrative forms an important part of collective identity. Promulgation of this single genesis fosters feelings of kinship that transcend geographically and culturally distinct regions. This allows for the attribution of meaning to somewhat arbitrary fragments of space, leading to the imagined community of the nation-state. Thus, nationality is a meta-narrative: it forms a totalising framework through which the world is viewed. Geopolitical events such as the War of Independence, Pearl Harbour and the Cuban Missile Crisis fit comfortably into the American creation narrative.³ These events tend to portray America as an innocent but powerful victim; peaceful but prepared to fight when threatened. The events of 9/11 were quickly absorbed within existing constructions of American identity. By contrast, the War on Terror prompted fears of imperialism that directly opposed this narrative.

Assimilation of 9/11 into the American creation narrative forced the creation of a diametrically opposed ‘enemy’ during the subsequent War on Terror. Although a significant portion of American military intervention was directed against al-Qaeda, the organisation by itself was an

³ Engelhard, The End of Victory Culture, p. 5.
inappropriate target. Terrorist organisations engender fear through their breakdown of the self-other dichotomy. They thrive on uncertainty and thus specialise in covert insurgency, inviting the suspicion that terrorism exists within a society. To focus exclusively on terrorist organisations is to direct scrutiny inwards and in doing so, invigorate a neo-McCarthyist hunt for aberrant domestic behaviour. Indeed, this did occur to some extent soon after 9/11 with the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security. However, such practises are divisive. Thus, America turned its attention towards Afghanistan and then Iraq. Although these governments were sympathetic to al-Qaeda, they were certainly independent. Nonetheless, they were portrayed as the dichotomous opposite of American nationalism: undemocratic, amoral and aggressive. They represented the prototypical antagonists.

Yet, the construction of a coherent national enemy was undermined by one key text. Broadcast on Aljazeera and thus widely accessible, Osama Bin-Laden claimed responsibility for 9/11 on behalf of al-Qaeda. Bin Laden’s use of metaphor, describing America as the wolf, butted but unharmed by the mother of the lamb it had just eaten, prevented the War on Terror from being framed through nationalist discourses. It was made clear that the attacks in themselves did not provide any threat to American self-determination. Audiences were made aware that intervention targeted beyond the well-defined perpetrators of 9/11 would itself constitute an act of aggression, disrupting the coherence of American identity. I argue that 9/11 was successfully incorporated into the American creation narrative through a renewed identification with the ‘feminine’ at the level of the individual. However, subsequent ambivalence towards the War on Terror fostered criticisms of American identity and by association, the meta-narrative of the nation state. These critiques were not played out through popular discourse because such discourses had been co-opted by existing power structures. Instead, ambivalence was engendered through a retreat to the sublime: that which lies beyond linguistic representation. I will conclude by arguing that through repeated exposures, the sublime can itself become discursive, offering an avenue through which audiences can alter existing modalities of thought.

The rise of embodied symbols of national solidarity facilitated the assimilation of 9/11 into the existing American creation narrative. Jason Dittmer argues that American nationalism was so


compelling because it was expressed via metaphors of corporeality.\(^6\) That is, the good-evil
dichotomy perpetuated through geopolitical discourses was negotiated through exploration of the
self-other dichotomy at the level of the individual. This allowed for a more personal connection
with the nation-state. According to Dittmer, Captain America is one such embodiment: a hard-
working, Anglo-Saxon protagonist from Middle America who defends the home-front.\(^7\) However,
Captain America was confined to the comic books genre immediately after 9/11; its narrow appeal
provides limited support for Dittmer’s thesis. By contrast, Miss America 2002 Katie Harman
demonstrates that reactions to 9/11 were both understood through the American creation
narrative and decidedly ‘feminine’.

Harman came to be a living and breathing symbol of American nationalism. Blonde-haired,
blue-eyed, young and female, she was the exact opposite of the jaded, seemingly unkempt Bin
Laden that appeared on Aljazeera. She symbolised the regression towards more prototypical
conceptualisations of American identity. Unlike Miss America 2001 Angela Perez Baraquio, who was
of Filipino descent, Harman’s fair, Anglo-Saxon skin facilitated the ‘othering’ of the Islamic terrorists
in the wake of 9/11. Her innocence was hyperbolised by the first question asked to her upon
winning: ‘Are you going to go to Disneyland?’\(^8\) After being crowned Miss America, Harman visited
‘Ground Zero’ and then featured in a *Bio Channel Special* on her reaction to 9/11.\(^9\) Resilient but
pure, and struggling to comprehend a perceivably gross injustice, Harman embodied defensive
American nationalism. She construed herself as a focal point around which Americans could
marshal, commenting that ‘this is an opportunity for Miss America to rally the hopes of the
American public. I want to make sure that this tragedy does not bring America down’.\(^10\) By 2002,
such discourses were also perpetuated via the hard-working but good-natured protagonist Melanie
Carmichael in *Sweet Home Alabama* and Vanessa Carlton, a 22 year-old singer song writer best
known for her hit ‘A Thousand Miles’. As embodiments of national identity, these pop cultural icons
allowed audiences to comprehend 9/11 at a corporeal level, facilitating integration of the event
into the American creation narrative.

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\(^6\) Dittmer, “Captain America’s Empire,” p. 626.


\(^8\) “Miss America 2002 – Katie Harman Crowning Moment,” available from
http://www.veoh.com/watch/v16479977hPngBc27h1=MISS+AMERICA+2002


http://www.washingtonpost.com/newssearch/search.html
Because Americans initially conceived themselves as victims, conceptions of masculinity were also renegotiated. Heterosexual men were allowed the freedom to explore increasingly pluralistic, ‘effeminate’ modalities of behaviour. Consequently, openly homosexual men were jettisoned into the public sphere. *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007) reflects this trend most vividly. Headed by the flamboyant Carson Kressley, the ‘Fab Five’ gave advice to hapless men about how best to occupy their domestic spaces. Kylo-Patrick Hart argues that *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* was revolutionary because it inverted traditionally subversive representations of gay men. However, the program also perpetuated existing gay stereotypes. In doing so, it was able to promote America-as-victim discourses without endorsing homosexuality. The new image-conscious man was certainly a departure from the dominant stereotype, but he remained strikingly different from the vivacious Fab Five. For example, one episode opens with a member of the Fab Five commenting ‘those postal uniforms are so sassy... Look at that hair; oh my god, Scary Garcia’.

Thus, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* sanctioned existing discourses of heteronormativity by creating a cultural space for the metrosexual. Season one featured such heterosexual protagonists as the New York policeman, the retired Marine and George, the everyday man who took a bullet for his mother. By juxtaposing these prototypical images of masculinity against the Fab Five, American men could reshape their national identity towards more innocent and feminine conceptions of selfhood without jeopardising their sexuality. Indeed, each protagonist was framed within his own heteronormative narrative. For instance, George ‘broke up with his girlfriend of five years’. By normalising feminine conceptualisations of masculinity, the program was able to appeal to a broad section of American society. The metrosexual did not represent a shift towards more tolerant conceptions of homosexuality; rather, it cemented the gay-straight dichotomy. American males could feel more comfortable embracing feminine aspects of their national identity without being labelled gay.

Whilst audiences embraced the metrosexual, 9/11 also prompted a fusion of moral purity and vitality. This further facilitated the positioning of the Islamic perpetrators as ‘other’, allowing accusations of amorality, impurity and discrepancy to become more lucid. This was achieved via the unification of religious right and nationalist ideologies. Although the mythologised story of

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Thanksgiving has always provided the nuclear scene around which American identity is formed, its motif of redemption gained renewed valence in the early to mid-2000s. The television program *The Biggest Loser* (2004–) featured obese contestants competing to lose weight through gruelling exercise and rigorous diet. Contestants came to embody society’s ambivalence towards American claims of moral ascendency and were eliminated one by one for failing to show the requisite transformation.

Like Katie Harman, *The Biggest Loser* explored geopolitical discourses at the level of the individual body. Daniel Akst argues that *The Biggest Loser* was ‘a modern-day allegory of self-transformation... a journey one makes in the direction of self-mastery through a hostile landscape of fast food’.14 This was reflected most vividly in the motif of temptation. During the program, contestants had unrestricted access to a pantry stocked with sweets and fast food. Those that were most successful avoided this temptation, thus being freed from the sin of gluttony. This is elaborated by Courtney Bailey, who suggests that obesity came to embody evil, and that although difficult, weight loss provided the opportunity for moral redemption.15 Indeed, the Season One Finale featured vignettes linking weight loss to improved social functioning, professional success and motherhood.16 Increasing vitality was depicted via the motif of strength training, a core component of each exercise program. *The Biggest Loser* portrayed a reinvigorated American society that had both metaphorically and literally cut the fat after 9/11. A sense of moral superiority could be achieved by weight loss, allowing for the easy narrativisation of 9/11 through the discourses of good and evil. Even amidst rising concerns surrounding the immorality of the War on Terror, nationalist understandings of 9/11 were reaffirmed.

So far I have argued that 9/11 was successfully incorporated into the American creation narrative. Katie Harman allowed American identity to be associated with innocence. Notions of masculinity were tied to this identity, leading to the acceptance of a more feminine prototype of ‘manliness’ expounded in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. The American creation narrative also called for more substantive othering of the 9/11 perpetrators. Through the metaphor of weight loss, Americans were able to both symbolically atone for past sins and gain a renewed sense of

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vitality. Thus, the actions of al-Qaeda were perceived as immutably reprehensible throughout the 2000s.

Unlike conceptions of 9/11, the War on Terror could not be successfully framed using nationalist rhetoric. To accord with the American creation narrative, war had to be swift and targeted directly at al-Qaeda. It was neither. When declaring the War on Terror George W. Bush declared: ‘Americans should not expect one battle but a lengthy campaign... Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists’.\(^{17}\) This, a flagrant over-extension of American military power, undermined the very sense of collective identity that the government aimed to perpetuate. Consequently, criticisms of the War proliferated. However, these criticisms were largely limited to American foreign policy and did not explore the kind of crises of national identity experienced by audiences. I will now focus on how conventional modalities of popular culture failed to adequately reflect the true sentiments of audiences.

Critics of the War on Terror still assumed that the American creation narrative was totalising and organic. *Fahrenheit 911* (2004) is perhaps the prototypical anti-war text, condemning the ‘alliance’ between government, military and big business. Filmed using a bricolage of political footage and images from small-town America, producer Michael Moore used the reality genre to enhance his claims of authenticity. In particular, the film used the female to symbolise a pacifist model of American identity. *Fahrenheit 911*’s protagonist is the mother Leila Lipscomb, who fought against welfare dependency by working at a locally run employment agency. The film presented an image of the American female as hard working and patriotic, but also poor and isolated. Lipscomb, when discussing the death of her own son was pictured recalling ‘the grief grabbed me so hard, and I was alone. I didn’t have anybody to pick me up’.\(^{18}\) Whilst the motif of feminine innocence was initially used to condemn the actions of al-Qaeda, it was appropriated by Moore to condemn the War on Terror. *Fahrenheit 911* argued that the War is un-American. That is, the War did not accord with Moore’s own vision of American identity. The documentary was a critique of the foreign policies and social practises contained *within* the frame of American nationhood. For example, Moore suggested, “I don’t trust the mainstream media. I’m like most Americans at this point”\(^{19}\).

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\(^{18}\) Leila Lipscomb quoted in M. Moore, *Fahrenheit 911* (Lions Gate Entertainment, 2004).

Like other criticisms of the War, Fahrenheit 911 assumed that American-ness was a natural state of being rather than a constructed and increasingly paradoxical narrative. It provided a localised critique of the War on Terror, focussing on issues of welfare and governance but ultimately failing to address concerns surrounding the coherence of national identity.

The existential crisis engulfing American identity was not explored through discourse. The hegemonic nature of all pop cultural interpretation prevented the emergence of texts that reflected the sentiments of the audience through language. Michael Spencer argues that existing pop cultural tests, such as rock songs, are hijacked to provide support for particular political discourses.\(^\text{20}\) Regardless of the intentions of the producer, the interpretation of a text will inevitably usurp its intended meaning when it enters the public sphere. For example, Fahrenheit 9/11 used government-sanctioned footage to both criticise the War on Terror and aid Moore’s own anti-Republican message. Indeed, when asked whether his film was an attack on the Bush family, Moore explicitly stated, “Oh yeah. It’s that”.\(^\text{21}\)

However, Spencer does not go far enough. He fails to suggest that language, by its very nature, is hegemonic. Foucault argues that representations of ‘reality’ are constituted through the entirely arbitrary contours of language.\(^\text{22}\) That is, meaning comes from the relationship between words rather than any property intrinsic to the ‘thing’ the word is attempting to represent. Thus, to attach a word to a ‘thing’ is to enter the realm of discourse and to be coerced by existing modalities of thought. Put simply, to speak with language is to speak through the agenda of an empowered other. At best, audience interpretations can form as a patchwork of discourses that give the appearance of authenticity.

Because linguistic representations of the ‘non-American’ were largely absent from discourse during the War on Terror, criticism proliferated in non-linguistic domains. In particular, national identity was questioned via sublime fascination. Martyn Lee describes the sublime as a “moment when the ability to apprehend, to know, and to express a thought or sensation is defeated. Yet through this defeat the mind gets a feeling for what lies beyond language”.\(^\text{23}\) This transcendence of discourse allows meaning to be fully experienced in the visceral realms of the body. I argue that

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\(^{21}\) Michael Moore quoted in M. Lauer, “Moore Defends Incendiary Film.”


sublime criticisms of the war occurred via the resurgent fantasy genre and the emergence of pop cultural villains that idealised anarchy rather than grandeur.

Fantasy films often generate sublime appeal because they challenge and renegotiate existing geopolitical boundaries. *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003) was popular precisely because it subjugated national membership beneath the free and limitless virtues of piracy. In particular, protagonist Jack Sparrow, adorned with an eclectic mix of clothing and jewellery, captures the desire for national disembodiment. He is denied a nationality, traversing the ocean as a disfranchised but free nomad. By contrast, the British wear ridiculous, matching uniforms and abide diligently by the instructions of a wigged and powdered aristocrat; a direct allusion to hegemonic conformity. Sparrow’s escape from his imperial captors represents a symbolic emancipation from the confines of the nation-state. The ocean becomes a lucid representation of freedom. Amoral and selfish, Sparrow rejects the position of hero, choosing to get drunk whilst marooned on an island rather than ponder an escape. The attraction of his character is perhaps best surmised by one reviewer: ‘why does Jack Sparrow prance around like a cross between RuPaul and Nathan Lane? Who knows? Who cares? I love it.’ 24 Although the appeal of the film is often misattributed, its emotional valence exceeds what one might expect from its relatively superficial plot. Thus, its critique of American identity is *apolitical* but powerful, positing an existence beyond the confines of the nation-state. Its appeal is sublime.

The sublime is also captured through the *un*-magnanimous pop cultural villain, whose anonymity and desire for chaos expose the constructed nature of all coherent identities. Lee suggests that the sublime is a rupture of conventional pleasures that destabilises the perception of oneself as whole and coherent; leading to a morbid and rapturous fascination with disembodiment. 25 This is best captured by the Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008). Whereas Jack Sparrow is denied a nationality, the Joker is denied both a genesis and an identity. Masked by paint, the joker plays with the fluidity of his own identity by giving multiple anecdotes about his own past. This anonymity is combined with a somewhat rational desire for chaos. Although the Joker attacks the public hospital, a bastion of civilised society, his actions appear logical: ‘schemers try to control

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their little world. I try to show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are."  

By contrast, Batman is depicted as the stalwart of conventional rhetoric. The Joker observes ‘you won’t kill me out of some misplaced sense of self-righteousness’. However, it is interesting that in many respects the Joker is the protagonist of the film. Anthony Kolenic argues that the Joker’s denial of both insanity and an overarching agenda underline his appeal. Indeed, the Joker cannot be fully understood using existing discourses. One reviewer suggests that ‘in a way, you’ll almost find yourself rooting for him to win. Let him burn it down, if only so we can see how he’ll make it happen’. The Joker embodies a freedom from hegemony that allows audiences to explore the nature of a more fragmented and apolitical ‘identity’. He presents an embodied state of disembodiment that is absent from narrative and ideology, drawing audiences towards his own ‘utopian’ vision of anarchy. 

Above, I have argued that discourses could not authentically capture audience responses to the War on Terror. Audiences were instead drawn to texts positing an ulterior state of being that existed beyond linguistic representation. However, over time the sublime can itself shape discourse; offering a legitimate avenue through which audiences influence popular culture. Lee suggests that the sublime can enter the ‘safe fold of human reason’ through exposure, but in doing so will lose its affective valence. For example, although Queer Eye for the Straight Guy was initially a ratings success, its popularity declined from 2004 until its eventual cancellation in 2007. At first, it appealed to an unspoken link between homosexuality and heterosexual conceptions of masculinity. However, the term ‘metrosexual’ has since captured this link, leading to the creation of a new discursive category. As such, the queer makeover genre has disappeared. It no longer transcends linguistic constructions of the world. Exposure ensures that the fallibility of the American creation narrative will also be explored discursively. Critiques of American identity have become more lucid through fantasy film Avatar (2009), which contrasts the militarised and imperial nation-state with the utopian moon of Pandora, a communal land free from geopolitical division. Although such critiques already exist in academia, most notably in Tom Engelhard’s book The End of Victory

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26 Christopher Nolan, The Dark Knight (Warner Bros, 2008)
27 Ibid.
Culture (1995), it is only the crystallisation of linguistic labels such as ‘non-American’ in popular culture that will allow authentic audience responses to be captured.

In conclusion, popular culture responses to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent war on terror were fundamentally opposite. 9/11 sparked a regression towards the meta-narrative of American nationalism. Individual responders were willingly co-opted by those powerful others that produced and interpreted discourse, giving rise to female embodiments of innocence and liberty such as Katie Harman. Other deeply patriotic texts such as Queer Eye for the Straight Guy and The Biggest Loser perpetuated these notions of innocence and symbolically reinforced American perceptions of self-righteousness. America was profoundly good and forced to unify in the face of a begrudging and inhumane evil. The 9/11 terrorist attacks were not understood as an unjust act committed by an otherwise just people; they were understood as an attack on the tenants of American liberty, equality and self-government by a powerful and imperialistic enemy.

Ironically, the Bush administration chose to combat this so called imperialism with its own generous brand of ‘justice’. It overextended its charter by invading the sovereign states of Afghanistan and Iraq. Engelhard suggests that

The United States emerged from Vietnam with only two aspects of its war story intact: victimhood/underdog-ness and captivity... As captivity necessitated rescue, so ambush necessitated the defensive acts of conquest and slaughter.\(^{31}\)

The War on Terror shattered these remaining tenets. Audiences were aware that Saddam Hussein and his Iraqi government were not responsible for 9/11. And they were aware that American foreign policy had created rifts in the fabric of American identity. However, audiences were not capable of expressing these concerns through discourse because the realm of language, by its very nature, is co-opted by those with hegemonic agendas.

Texts such as Fahrenheit 911 fell short of offering the totalising critique of American-ness that audiences craved. Instead it disseminated its own, welfare-oriented image of American identity. Consequently, audiences turned to the sublime, becoming morbidly fascinated by pop cultural symbols of defiance such as Captain Jack Sparrow and the Joker. Both were transgressive, exposing the arbitrary and fragmented nature of geopolitical space. If audiences came to

\(^{31}\) Engelhard, The End of Victory Culture, p. 274.
understand themselves as the embodiment of existing discourses, then these characters were symbols of disembodiment and emancipation. Lee notes that the sublime experience is subjective, informed by the unique latticework of discourse through which each individual views their world. However, throughout the War on Terror, these sublime texts have appealed to a silent majority. Indoctrinated by the American creation narrative, audiences have been homogenised. It is thus logical that resistance to this narrative would itself manifest through a uniform desire for transcendence. Indeed, the overwhelming popularity of The Dark Knight suggests that through these profoundly non-discursive texts audiences may truly, if unwittingly, experience the rapturous kind of solidarity that the American creation narrative has failed to cultivate.

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