

**The Rise of the Media-Real:  
Representation, the Real and September 11, 2001**

**By**

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## Abstract

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001 the world witnessed an unparalleled type of catastrophic event; the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre, the Pentagon and the attempted attack on the White House.

One of the key factors making these attacks so unprecedented was that the second plane was caught live on television as it struck the second tower, as were the subsequent collapses of the two towers. To a large degree the events of this day were broadcast live to a mass global audience and it was this mediation that set the event apart. The mediation of this event was, on so many levels, more important than the event itself. It was not the first terrorist attack on a Western country, it did not cause the greatest loss of life of any catastrophic event, in a hypermediated world it was not even the most spectacular thing to appear on a television screen, yet no other event in recent history comes close to the level of effect that September 11 has had. This is the central concern that began the journey of this thesis, how did the representation of this event shape what possible societal perceptions of reality were available?

This thesis is an exploration of why this event in particular has had the impact that it has and it is through this exploration of these issues that I propose this new model of the communication of spectacular catastrophic events – the media-real. The media-real, arises from the conjunction of four key elements; the triadic forces of the spectacle, the *'unheimliche'* and the abject which converge and then travel through the conduits of unpreparedness. This convergence and acceleration of convergent elements allows for the re-emergence of the Lacanian real, that, like an eruptive wound, produces a rupture in the societal perception of reality and allows the event to escape from its representation. It is here that we find the media-real, at the fringes of what it is possible to understand. Existing in fleeting glimpses, in

moments within larger events but always a part of this process never a discreet product in its own right.

The concept of the media-real is proposed as an analytic tool for the analysis of mediated catastrophic events because of the conceptual inadequacy of current media theory to deal with the extent of the impact of such an event.

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This thesis is dedicated

To my father

David Strafford Vaile

30 September 1954 – 22 October 2010

Rest in Peace

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## Foreword

In early September of 2001 I went to visit my grandparents in Taree for a week. On the second last evening it was getting late, about 10.30pm, and I was thinking of going to bed when my grandfather called out to me to come and see the TV. I hurried through in time to see a shot of one of the World Trade Center (WTC) towers bleeding smoke and debris. The vision cut to a female voice calling the Television station from Central Park saying that there was a plane flying incredibly low overhead. Cut back to the original shot, except now there was a dot in mid-air that was getting bigger. Then the dot impacted on the building and a massive fireball leapt from the side of the tower. It was about this time that the TV started to use the phrase 'terrorist attack' – up until this point they suggested it may have been an aircraft accident. With the second plane, those suggestions disappeared from the coverage.

About an hour later the same shots were being repeated again and again and they were lasting for what seemed like a long time, so I decided to stop watching. As I was getting into bed I turned the radio to BBC World, just in case there was some major development. Then it was announced that the first tower had collapsed. I raced back to the television in time to see the first tower collapse in a torrent of smoke, dust and debris. I phoned my brother Josh in Melbourne. One of the first things that he said was "I can't believe this is real, that this has actually happened." I called my Father who had been sleeping on the couch and woke up to see the footage. He had yawned, muttered to himself about Hollywood disaster films and wandered through to the kitchen to get a drink. While he was in the kitchen he could hear the news presenters talking and so he went back to see what was happening. When the same shot was repeated again and again (for extended periods of time) and the news anchor kept on coming on, Dad finally realised that the attacks were not movie depictions but images of actual events.

The next day the whole of Taree and probably the world was talking about the attack on the World Trade Centre. What struck me about peoples' reactions was their disbelief, their feelings of distance from reality. So many people had initially read the event as being yet another Hollywood disaster film. I started to pay very close attention to the news, even taking some notes. I started to ask myself how the 'real' is constructed, how the media helps to shape our perceptions of reality, and what is 'real' anyway?

# Introduction

## *The Media-Real*

Many people viewing the media depictions of the 'September 11' attacks on the World Trade Centre thought at first that they were watching a movie, or at least registered a feeling that the representations were similar to scenes from movies. This thesis proposes that such reactions of disbelief and distance helped produce a qualitatively new phenomenon that I have termed the *media-real*. This concept, which is a model of the media representation of catastrophic events, answers the central question dealt with by this thesis, how the representation of this event shaped the possible societal perceptions of reality. What made this event so prone to 'misreading'? What made the mediation of this event so different?

It is important to note at the outset that the concept of the media-real cannot be conflated with the 'life-real' or with 'lived reality'. Rather, the media-real pertains only to representation and involves the eruption of a 'Real' into the more usual forms of media representation, but it is still a mediated representation of an event. It is not, and can never be, the same as a life-real experience of an event. Representing an event, even an unexpected one, still effects subtle changes, however the unpremeditated, unpredictable nature of certain occurrences often precludes the use of the usual ways of framing and mediating what has happened.

This thesis argues that the media-real comes about when the real erupts through, or escapes from, the superstructure of represented reality. This can only occur when the three 'forces' of the spectacle, the uncanny, and the abject are all present and working in conjunction with the 'conduit' of unpreparedness<sup>1</sup>. This eruption both

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the terms 'forces' and 'conduits' delineates the difference between two different types of factors that are examined throughout this thesis. 'Forces' refers to the three key theoretical concepts used in the thesis to

causes, and is caused by, the level of spectacle found in the coverage of September 11 2001. This level of spectacle provides a moment where the image becomes paramount and disturbs the more usual relationship between the spectator and the event. This in turn causes and reinforces a sensation of uncanniness because of the way that it destabilises the boundary between what is considered to be 'real' and its representation. In disturbing this boundary, I argue that the media-real works to destabilise the boundaries between other accepted binaries, such as true/false, good/evil, animate/inanimate, alive/dead, heaven/hell and so forth. The third force of the abject provides more impetus towards eruption due to the violent revulsion and rejection produced by the representation. This disturbance of binaries, as well as the spectacular disturbance of the relationship between the image and the spectator, adds to the repulsion of abjection, which begins to cause a rupture in the fabric of societally reinforced perceptions of reality.

In order for the event to escape from its representation, the eruption needs to travel through the conduit of unpreparedness and a major part of this conduit comes about through 'live' broadcast. This 'liveness' means that there is no time for repackaging the event and, more importantly, that the lapse in the symbolisation and consequent framing of the event is apparent. This temporal blip in our symbolisation processes is a key requisite for the media-real to appear because it is the failure of the symbolisation system that alerts us to the fact that something unusual has occurred. It also helps to bring about the uneasy sense of *unheimlichkeit* that the appearance of the media-real produces. This uncanniness is emphasized by the fact that we are witness to an unfamiliar event reproduced in an unfamiliar way through a very familiar medium.

Yet, 'liveness' by itself is not enough to propel the forces described above through the fabric of our perceptions of reality. This conduit is also comprised of a lack of premeditation and preparedness in the representation of the event. Media content is

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illustrate how this event was different while 'conduit' or 'subconduit' refer to factors that provided a 'pathway' or played a contributory, more minor role, in why this event was so different.

usually highly structured, scheduled and streamlined; it is timed down to the last second. The media-real occurs in those moments where something unexpected happens and the planned nature of media programming breaks down. Elements of 'liveness' or immediacy and unpreparedness are interconnected with the issues of technological hyperefficiency. The ubiquitousness of visual technology has become such that there is a much higher chance of capturing any given event 'live' than ever before. Mobile phones now include both video and still photographic abilities and there has been a corresponding development of increasingly small digital cameras that also record moving images. Mass production of such technology has meant that this technology is affordable for an increasing percentage of the population. This also means that events that in the past would have been carefully 'packaged' for audience consumption now go to air much faster than before. They also reach unprecedentedly mass audiences through satellite transmission technology. The cumulative effect of this is that it is now possible to witness events as they happen even when they occur on the other side of the planet.

It is necessary that the aforementioned forces and their corresponding conduits are present for this eruption of the Real through its representation, because it is only the combination of all these factors that allows the media-real to escape from the boundaries of the symbolisable. A spectacle, by itself, will not necessarily become a media-real. This is because it requires the repulsion and rejection (as well as a strange kind of longing) inherent to the abject, as well as the *unheimliche* confusion and transgression of boundaries to surpass (and hence render unsymbolisable) the representation of itself. Additionally the media-real requires the transmission of the event happening 'live', that is, it is immediate and 'is happening as we speak'. Likewise something that comes from the abject cannot itself become a media-real without the impetus of a moment of sheer spectacle (and of course *unheimlichkeit*).

The rupture caused by the formation of the media-real can be seen as a wound in the normalised, societally constructed perception of reality. The subsequent repackaging of the event fits with this analogy as the process of stitching the wound

back together again. A part of this stitching process is repetition of the most spectacular instances, because through repetition the impact of the rupture is made to feel more controllable, and it reaffirms our technological supremacy through making the event obey us. It also serves the purpose of desensitising us because with each repetition it becomes more familiar and less uncanny. As Geoff King argues in his book *The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to Reality TV and Beyond* “[t]elevision coverage of catastrophe has a therapeutic effect...while producing anxiety, it also discharges it, especially through constant repetition...”(2005:55). Like a wound however, this area is considerably weakened in the aftermath and must be vigorously protected so as to avoid a further rupture. Even after the stitches themselves have healed, the wounded area will still maintain a high degree of sensitivity because of its rawness and the memory of the injury itself.

### ***Some brief definitions of key concepts***

There are a number of recurring key concepts that will be used throughout this thesis and it is appropriate to provide a brief definition of these concepts early in the thesis to aid in maintaining clarity of meaning and understanding.

The concept of an ‘event’ is one used frequently throughout this thesis and deserves specific attention. An event, in the sense that it is used in this thesis, is taken from the Deleuzian interpretation and thus represents a *process* of becoming (Deleuze 1990) as opposed to the more standard usage as the *product* of a set of causal factors or the end link in a causal chain. The meaning of this concept and the way that it is utilised in this thesis is examined in more depth in the early stages of Chapter One.

The concept of ‘discourse’ is also used frequently throughout the thesis. The meaning ascribed to it within this work is taken from the Foucauldian

understanding of it and refers to the rules governing what it is possible to say in a given situation or as Sara Mills puts it in her book *Discourse* “...regulated practice(s) which accounts for a number of statements” (1997:7). This concept is explored in greater detail in the second half of Chapter One.

Each of the three forces theorised as integral to the model of the media-real, the spectacle, the *unheimliche* and the abject also deserve mention here due to their extensive use throughout the thesis.

A spectacle as used within this thesis can be defined as a visual extravaganza designed to stimulate the eye and possibly the viscera rather than the intellect (Darley 2000). The view of spectacle as a tool of distraction and isolation, as explored in Chapter Two, is drawn from the work of Guy Debord.

The concept of the *unheimliche* or the uncanny as used in this thesis is taken from the work of Sigmund Freud and can be best defined as a feeling that something is not quite right, that something which is familiar has somehow become unfamiliar (Freud 1975). A detailed definitional framework for the *unheimliche* can be found in Chapter Three.

The concept of the abject is drawn from the work of Julia Kristeva and is used throughout this thesis to describe that which breaches the boundaries and provokes rejection and repulsion but also a curious longing and *jouissance* (Kristeva 1982). Kristeva described the abject as occurring at “...the border where exact limits between the same and other, subject and object, and even beyond these, between inside and outside...[disappear] – hence [becoming] an object of fear and fascination” (Kristeva 1982:185). This concept is further explored throughout Chapter Four.

## ***Foucault's Toolbox as a Methodology***

I would like my books to be a kind of tool-box which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area...(Foucault 1994:523).

All my books are, if you want, small *tool* boxes. If people are willing to open them, to use such a phrase, such an idea, such an analysis...[as] a screwdriver or a loose-bolt...well, that's good (Foucault 1994:720).

This idea, taken from Michel Foucault's *Dits et Ecrits* (1994), that theories can be 'rummag[ed] through' and selected for use like a tool due to their appropriateness for a particular case, is the methodological concept underpinning this thesis. The thesis draws upon a wide array of different concepts, taken from different theories and uses, in some cases, very disparate approaches. It does so because no single theory satisfactorily 'fits' the case being studied. So while the representation of the September 11 attacks could be analysed by using psychoanalytic film theory alone, for example, this would only provide a partial picture of what is really being examined, the way that the representation of this event shaped what possible societal perceptions of reality were available.

Akin to the idea of the toolbox is Heather D'Cruz's idea of a 'fractured lens' model of methodology found in 'The Fractured Lens: Methodology in Perspective' (2001). This model again places the utility value of a concept higher than the coincidence of the theories from which the concepts have been drawn. D'Cruz states that a "...fractured lens allows for multiple, if somewhat disjointed, ways of seeing a fractured reality..."(D'Cruz 2001:27) and one of the central ideas explored within this thesis is the idea that the representation of the September 11 attacks, certainly in the initial coverage, can be seen as a time when a socially shared perception of reality was shattered or fragmented by the event and its mediation. When dealing with a fragmented and dissociative event and its representation, it is appropriate to approach the analysis from more than one theoretical position. By doing so it allows

for the broadest level of understanding even if, as D'Cruz points out (2001), this understanding can itself be somewhat disjointed at times.

In taking on this toolbox and fractured lens style of methodology, concepts have been drawn from several sources. The aetiology of some particular groups of theorists and their key concepts is quite clear. For example this thesis draws upon a number of concepts from within the very broad field of psychoanalysis. A key concept, the uncanny, is taken from Freud, while others are taken from Lacan and Žižek (the real and Žižek's reworking of the real) and Kristeva (the abject). Concepts are taken from Marx (commodity fetishism), Debord (the spectacle), Benjamin (authenticity) and Jameson (critique of postmodernity), and a reworking of DeBord by Kellner is employed as well.

Concepts have also been drawn from theorists that can be broadly grouped as postmodernist/post-structuralist. Deleuze' concept of the event is used as is Foucault's concepts of discourse and biopower. Derrida's deconstruction approach is discussed as is Baudrillard's concept of simulation and the hyperreal and Virilio's notion of dromocracy. Each of the concepts drawn from these theorists adds to the exploration of the key question central to this thesis, how the representation of this event shaped what possible societal perceptions of reality were available.

The obvious problem with using this methodology, as was mentioned above, is the fact that what often emerges is a somewhat disjointed understanding of the case being examined. However the central argument of the thesis, which is outlined in the following section, mitigates against negative impacts of disjointedness. By fitting these disparate concepts within a broader model of communication, and acknowledging the places where they disconnect or disagree, an overarching argument can be raised that, while relying on a multiplicity of views, provides one particular way of understanding the case under examination. While recognizing the problem of 'disjointedness', this approach is illuminating on many levels.

## ***Significance of this study***

The significance of this study is that it provides a new model of the communication of catastrophic events through the application of a number of key theoretical concepts to the case under examination. It is argued that the convergence of these concepts – the spectacle, the uncanny and the abject – together with the unpreparedness of the media for dealing with such an event led to a type of coverage qualitatively different to more standard televisual coverage. This in turn shaped what possible societal perceptions of reality were available.

In applying a ‘Foucault’s toolbox’ approach to methodology this thesis utilises a range of concepts drawn from different theoretical approaches that have not been used together in the form argued by this thesis, nor have they been applied, *in toto*, to the case being studied here. In saying this, there are certain theorists who have used some of these theories together, and occasionally a theorist who has applied some of these concepts to the event of September 11 2001.

The book, *The Spectacle of the Real* (2005) edited by Geoff King, is one example of a theorist similarly applying concepts to the event of September 11 2001. For example Rodney Lee’s chapter ‘Real Time, Catastrophe, Spectacle: Reality as Fantasy in Live Media’ applies some of Žižek’s work on the concept of the real to the case of September 11. He also uses Virilio’s notion of ‘dromocracy’ and some of the various theories on spectacle. However, none of the psychoanalytic concepts contained within this thesis are applied and nor does the chapter attempt to set forth a new model of this type of crisis communication. Both Douglas Kellner’s chapter ‘Media Culture and the Triumph of the Spectacle’ and Geoff King’s chapter ‘“Just Like a Movie”: 9/11 and Hollywood Spectacle’ examine theories of spectacle and apply them to September 11, again however there is no reference to either the uncanny nor the abject.

Catherine Belsey's book *Culture and the Real* (2005) looks at notions of the Lacanian real and the ways in which it can be understood. She critiques some aspects of social constructivism and is particularly critical of the Žižekian reworking of Lacan's concept of the real. She also briefly examines Freud's account of the uncanny. However these theories are not applied to the case of September 11 and nor are the issues of spectacle and the abject touched on.

Derek Hook's article 'Language and the Flesh: Psychoanalysis and the Limits of Discourse' (2003) uses the concepts of the uncanny, the real and the abject as well as discussing the idea of the limits or boundaries of discourse. However, Hook uses these concepts in a very different way to the path taken by this thesis. His article shows the similarities between these concepts and argues that it may be possible to collapse these concepts together in some ways. This runs counter to the argument of this thesis that sees these concepts as quite distinct from each other, though able to be used in a complementary fashion.

It is argued that this thesis represents a distinct contribution to knowledge within the field of communication/cultural studies because it provides a new way of understanding the communication of catastrophic events. This understanding is grounded in the application, via a 'Foucault's toolbox' methodology, of a number of different theoretical concepts in an original and distinct manner.

### ***The structure of this thesis***

This thesis explores the reasons how the representation of this event shaped what possible societal perceptions of reality were available. It proposes that a new model of communication, one that deals with the representation of catastrophic events, is required to fully explain why and how this event's representation shaped what possible societal perceptions of reality were available. The model that is proposed

consists of a convergence of three major forces; the spectacle, the uncanny and the abject with the 'conduit' or pathway of unpreparedness. In proposing such a model this thesis draws upon a 'Foucault's toolbox' methodology whereby a number of concepts are drawn from different theoretical areas due to their utility and are used together to provide an explanation for why this event seemed to escape from its representation and in doing so destabilised a socially shared perception of reality.

It is important to note from the outset that this thesis is not trying to examine the entirety of the media coverage of September 11 and nor is it concerned with media coverage of events that have a causal link with September 11 such as the invasions of Afghanistan or Iraq. This thesis is focussed solely on the first 48 hours of the television coverage of the events of September 11. The reasons for this relatively narrow focus are twofold. The first reason is that the argument of this thesis concerns the way that this coverage differs from the coverage of other events and, it is argued, the vast majority of this difference is only seen in the first 48 hours of the television coverage of the event. The second reason is that trying to include all of the 'follow on' events that have happened in the 9 years since September 11 is clearly an impossible task. Even looking at more than the first 48 hours becomes imprecise and adds little of value to the task at hand.

The first chapter of this thesis examines different ways of understanding reality and problematises the concept of 'an event'. It also looks at the concept of the Lacanian real where the symbolic falters and representation collapses. From here the chapter investigates the concept of discourse and deconstruction, drawing upon the work of both Foucault and Derrida. Additionally it examines the ways that language and symbolisation failed during the coverage of September 11 and shows how the visual language of television also faltered. This first chapter finishes with an exploration of Benjamin's concept of authenticity and how this relates to the event of September 11.

The second chapter deals with the first of the triadic forces that form the 'backbone' of the model of the media-real, the spectacle. It begins with a discussion of Debord's concept of the society of the spectacle and shows how spectacle is one of the defining characteristics of the representation of September 11. This second chapter also includes an examination of the notion of the spectator and Freud's concept of scopophilia. It also draws upon Benjamin's conceptualisation of the relationship between the subject and a work of art to propose that the representation of September 11 involved a reversing of the relationship between subject and representation due to the re-emergence of what Benjamin terms the 'aura'

In the third chapter Freud's concept of the uncanny is explored and the different 'themes' that Freud proposes are applied to the representations of September 11. Also included in this chapter is the concept of the 'uncanny valley', which comes from the work of Mori, and whereby the closer that robotics come to 'real-life', the more uncanny they seem. The fourth chapter introduces Kristeva's concept of the abject, the third of the triadic forces that, it is argued, converge to become the media-real. In this chapter the different ways that Kristeva conceptualises the abject are examined and applied to the representation of the event. Additionally the idea of the limits of discourse is investigated as the place where the Lacanian real exists, that which negates the symbolic. Finally this chapter considers the potential 'crossovers' or similarities between the concepts of the uncanny the abject and the real and rejects any attempt to collapse them together as too simplistic.

The fifth and final chapter of this thesis deals with the pathway or 'conduit' of unpreparedness. This chapter deals with the elements that 'accelerate' the event allowing for its eventual escape from its representation. The way that the representation of September 11 did not fit into the standard televisual structures is the key theme of this chapter. This chapter begins with a discussion of the impact of 'live' transmission and how this meant that there was little time for more usual framing of the event and how this led to the representation of the event being so indeterminate and confusing. The chapter proposes that there were two key issues

or 'subconduits' that show the differences between the representation of September 11 and other events, and hence how the representation of this event shaped what possible societal perceptions of reality were available. The first of these subconduits looks at the narrative structure, framing and genre characteristics of the initial coverage of September 11 and the way that it did not follow any of the standard conventions of narrative, framing or genre making the coverage difficult to 'read' and causing a degree of 'reality confusion'. The second subconduit looks at the way that the representation of September 11 broke many of the standard televisual codes and conventions, adding to difficulties in 'reading' the event.

This thesis argues that it is the combination of all of the factors outlined above that made the representation of this event so different from other events and shows how the representation of this event shaped what possible societal perceptions of reality were available. It caused a situation where the Lacanian real re-emerged to allow the event to escape from its representation and in doing so shattered the previously held perceptions of societal reality.