This Is a Picture and Not the World

Movies and a Post-9/11 America

Joseph Natoli

This Is a Picture and Not the World

THE SUNY SERIES IN
POSTMODERN CULTURE

Joseph Natoli, *Editor*

This Is a Picture and Not the World

Movies and a Post-9/11 America

Joseph Natoli

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

Printed in the United States of America

For information, address State University of New York Press,
194 Washington Avenue, Suite 305, Albany, NY 12210-2384

Production by Marilyn Semerad
Marketing by Fran Keneston

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Natoli, Joseph P., 1943–
This is a picture and not the world : movies and a post-9/11 America /
Joseph Natoli.
p. cm. — (SUNY series in postmodern culture)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13: 978-0-7914-7027-5 (hardcover : alk. paper)
ISBN-13: 978-0-7914-7028-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Motion pictures—United States. 2. Motion pictures—Social aspects—United States. 3. Motion pictures—Political aspects—United States. I. Title. II. Series.

PN1993.5.U6N39 2007
791.430973'09051—dc22

2006013427

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

It's 1895, everyone's favorite moment in film history—the time of naivete when the cinema was born. The audience that turned up for the Lumiere brothers' pioneering exhibition, in Paris, was not yet comfortable with the idea of illusion. The image on screen was not a picture of something real; it was reality itself. That idea hasn't quite faded: to some degree, many of us still believe that the cinema has a scandalously intimate connection with life.

—David Denby, "The Quick and the Dead," *The New Yorker*

There is no higher calling than to make pictures that show you the true world.

—E. L. Doctorow, *The March*, Random House, 2005

This page intentionally left blank.

Contents

This page intentionally left blank.

Behind the Scenes

A Preproduction Q & A

Kevin Nicholoff interviews Joseph Natoli, whose new book, *This Is a Picture and Not the World: Movies and a Post-9/11 America*, is currently in press.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: This is a picture and not the world. You have in mind the neoconservative picture of the world?

JOSEPH NATOLI: That's the picture President Bush adopted right after 9/11 as true to the world and the prompt for my title. The screenplay format introduces characters who may not have accepted that picture as true though everyone certainly has to deal with it. I call it the resident reality.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: And movies somehow reveal this resident reality?

JOSEPH NATOLI: All art is what Wolfgang Iser calls "at play" with the world and we in turn are "at play" with the movies we see. Popular film needs to be where we are in our imaginations, but not just be there to soothe us but to haunt us as well, haunt us with what already haunts us.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: Such as Al Qaeda?

JOSEPH NATOLI: An inordinate amount of fear after 9/11 when you consider what other countries have faced and continue to face. It's the kind of traumatizing fear that a canny politics would find useful—and did. Potentially crippling for the Dow Jones though. The neocons wanted to leverage the disaster in their direction while the traditional market conservatives wanted everything to return to normal as soon as possible. If you look at the country through one lens, you could say nothing has changed after 9/11. I mean, we were urged to go to the mall to shop and go to Disneyland and we went. That we haven't changed haunts some,

mostly the older generations I think. Our own history tells us we have done more than go to the mall and go to Disneyland. Americans live in a story of their exceptionalism, and that's been severely challenged. On the neocon end, fear has to be kept on the boil so that a tongue-tied, born-again president from Texas can appear to be a laconic, heroic westerner like Gary Cooper "come to bring 'em to justice." We're caught between manufactured fear and not supposing to care, and what shows up on the diagnostic screen looks like cultural post-traumatic shock.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: You think the market boom of the 1990s set us up for this? You remember that PBS special "Affluenza," the virus of the 1990s?

JOSEPH NATOLI: Set us up for a super-sized portion of fear? Sure. The invisible hand of the market doesn't direct us to thoughts of our own mortality. That's counterproductive. Death is the nemesis of shopping. That's glib, but it points the way; it's revealing. Of what? Of thoroughly privatized souls.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: As opposed to what? Thoroughly socialized souls?

JOSEPH NATOLI: I'm not joking. I'm serious. When you live totally within the cocoon of your own self-creation, which is a product of your own personal choices, which is itself a product of your infinite freedom to choose, which is fed by an economic system that thrives on the maximization of choices . . .

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: X-Box or PlayStation choices. We're not talking about existential choice or moral imperatives or what's the sound of one hand clapping. Ugg boots or flip flops.

JOSEPH NATOLI: You're choosing products from a shelf or from a catalog.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: Or more likely now from a computer screen.

JOSEPH NATOLI: We've privatized and personalized and uniquely designed our lives to the exclusion of anything outside ourselves. Your cell phone has a personal directory of your world. There's nothing outside you. But bin Laden got their attention.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: Outside us? You mean like what religion supposedly gives us?

JOSEPH NATOLI: I'm impressed by how little the 700 Club is unimpressed with 45 million people not having health care and a minimum wage below subsistence level and the polluting of the planet and the savagery produced by the market's invisible hand.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: I thought it was God's hand that upheld the world? What did Dylan say? You gotta serve somebody?

JOSEPH NATOLI: I think you have to attend to more than your own navel. Whether it's poetry or philosophy, nature or socialism, genealogy or science, fate or the stars, the point is that when we think of death within any of those narratives, it is in *medias res*; it's not closure. It has a place within a story outside ourselves. And that story includes not only other people but history. And the future. Not just of ourselves but of others, of the so-called lower orders, of the country, of other countries, of the planet.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: Yeah, but it is. Death is closure. Regardless of how you spin yourself.

JOSEPH NATOLI: Ah, but the story—call it a spin—of reality is what we live in. No one lives in reality as it is in itself, directly. We humans live in a "world" that is an instantaneous mediation of the stuff of the planet and ourselves. Animals may live directly, which is what we may mean by instinctually. But we will never know. The story that everything now and forever means only what it means to me is just that. A story. It's a piss-poor story, historically speaking, but who's young and paying any attention to history? And I'm saying that kind of story reacts to 9/11 very, very badly.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: So you're saying the story Americans live in after 9/11 . . .

JOSEPH NATOLI: . . . is a story of fear of a certain kind resulting from an excessively privatized way of being in the world.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: And it's the vulnerable spot that was targeted by the neocons to lead us to preemptively strike Iraq, and it was Karl Rove's same target in his politics of fear campaign in 2004.

JOSEPH NATOLI: We've not much concern for things outside. You can measure our curiousity by measuring the distance anything is from our own face. Neighbors have become the more nebulous "network." The notion of a society of mutual aid has become something over with, gone with the Socialists and their quaint sense of "solidarity." What's hip is the notion that government has to be drowned in a bathtub otherwise it will interrupt your life of personal choosing. Europe is "old" and doesn't "get it." We keep "reaching out" to the rest of the world and they remain unappreciative. We're all alone in here. But of course we're not. 9/11 was a knock from outside our cultural solipcism.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: So would you say our lack of curiousity also has made us vulnerable?

JOSEPH NATOLI: Mark Hertsgaard calls us the "oblivious empire." We're sidetracked by a lot of really personal interests, all of course, as I repeat, generated by our free enterprise system. Wasn't it the 9/11 commission that pointed to a failure of imagination? You know today if you took a long walk in the woods like Wordsworth did, you'd be hit with 3,000 commercial messages. No space, man, for the imagination to get exercised.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: Distraction, seduction, repression, overstimulation. You keep repeating this stuff in everything you write.

JOSEPH NATOLI: Hey, repetition does the trick for the president. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Stay on message. Anytime cultural ADD kicks in and out, the message is there. I do think if the most inventive minds in the country and the best in high-tech weren't directed 24/7 at keeping us productively consuming, we just might become something. Fear would diminish. Not just ours but fear *of* us. Given the lesson of our preemptive attack on Iraq, Iran is not foolish for seeking a nuclear "deterrent." Our cultural inability to think and feel beyond the box of our own self-interest doesn't exactly make other countries feel safe.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: Okay. This is what we're like post-9/11. But what does popular film really have to do with all this?

JOSEPH NATOLI: How do I know what we're like? Right now. At this moment. Should I wait for a definitive sociological or political study? Tune into Fox News owned by Newscorp, a corporate leviathan? Pay attention to PBS's *Newshour* sponsored by venture capitalists, Wall Street brokers, and a global food broker? Pay attention to the polls? Do my own five-point empirical study? Google it? Wait for the mathematics? Apply Rational Choice theory or go cognitive?

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: You go to the movies.

JOSEPH NATOLI: I go to the movies. Why? Because popular culture sets out to connect with the imaginary of the masses, not transcend it or instruct it or critique it. Reality frames change with time and pop culture keeps up. It has to if it wants to sell tickets. If you want to know what the American mass psyche is after 9/11, one of the places you can go to find out is the movies. Sure, it's escapist and it's entertainment, but the real draw is in touching the hot spots in the cultural psyche, and successful pop film often does that.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: Is it true that your work focuses on audience reception and not on film itself?

JOSEPH NATOLI: I don't go to the movies to look at the audience. I go to look at the movie. However, I'm not a film theorist or critic or historian.

I'm not a formalist. I'm a guy looking to connect what I read in the headlines with imaginary transformations of the same. Why? Because we live in a world we first imagine. Popular films help us see how we've imagined ourselves and are imagining ourselves. I look to film worlds the same way I look to literary worlds (*Mots D'Ordre* 1992): as imaginary "as if"-they-were-taken-to-be-real worlds. Such playful, picturing worlds are not discursively bound, so they disclose not only a conscious order of things but also what we struggle to represent. Popular film shows us our reality-making ways of the moment or, more precisely, puts us at play with those ways.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: So popular film reacts to us, and we react to it, and then it reacts to our reactions? You know we came before the movies.

JOSEPH NATOLI: None of us came before stories of us. Advertisers, marketers, trial lawyers, political candidates, telemarketers, TV evangelists, football coaches. . . . They want to create a narrative we adopt as our own, totally possess. You buy the story, you buy everything in it. But movies can hit gold by projecting whatever story we're in, including the gaps, the holes, the fissures. No story of reality can be reality so every story is fractal. We all know that. We all don't want to know that. Movies don't want to fabricate us the way the market does; movies can play into the haunting and electrifying spaces of our fabrications.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: Okay. Or, as your students would say, "Whatever." So if we don't go to the movies, what happens?

JOSEPH NATOLI: You don't go to the movies but you fall in love with someone who went to the movies and you play out *her* script of what love is. My point is that you play out somebody's script. Even Shakespeare had Holinshed. You think you can lock yourself away from Walt Disney, MTV, Rupert Murdoch, Time Warner, Viacom, and all the rest? Look, American culture is four parts Hollywood, five parts Madison Avenue, two parts MTV, one part Disney . . .

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: More Disney, I think. And all *American Idol*. Here's the thing. If we're all living these totally privatized lives as you call them, how come we're scripted? Pre-fab, as you like to say.

JOSEPH NATOLI: Ah, there's the con. To be manufactured as Chomsky says and yet to think you're unique. I said our mantra is "free to choose," but that doesn't mean we are. Our choices are constrained by the cultural surround, which in the United States . . .

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: . . . is five parts Victoria's Secret, three parts *Survivor* . . . I got it. Even if we don't go to the movies, we're in a movie.

But you're in it too. If you aren't, where are you? Our culture's a thing marketers and filmmakers and Jack Abramoff and Karl Rove create. But not for you. We're all in this matrix, but you're like Neo who is outside the matrix.

JOSEPH NATOLI: No, I'm in it. I just keep telling myself when I'm watching a movie that what I don't see outside the movies I can see here. I start looking for disclosures, for an unconcealing. And when I'm outside the movies I keep telling myself that this world we humans create has to be treated like a movie. I start looking for the writer, the producer, and the director. I'm not living in my own private imagining. I'm living in somebody else's. A lot of people. Living and dead. It's not a conspiracy and it's not rational. There's no beginning, middle, or end. We may go from Act One to Act Two, but Act Two may be from another script.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: Movies reveal something hidden about reality . . .

JOSEPH NATOLI: About the picture of reality we're in at the time.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: And to understand the reality you're in—or we're in—we have to treat it like a movie. I've got it but I don't have it. Know what I mean? What keeps what you say about a movie or about American culture or their connection from being nothing more than your personal take? And what about things that are not human culture like nature and asteroids and bird viruses and atoms and . . . gravity.

JOSEPH NATOLI: Okay, my personal take. I don't see "personal take" as any more establishing of the personal than "free to choose" is establishing of free choice. Take Huxley's *Brave New World*. How many unique individuals all expressing their own personal take do we have? One guy. Almost. I'm in the box of the moment just like everyone else. But I'm in a story that says it is a box; it's a stage set. So I'm just looking up and around and down and seeing the walls. Which are changing sets. And I'm looking to other people for confirmation on what I see. This isn't a personal screening. We're in a hierarchically narrated world.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: If we're so *Brave New World*, how come we have so much difference and conflict and . . . red and blue states and we hate Bush and we love Bush and pro-lifers and pro-choicers. Everyone in a war of all against all. If we're in the same box.

JOSEPH NATOLI: All of it, and I mean all of it, arises out of a reaction to—positive or negative—our "show *me* the money!" mantra. Everything is narrated in reference to the master voice of the market, which outshouts and overwhelms every other voice. Because it's so pervasive it's reached an invisible status, like air. In its apparent absence, we

seem to be arguing over other, independent matters. But all our conflicts can be traced to what will not enter our discourse because it is beyond the need of discourse. It's gone beyond the need for alibi. Our free-enterprise system, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, is in the nature of things. It is as foolish and useless to critique it as to . . . critique our own mortality, or our need for oxygen, or whether technology isn't necessarily progress, or the motives lying behind 9/11. We're prefabricated not to think that we are mostly prefabricated within a dominating discourse that like the notion of God in the view of the Christian Coalition has disappeared from the scene because it is unarguably self-evident.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: I'll let you argue that with the Christian Coalition, not to mention the Libertarians. What happens when you go to the movies? Let's get back to that. Oh, first tell me how you get nature into your movie.

JOSEPH NATOLI: You know when Berkeley's idealism that it was only perception that made things real reached Dr. Johnson he kicked a stone and said, "There, I refute Berkeley." A real foot hit a real stone and it moved and Dr. J's foot hurt. Was that a refutation? Not if Dr. J was scripted to see the stone move. You could say that Boswell saw it too but Boswell's verification could have been part of Dr. J's script. What I'm saying is we go into the woods we see a deer, we play out *Bambi* or *The Deer Hunter* or a story of the guy down the road dying of deer TB. Blake put it best when he noted that when some see a tree they see a green thing standing in the way—they're into a land developer story—while others see the handiwork of God—they're in a God story.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: Okay, you're not in the woods. You're in the movies.

JOSEPH NATOLI: Well, I go to see a picturing of the world I'm in that the movie is at play with but maybe I'm not at play with. Maybe it's because I don't picture the world in that way or maybe it's because I haven't consumed and responded to the world in the way the movie does. Film is an imaginative "as-if-it-were-the-world" creation, and therefore it abides by the laws of the imagination, working into levels of emotions, senses, and imagination that, say, rational choice theory or discourse analysis or whatever can't get to. I'm not looking for an original theme or startling message. I don't care what popular film may have to *say*, plotwise or subjectwise. On this imaginative level, however, popular film can become an analogue to the world we are in, one which by its very picturing of that world has an integrity independent of our own minds. We can be put into play with what may be projections of what is in us but we can't deal with, we can't represent.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: For a guy who says he doesn't have a film theory it sounds like you do have a kind of film theory and approach. Right down to it, what's invisible here that the film may reveal is this invisible free-market stuff. Or something else?

JOSEPH NATOLI: It could be something else, but right now, both before and after 9/11, certainly since Reagan, the repressed and suppressed cultural dominant is how free-market economics let loose in a global arena totally drives the politics of our democracy. And since the bottom line of one is not the bottom line of the other, you can see the need for a cloaking of this dominant.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: But popular film isn't all about uncloaking what this democracy fears to recognize. I mean where's the popular in that? We are talking commercial enterprise. Selling tickets. This isn't a PBS enterprise.

JOSEPH NATOLI: Sure. The fact that's it's commercial and therefore striving to be widely accessible makes it effective in shaping the culture. It also needs to do more than stroke that culture. It can't for commercial reasons repeat where we're at, but at the same time it has to reassure us that where we're at is okay. In both cases—if it's redundant or if it unsettles us—we'd walk out.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: And the way it walks this tight rope?

JOSEPH NATOLI: Popular film has to present itself within a naïve realist mode of presentation; otherwise it would fail to be popular. The need here is to bring the viewer into the picture of reality being presented in such a way that the viewer is reassured that his or her own grasp of things is solid, that he or she knows what's going on and is in control. But the film can't rest there, because such redundancy, such repetition of how the viewer is already in the world, doesn't elicit the kind of box office smash appeal that sells tickets. There has to be an unnerving aspect, there has to be a threat to and unsettling of everything naïve realism has worked to create. I call it a haunting passage or moment, a plugging into what seizes and electrifies the viewer. We are taken beyond our sense of realism, beyond the order of our reality making, set against our own order of things. Then the film draws back and away and works to recover what it has disclosed so in the end we are not left unsettled but with the feeling once again that we are in control of the world around us, that our picture of the world is indeed not a picture but the world itself. Not all popular films do this, of course, but I have found that the more popular a film is the more certainly I will find such haunting passages.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: Wouldn't you say that art or independent film and not box office would be more likely to reveal something to us about the world we're in?

JOSEPH NATOLI: One of the reasons popular film has something to reveal on these subliminal levels of desire and fear of what we are is because it has a close relationship with the American populace. That necessity is market driven. That populace goes to popular movies and ingests and reacts to those movies. In turn, in order to be popular, popular film has to work itself into this populace, alternatively giving it the escape it seeks and jolting it with what it's escaping from. As none of this is on a rational, conscious level of exposition and critique, there's no unifying second level of grand meaning. It's an endless circle of fabrication, seductions, and consumption. Critically acclaimed films that are rarely seen by anyone but an elite few invariably are critically acclaimed because they attempt to end this round of insensibility. However, they might be able to change it but they can't end it. And popular film by its very nature creates change and also responds to it much more rapidly and reliably than art film can.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: I'm sure every serious film student will give you an argument on that. And all this is important because . . . we need to be insensible?

JOSEPH NATOLI: The ways we imagine the world lead to the ways we narrate the world, and these are the stories of reality we live within. It's important to know what reality you're in, what the new rules of the game are, what Wittgenstein called the language game being played. Science and its wannabe-science brood want to discover and explain reality, expose falsehood, even if they can't find truth. In the end, they come up with stories of discovery and explanation. The kind of cultural studies I do focus on the stories and story-making process itself and attempts to track them to our imaginations, our cultural imaginaries, because our own individual imaginations are, with rare exceptions, culturally bound. We may stay calmly within certain imaginaries or we may suddenly experience what our imaginations struggle to represent or repress, to defend against by demystifying or deconstructing. We run in all different directions from what haunts us.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: And after 9/11 we're living in a different picture of the world? How do you prove that?

JOSEPH NATOLI: I can't. I don't. I leave the five-point statistical survey behind. I go to the movies and I am aware of the difference. If a good part of how we imagine ourselves and the world eludes us because it

remains inconceivable to our resident conceiving-making ways, we either reconfirm and more deeply impose that resident reality, as do conservatives; protest the unreliability and inadequacy of such a reality, as do liberals; or remain in an undecided posture, as do the so-called swing voters. We haven't come to terms with what we've become for a very long time. "Greed is good," Gordon Gekko says in Oliver Stone's film *Wall Street* in 1985 and that picture of us stunned some and inspired others. Bin Laden also brought us a picture of ourselves, so you can say that 9/11 raised the stakes, raised the intensity levels of both what haunts our cultural imaginary and our defensive responses.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: I keep choking on this idea that there's only one cultural imaginary.

JOSEPH NATOLI: And that I'm the guy who can reveal it.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: Hey, you've got a take and maybe we're all more in the same box than in different boxes, but if it's all a matter of story choice, I'd like to be able to know the difference between being in a movie theatre watching a flick and driving my car on the interstate. I'd also like to think Karl Rove isn't renting all my brain space. You know the WMD story was totally bogus and everybody gave a shout-out on that. Well, almost everybody. After awhile. Reality trumped story. Maybe we could do that every time, like we used to, if this postmodern virus hadn't gotten inside our heads. Now, is all that I've just said out of a movie script?

JOSEPH NATOLI: Well, let's say, for the moment, that what I've been saying are just my personal connections with the films and the politics. It's the way a certain kind of leftover Leftist riddled with postmodern ideas would think. Then they won't stick in anyone's mind because they spring from purely personal soil. But if a connection is made not only between film and headlines but also between the reader, that implies a mutual sharing of something. I say we are at this moment sharing a very powerfully constructed cultural imaginary. Maybe it's the virus, as you say, of postmodernity that created this imaginary, or maybe postmodernity is the "cultural logic" of what created this imaginary, or maybe postmodernity is what enables us to recognize what the invisible hand of the global market has made of us. Maybe we'd prefer to be back in a world where realism and rationalism rule, but we're now in a world in which both provide spin and alibi for our cultural dominant—market globalization.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: Which is shared because it's so powerful?

JOSEPH NATOLI: I'm repeating myself, but transnationalized capitalism has pretty well defined the dimensions of that imaginary. You can be

caught black or a woman or poor or illiterate or "downsized" or gay and so on, but it's the dominating values and meanings of globalized capitalism that narrate all that.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: Let's get to the book. You use characters because?

JOSEPH NATOLI: Using characters is a form of sampling or quoting the population. I sample well-known film characters who bear with them film worlds that picture or are at play with former American realities. I do this in order to create a level of historical contrast. I engage in a sort of dialogic, a sort of endless Q&A that floats more balloons than it brings to ground.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: And the Blogosphere that ends the book is similarly a sampling?

JOSEPH NATOLI: Let's say you try for a trustworthy picture of the world with a mass of characters in a number of screenplays. After all, why not use imaginative means to track the imagination? Is there some universal law that keeps us divided, reason and imagination, in our writing? So, I write screenplays with characters to reach toward our cultural imaginary after 9/11. What I get are epiphanies, but no unified, clear picture emerges. How do I supplement this? You go to the Internet, the new Google Delphic Oracle, and what do you find? A battle of narratives, each narrative a discursive thrust, say, rant, into the heart of darkness, promising to deliver a true picture but in the end only inciting a counter-picturing. My use here of blogs is a satiric parodying; there is no space within these blogs for a revelation of what haunts the cultural imaginary, but there is such revelation, I think, in a fabricated clash of narratives, of blogs. These are meta- or sur-blogs, not read for the message alone but read with an awareness of construction, intent, and context. That as Duchamps' urinal showed us in another century fires up more than our everyday, conscious awareness. The screenplay format and the blogospheres attempt to picture, not capture or mirror or analyze, a post-9/11 world. And I find the style suitable to the subject: movies and reviews.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: But how do you get from movies to the Bush administration, which seems to be the main focus of your attack? Clearly regardless of how many character parodies you use and how many pseudo bloggers, there is an underlying unified voice of rage against neocons, the Bush regime, and capitalism itself. Do the movies reveal this, or do the movies give you a chance to do what the bloggers do: rant your case?

JOSEPH NATOLI: The glue connecting the Bush administration—call it neocons—and the movies is this equal immersion in an unchecked globalized

capitalism. Popular film needs to plug into that connect not because it wants to critique it but because it has potency. It has power over us. Why? Because it's repressed in the cultural imaginary. It's a psychodrama on a cultural scale. How then does an undisclosing of that connection reach us? As a rant. How else would it?

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: Spell out the postmodern in all this for me.

JOSEPH NATOLI: How do you go from art to reality? From picture or word to world? As a postmodernist, I think that we live in a buffer zone of stories about the world. Of course, "hard pragmatists and Scot realists" like to say they live in world not fancy. The more they set about "explaining" that "hard realist" view, the more we see the act of narration. Hayden White pointed all this out in regard to our "objective" accounts of the past. We make a world of reality by the very act of narrating that reality. We are "worlding" in Heidegger's view, that is, we are transposing at the moment of intentional perception something not "out there" but rather something we are "already in" into a human life-world. That's what humans do. The irony is that they want to escape this by narrating stories of escape. Stories of power—of government, politics, corporate lobbying—are part of our narrative frame. Movies concoct stories within the same buffer zone. They intersect and interrelate.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: So you won't object if those who feel there are disciplinary boundaries and methodologies to be respected can't find your purpose or your contribution here?

JOSEPH NATOLI: I don't have a story of escape. And that, at this moment, is not a very viable position. We act out what we imagine, and movies, the art form of the twentieth century but not the only one, both script that imagining and put us into play with it. But I don't have a methodology. I don't know what discipline can track our imaginations to the world, or what methodology tracks art to emotions, or indeed can tie pictures to world. We live in pictures of the world we—first person plural—ourselves have imagined. We can probe the imagination itself or we can probe the world or both. What I do is probe a product of imagination and world, a picturing of the world movies present. And I don't take up political analysis or discourse analysis or argument analysis to do it. I have no theoretical bottom to do any of that; my theoretical bottom is postmodern, and the subplot of *This Is a Picture* is trying to perform nothing more than an attitude or disposition.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: I kind of disagree that you don't have any theoretical bottom. It sounds like you've got a lot of. . . . Let me ask you this. At a

time when being post-9/11 America also means—to many—that we're post-postmodern, you connect what you see as a movement from modern to postmodern film with our post-9/11 awareness. Why? How so?

JOSEPH NATOLI: There's been great success since 9/11 in knocking off not only postmodern thought but Enlightenment as well. We could have taken the view that bin Laden and al-Qaeda are picturing the world in a way we can't understand, or, we could have declared The Truth that they're evil and we're good. The former is postmodernist, the latter naïve realist. It doesn't follow that in trying to grasp fully the story of reality al-Qaeda is in that we are condoning the actions of 9/11, giving up our moral compass, being liberal-soft on crime, or hoping for a Utopia where we "all get along." But knowing how the world is pictured and knowing how that picture convinces anyone that it is not a picture but indeed the world itself puts us in a far better defensive posture than throwing bin Laden and al-Qaeda in a handy historical bin of "Evil," a signifier absolutely empty of any pertinent conceptual force.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: Wouldn't just being more scientific about everything been the best defense? Not that I think scientism is the answer for everything, but we did fail to analyze some pretty far-out intelligence, so called.

JOSEPH NATOLI: The Enlightenment had also to be replaced by the reigning naïve realism, a mode dominant in the Middle Ages, so that any application of a Kantian critical reason to reasons as to why we should attack Iraq after 9/11 was considered unnecessary. Why? Reason is unnecessary when faith rules. And we had faith after 9/11 that "evil" covered the crime and nothing more than a Dark Ages approach was needed. Besides, faith—not critical reason—won Bush the White House in 2004. Rove's problem with Bush from the beginning was that he couldn't possibly represent the Enlightenment but as a repentant drunk and born-again Christian he could front faith. I forget what else you asked me.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: You relate a movement from modern to postmodern film with film before and after 9/11.

JOSEPH NATOLI: We are now aware of how we are aware. What Bush and his neocon mentors made of 9/11 has made us too aware of the power of spins to shape our world. At least for those who weren't made aware already by the film *Wag the Dog*. This sort of hyperconsciousness that we are inevitably living in a hyperreality brought to us by resident power-brokers is what we bring to the screen and what the screen now brings

to us. Were we first put into play with this postmodern awareness by the movies? Or did our picturing of the world postmodernize and the movies followed along?

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: Something like every small town becoming a Twin Peaks after Lynch's TV show.

JOSEPH NATOLI: Sure. Theory set me up for it but David Lynch's work in fact put me into play with the far-reaching implications and consequences of our imaginative mediation of reality. Movies shaped themselves within this postmodern attitude and showed us the power of our own fabrications. This too is now what haunts us—we've somehow constructed this dark world we are now in, dark in spite of the daily, bell-ringing buoyancy of Wall Street and perhaps more dark because our globalized, capitalist foundation seems indifferent to war, death, job loss, poverty, natural disaster, torture, inequality, environmental and species degradation, and so on. But at the same time movies launched themselves to a privileged place within the hyperreal.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: That's reality plus what we've made of it.

JOSEPH NATOLI: To know what reality is for us at this moment we need to see it from within the cultural imaginary of the moment. That awareness too is part of the hyperreal. We see everything as if it were being screened. What is more hyperreal than airplanes flying into the Trade Towers on a brilliantly clear autumn morning in AD 2001, than a preemptive strike against Iraq for fallacious reasons, than a loss within the tenure of one willfully ignorant president of all the international respect we had earned up till that time? Those jets flying into the World Trade Towers, Saddam's stolid statue being toppled, George W. uttering "I know what I believe. I will continue to articulate what I believe and what I believe—I believe what I believe is right"—these are all hyperreal.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: I see what you're saying about our responses being contrived. But the attack itself—that was real. People died. That was real. Those towers are gone. That's real.

JOSEPH NATOLI: Sure. It's an historical fact. Place, date, and all. Like Pearl Harbor. Vietnam. Wait. Aren't those historical events, like all historical events, now imagined within the dimensions of a present cultural imaginary? Their existence is at once a matter of representation, which is a matter of cultural mediation. The 9/11 attack was unique in that it happened on our TV screens at the same time it happened in the world. From the very first TV images of a plane and a building the event went through the kind of mediating filtering TV gives to reality and we give to TV. At once, what we saw on TV was like a movie and we could

digest it in no other way. Bush's responses were also from a movie, the only way to reach a culture already residing in the hyperreal. He became John Wayne. He had a Texas walk, a tobacco-chawing smirk, a twang as needed, and he cut brush a lot "out at the ranch. It was pure PR genius to give Bush a part in that movie, pure genius to see it all so quickly as a movie.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: This is a special problem for Americans? And, say, before TV and the movies and the computer and any kind of technology?

JOSEPH NATOLI: To answer the first: we are exceptional in the longevity and success of our use of technology to create new products and new needs and increased profits. The past and the hyperreal? A matter of degree. Patrick Henry or Paul Revere or John Paul Jones and so on get into the mix of a Revolutionary war narrative. There's an imagined community back then through which everything is filtered. But the technology to disseminate their representations are nonexistent or primitive. We now live at a time when the image-making powers technology has produced invade every moment and place in our lives. We are reached as no one in the world has ever been reached before. The image-making machines of Hollywood and Madison Avenue are truly awesome. Everything that happens is immediately massaged to suit market needs. It's ironic that a time when market power can be tempered by governmental power, we hold government the villain and look to the market for relief.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: But don't you rail against the Bush regime?

JOSEPH NATOLI: That's a regime fully responsive to market power. Nader, I think, called Bush's presidency a "corporate presidency." Theoretically, ideally, and constitutionally, the Federal Government can operate independent of the corporate boardroom. It shouldn't operate in opposition to the free market on the grounds of any principle or ideology but certainly on behalf of the democratic and egalitarian ambitions of this society, which, everyone realizes, far exceed a bottom line of profit to shareholders. There was no mention in the Constitution of profit or shareholders.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: Now doesn't this kind of partisan rage put your whole project here in jeopardy?

JOSEPH NATOLI: I think more rage should have been shown by the press, by the Democratic Party, by university faculty and students, by an American public more concerned with the latest special at Wal-Mart than with where President Bush was taking us. I don't apologize for rage. It's biblical. And whether I've presented just my own rage and rant or have gotten into other lifeworlds, other characters, is up to the reader to

decide. I think I put the reader into play with clashing lifeworlds and clashing views and although there is no grand summation or resolution, no original revelation or stunning closure, there are, I hope, some windows to a new awareness, some fresh incitements as to how we imagine ourselves and the world.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: Do you think Hillary Clinton will get some red state votes if she runs for president?

JOSEPH NATOLI: Not a one.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: That's what I think about you getting red state readers for this book. Good luck.

JOSEPH NATOLI: I won't need it. This interview is going to draw them in.

KEVIN NICHOLOFF: I see post-traumatic shock hasn't missed you. But maybe you're right. People will read this and go on to read the book: *This Is a Picture, and Not the World: Movies and a Post-9/11 America*. Was that spin as good as Rove after 9/11?

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 capstone 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.