

# Demythologising our Times: Work in Progress

by Gary Hall

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Michael Moore's award-winning film *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) is an extraordinarily powerful exploration of fear and violence in the USA. Like the English campaigning comedian Mark Thomas, Moore digs deep, confronts, and reaches the parts (and the audience) that would impress anyone who takes seriously the need for 'demythologising our times'. Moore's carefully-crafted film manages to be humorous, incisive and convincing. He tackles the primary myth about 'violent black men'. Then he disarms assumptions that murderous violence is caused by either aggressive music culture, a violent history, youth alienation, violent video games and films, poverty or even of gun ownership. The primary cause (he concludes) is generalised fear, perpetuated by a media which keeps people afraid.

That is, Moore shows that there is a media-fed mythology which benefits certain industrial / military / political power-groups, whilst having devastating effect upon the population at large, and primarily upon the poor. At the same time, he is telling us that the same dynamic is not necessarily the case in other nations or cultures. If heightened, collective fear can have such devastating consequences (an annual murder rate of 11,000, for example), then fear is a theme we must consider carefully in our theologies, our interpretations, our 'demythologising'.

Peter King raised vital themes in his thoughtful and encouraging article, 'Demythologising our Times: Living Humanly in the Twenty First Century'. [1] As he notes, much has changed in the decades since Ellul, Stringfellow and Merton wrote some of their urgent social critique. Significant things have changed even in the relatively short time since Peter wrote his essay. Picking up his key themes, I wanted to explore further what it does mean to be in continuity with the great writers to which he turns, whilst living in a very different climate.

We in Britain have for the past year or so been 'softened up' in preparation for another bombardment of Iraq, which in turn has prompted unprecedented and highly organised protests across the cities of the world against such a war. London, for one, had never seen such mass demonstration in living memory.

Mass demonstration is not a precise measure of public opinion, and public demonstrations can of course be depressingly misguided. [2] But something remarkable has shifted and emerged in the public arena here in Britain and on the global stage. The way in which we participate politically, along with opinions about military and economic intervention, appear to be quite different from even a few years ago. With reference to globalised capitalism and consumerism, Noreena Hertz states that:

a new political movement is beginning to emerge. Rooted in protest, its advocates are not bounded by national geography, a shared culture or history, and its members comprise a veritable ragtag of by now millions, made up by NGOs, grassroots movements, campaigning corporations, and individuals. Their concerns, while disparate, share a common assumption: that the people's interests have been taken over by other interests viewed as more fundamental than their own – that the public interest has lost out to a corporate one. [3]

Such protest, says Hertz, 'centres on the assumption that their votes have become insignificant.' If so, this is a seismic shift. More pertinent to the current essay is the evident change in the way many people are interpreting their world, and contradicting its 'official' or dominant interpretations.

Michael Moore is amongst a rising number of thinkers (Hertz and Klein, of course; we might add the essayists Noam Chomsky, John Pilger, George Monbiot, Kalle Lasn, Ziauddin Sardar; then there are the film-makers, novelists and poets...) who directly counter particular, dominant myths of our time or of recent history, and offer us alternative narratives for living together.

Tony Blair was surely right in his response to a journalist's question about whether those global anti-war protests - and the joint public statement of two Church leaders - had made him question his own judgement. He was right when he said that commentary – however wise – is far easier than making detailed practical plans and decisions to be implemented. Commentary has no real consequence until it is acted upon.

'Commentary' might be another word for 'interpretation', even for 'demythologising' or the metaphor of 'seeing clearly'. It goes without saying that accurate, imaginative and intelligent commentary is important. But then what? What are we going to do about it? [4] In a sense, Moore's film is commentary – but more than this: it is a story of reflective action, of distilling and acting upon evidence, then considering further the consequent action.

In the experienced world of action and interaction, of decision and consequence, we discover that even in the realm of dehumanising forces and their propaganda, there is not necessarily a clearly-definable Us and Them. [5] Not in generalised, overarching terms anyway. Therefore it is difficult or inappropriate to speak of a singular (Christian) Revolution against those forces and their mythology. Indeed, one of the pervasive attitudes which sustains groups like the Michigan militia and their ilk (who feature as eerie clowns in Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*) is this very notion of an all-powerful, often invisible, great enemy. Now, 'revolutionary' discipleship seems to require that we too are willing to jettison some of the mythologies which once inspired and motivated us.

What do we do when we question the myth of the fundamental corruptibility of the oppressor and the inevitably reliable and resilient wisdom of the oppressed? How do we exercise power, knowing that both groups are capable of insight and self-serving delusion? How do we act, think and judge when the old script of Revolution no longer makes sense? How do we continue to take seriously poverty, hunger, and war when denunciation of those evils in itself no longer offers any comfort? The evils are identified, those responsible and complicit castigated, and then what? Who provides effective antiracist training for police departments? Who enables companies to be accountable to locales, both human and natural? How do we prevent famine? What are the concomitants of a just and durable peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians? How do we provide jobs, hope and a place to thrive for an estranged, desperately poor underclass? [6]

It is one thing to recognise that global corporations have immense social impact, another thing to reinvent the global monetary system. It is one thing to know that the bombing of civilians – even unintentionally – is an inhumane act, another thing to work out an acceptable solution to the political, social and humanitarian crises of a region. The point is, quite simply, that 'living humanly in the twenty-first century' involves more than 'seeing' through the propaganda. This remains crucial, then the more detailed 'demythologising' is essentially practical, experienced and localised.

The foundation of Sharon Welch's inspiring and provocative essay is, she writes, an experience of 'growing up and realizing that there is no one else to complain to, to denounce or challenge, no other adults who will hear our cries of injustice and transform reality.' So we are called upon to accept the responsibilities of the fact that:

We are the ones in charge, in small ways and in large. We are the voters, the parents, the teachers, the owners and managers of business, the investors, the government officials. What do we do when the protest is heard? [7]

One can hear Merton's words echoing back from that final address in Bangkok: 'It's time to stand on our own two feet...' A turning point in Moore's film, for example, involves student survivors of Columbine returning to K-Mart bullets they have bought there (K-Mart bullets had maimed their own bodies). The action was imaginative, instinctive, and in turn changes the reality (K-Mart committed to stop selling bullets), whilst revealing something more about the nature of the beast and the potential for modifying its behaviour.

With regarding to the (currently) looming war, it is not entirely clear how or when the shift in public opinion or approach gathered pace. Crossing the threshold of the millennium changed our outlook, as did the shock of September 11th and its aftermath. How many other significant details have brought about a very different social climate? It is not surprising that some of Jacques Ellul's words of more than fifty years ago cannot be applied universally to our own times:

Our contemporaries only see the presentations which are given them by the press, the radio, propaganda, and publicity... [and] ... modern man, submerged by this flood of images which he cannot verify, is utterly unable to master them. [8]

The impact of continuous, streaming propaganda-entertainment is vast and potentially devastating, though as Peter King acknowledges, the world of the 1940s is not our world. For instance, 'a television-based epistemology pollutes public communication and its surrounding landscape' [9] more than we could realistically have imagined; but we might also heed Naomi Klein's words of caution, lest we generate more unnecessary fear and unwittingly disarm ourselves:

When piled on together, such examples give a picture of corporate space as a fascist state where we all salute the logo and have little opportunity for criticism because our newspapers, television stations, Internet servers, streets and retail spaces are all controlled by multinational corporate interests.... But a word of caution: we may be able to see a not-so-brave new world on the horizon, but that doesn't mean we are already living in Huxley's nightmare.... We might easily lose sight of the fact that censorship is not nearly as absolute as many a newly-converted Noam Chomsky acolyte might like to believe. Instead of an airtight formula, it is a steady trend.... [10]

The public imagination (so the evidence suggests) tends now to be more suspicious of the motives of governments, of the military-industrial complex, even of our own dispositions towards self-protection and violence, than was the case in the 1940s or 1960s. Fewer people, it would seem, accept without question the propaganda about (say) the Iraqi regime, or believe that intensive bombing would in any case be a way to deal with local tyrants. The 'myth' we are being fed is itself hardly coherent: Indeed, it is widely held that any myth in this 'post-modern' era will necessarily be relativised and therefore to some degree disempowered.

In our day, in our place, the person absorbing continuous streams of information and images - which shape our values, our attitudes, our sense of self and others - does not so readily take them at face value. The problem then is that we, doubting the very cultural vocabulary which shapes us [11] no longer dare to take anything for granted. Such a disturbing and alienating experience generates insecurity which in turn can soon lead to fundamentalisms of one form or another. It becomes apparent that our 'demythologizing' must now involve an acceptance and integration of complexity, not least to avoid the temptation of fabricating a highly-developed and all-embracing global 'enemy' whose single, sophisticated dominant myth has deceived and ensnared us all. Such a view - which

has already destroyed more lives than we can imagine - would be not only paranoid but arguably blasphemous.

In 1948, when Jacques Ellul published the essay quoted above, George Orwell was writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. But - as Neil Postman argued convincingly in his seminal critique of television culture [12], the world into which we emerged was less like Orwell's tyrannical vision of Big Brother, more like Huxley's *Brave New World* where people love their oppression:

'All that has happened is that the public has adjusted to incoherence and been amused into indifference. Which is why Aldous Huxley would not in the least be surprised by the story. Indeed, he prophesied its coming. He believed that it is far more likely that the Western democracies will dance and dream themselves into oblivion than march into it, single file and manacled. [13]

Again, we might question whether the emergence of large-scale movements of protest suggest that the picture is again changed or at least more complex than this. There is another fiction, however, which seemed to capture the imagination of many who experienced in *The Matrix* [14] an echo of their feeling that 'something isn't right', that something about this world as presented and experienced is illusory.

The film is set in the aftermath of a global war which people no longer remember, as they are living in a virtual reality generated by the victorious machine to which they are all attached and which uses them solely as sources of energy for its own continuation. Only a small resistance group has broken away from this grand illusion, and battles against the domination of the machine.

The film is compelling, but to take it as an Orwellian metaphor of our situation would be at best unhelpful, at worst paranoid. The notion of an immense, dominant, global super-power - which has the capacity to generate an almost flawless illusion to imprison and dehumanise us - is attractive if we are still looking for one identifiable 'enemy' against which we might awaken the Revolution. The facts point to a more complex reality, and the 'alternative narratives' we might present in any given situation need to be specific, evolving and detailed; they need also to be lived rather than described.

One aspect of the complexity of our actual situation is illustrated by a sub-plot in *The Matrix*, and involves the traitor, the one who decides that he actually prefers the illusory world to the harsh and barren reality to which he has been awakened. Being aware that 'we in the West have been catching glimpses of another kind of global village, where the economic divide is widening and cultural choices narrowing', that is 'the village where we are indeed connected to one another through a web of brands, but the underside of that web reveals designer slums' [15] we are only too aware that these things flourish by consent and participation. We cannot assume that all who participate are unaware of the impact of our consumptive way of life on other people and the planet. But what is to be done when we do see clearly enough through the veils of branding and consumer fantasies, then go on participating?

For one thing, best not to panic. If 'our cultural environment increasingly expects, imagines, provides for and nourishes panic', [16] then resistance or re-creation opposes panic. We might also usefully avoid being preoccupied with a quest for personal purity or disentanglement [17] but rather to contemplate the possibility that 'one of the most powerful enemies of the self will always be anything that encourages us to imagine an environment without friction.' [18] Our participation in the problems we identify only reveals that we have no 'outside' perspective on what is going on. Except, that is, the possibility for the Christian of what James Allison calls 'the knowledge of the victim' which is given to us in the crucified-and-risen Christ. [19]

Peter King distils something of the narrative bequeathed us by Ellul, Stringfellow and Merton. The

first thing, he says, involves seeking out the meaning and implications of ‘living humanly during the Fall’. This implies an acknowledgement ‘that it is not human nature as such that is depraved, but it is our relationships with one another, the world, and God that are distorted’. It is not altogether clear that we can so readily distinguish between human nature and the relationships we create. Forces of dehumanisation are of course human in origin, and when we attend to our own hearts and how we are affected by our relation to the world in which we live, we catch glimpses of the seeds of destruction. The problem then is not necessarily that we don’t see accurately, but that we don’t easily translate our seeing into liberating and transformative praxis.

The second point Peter identifies as bequeathed to us, is our calling ‘to look beyond the image to the reality, unmasking the illusions upon which so much of our lives are built’. In a world of virtual reality, it comes as no surprise that we seek ‘something more real’ than the apparently thin, fake, unsubstantial nature of much of our existence and the products of our lives.

On today’s market we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant properties: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol.... And the list goes on.... the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare... up to today’s tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness.... [20]

It was the title which attracted me to Slavoj Zizek’s essay, Welcome to the Desert of the Real, though I had not immediately identified this ironic line from The Matrix. Zizek draws some startling and poignant conclusions from his analysis of September 11th and the culture in which it was interpreted. Setting the scene, he says that:

just as decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being real coffee, Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being so. What happens at the end of this process of virtualization, however, is that we begin to experience ‘real reality’ itself as a virtual entity. [21]

The attack on the World Trade Centre, he goes on, can be perceived as ‘the climactic conclusion of twentieth-century art’s ‘passion for the Real’ – the ‘terrorists’ themselves did not do it primarily to provoke real material damage, but for the spectacular effect of it.’ [22] James Allison’s recent essay in this journal is an incisive exploration of the satanic nature of such a spectacular Event. Zizek’s conclusions require us to think again about what it means to speak of looking beyond the image to the reality, of seeking Reality behind Illusion. It may only be a question of the language we use, but our language then needs to be precise. Zizek interprets our repeated viewing of those collapsing towers as the cruelly logical outcome of our yearnings for more Reality:

The authentic twentieth-century passion for penetrating the Real Thing (ultimately, the destructive Void) through the cobweb of semblances which constitutes our reality thus culminates in the thrill of the Real as the ultimate ‘effect’. [23]

Zizek’s essay contributes most directly to this present discussion when he concludes that we should ‘invert the standard reading according to which the WTC explosions were the intrusion of the Real which shattered our illusory Sphere.’ The reverse, he says, is actually the case:

it was before the WTC collapse that we lived in our reality, perceiving Third World horrors as

something which was not actually part of our social reality, as something which existed (for us) as a spectral apparition on the (TV) screen – and what happened on September 11 was that this fantasmatic screen apparition entered our reality. It is not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality (i.e. the symbolic co-ordinates which determine what we experience as reality). [24]

That our daily experience can be dull, dissatisfying, lacking in depth, stressful, deceptive, violent, full of pretence and propaganda is a fact we may abhor, but is no reason to declare that experience ‘unreal’. Our lives may be more full, overloaded with information, demands, impressions, generally more complex than was the case fifty years ago. However, it may nevertheless be counter-productive to assume that people are too busy in their daily lives to notice when we are fed propaganda, or that this propaganda is part of our reality.

At the same time, there are countless models of ‘living humanly and humanely’ in the midst of the forces of dehumanisation and despair. These little parables are all around us: people and communities who are our constant hope and inspiration, and remind us that we can never speak of ‘humanity’ as wholly depraved or lost or whatever. I cannot imagine how we would offer a vision of a truly human and humane world other than in these ever-present and infinitely varied ways by which we are already surrounded. Our future vision may need to be more chaotic, less climactic than, say, the outlook of chiliastic Christian movements, [25] but that is not to say we are any less dependent on the grace of God, the inspiration of scripture, the Holy Spirit, the ‘knowledge of the Victim’. ‘The kingdom of God is in our midst,’ and we are gifted with alternative narratives bursting out and taking shape all around us, contradicting dominant and destructive powers. Occasionally a critical mass is reached and – as in the previous weekend’s enormous demonstrations – we witness a coming-together, a significant shift in majority public opinion and unified action. For the rest of the time we remain in a world which will always require of us new efforts, clarity of perception, investigation of facts and their implications, and constant revision of our living as Christians in this time and place.

I wonder if our problem in the church is not so much that we don’t face reality, but that we will not accept it. Meaning not that we approve or resign ourselves to our current situation, but simply that we acknowledge this is where we start from. Rather than wishing things were different, we might make things different once we discern and acknowledge the facts of our lives together. Surely then there are many truths ‘which [do] not yet exist’. Truth (it has been said, from a liberationist perspective) is what we make true. So every little act of compassion, of transformation or self-giving or re-creation is that more humane reality we seek. In our discipleship we often have no clear idea what will contribute towards a better future, therefore we might do better to think not so much of ‘the end’ but of the next step – and then the next. As Peter says, ‘The precise shape of those lives of resistance will be formed by our own specific time and place, and their interaction with our own self and gifts’.

Nicholas Lash said that ‘learning to pray, to keep creativeness in mind, is a matter of learning to read the times in which we live and, in those times, to apply the correctives which discipleship requires’. [26] Our demythologising is then highly specific: So-and-so makes a product for which they pay workers so much and under these conditions. They invest in this bank which finances these military industries, whose goods are exported by permission of this select committee to these countries where, on this date, they were used to maim and kill these people. And so on. Then, in light of our reading of scriptures, we look imaginatively at what opportunities there are for being a spanner in these particular works. Illusions tend to be unmasked by attention (which is prayer), analysis and focussed action. A vision of a more humane world is presented not as an ideal notion but as myriad living parables of communion, restoration and solidarity. Above all, by the presence of the crucified-and-risen Christ who reveals in us the perspective of the victim, and the possibility of living together without the need for either victims or illusions.

## Notes

1. Peter King, 'Demythologising our Times: Living Humanly in the Twenty-First Century', *The Merton Journal*, Advent 2002, pp. 30-37
2. Noreena Hertz writes that:  
Various pressure groups... lack any sort of democratic mandate, are often narrowly focussed on the priorities of their members, or of their leadership, and may work to impose their values irrespective of those of others.... And sometimes the wishes of the demos are downright nasty, like the British hysteria about paedophiles, largely stirred up by a corporation, *News International*....  
Noreena Hertz, *The Silent Takeover: Global Capitalism and the Death of Democracy* (London: Arrow Books), p.260
3. *ibid.* p. 251
4. Whilst writing this, I was pleased to read the *Guardian* supplement of 27th February 2003, where the question, 'What would you do about him then?', was asked of various public figures in relation to Saddam Hussein. See [www.guardian.co.uk/iraq](http://www.guardian.co.uk/iraq).
5. Hertz (*op.cit.*, p.259) writes: 'Of course, such protest does not provide a long-term solution to the Silent Takeover. Its limitations mirror those of consumer activism.... As we have seen, pressure groups need to play to the media, which encourages polarised posturing, the demonisation of 'enemies', the oversimplification of issues and the choosing of fashionable rather than difficult causes to champion.' Further (p.260), she says that: 'Protest acts as a countervailing force to the Silent Takeover, yet because it is not fully inclusive it shares, to a degree, the illegitimacy of its opponent.'
6. Sharon Welch, *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work* New York: Routledge, 1999. p. xx
7. *ibid.*
8. Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom* London: SCM 1951 (quoted in Peter King, p.31)
9. Neil Postman *Amusing ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* London: Methuen, 1987, p.29
10. Naomi Klein, *No Logo* London: Harper Collins, 2000, p.187
11. Rowan Williams writes: 'What I want now and how I feel now and what I am capable of 'inventing' are grounded in certain basic dispositions, limits and needs in a material constitution; but no one element in this exists without cultural mediation. We learn what we are in language and culture – even what we physically are.' Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* London: Continuum, 2000, p. 141
12. *op.cit.* first published 1985
13. Postman, *op.cit.*, p.113
14. The Wachowski brothers, 1999
15. Klein, *op.cit.*, xvii
16. Williams, *op.cit.* p.143
17. 'Inwardness develops not by escaping or resolving but by deepening the conflicts that define it.'" *ibid.*, p.146
18. *ibid.*, p.147
19. James Allison, *Knowing Jesus*, London: SPCK, 1993
20. Slavoj Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, London & New York: Verso, 2002, p.10f
21. *ibid.*, p.11
22. *ibid.*
23. *ibid.*, p.12
24. *ibid.* p.16
25. a good overview and analysis of chiliastic / millennial Christian movements is found in Chris Rowland, *Radical Christianity: A Reading of Recovery* Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988. Sharon Welch (*op.cit.*) offers alternative models of future-orientation and social action, borrowed from (amongst other sources) chaos theory.
26. 1990 Aquinas Lecture delivered at Blackfriars, Cambridge