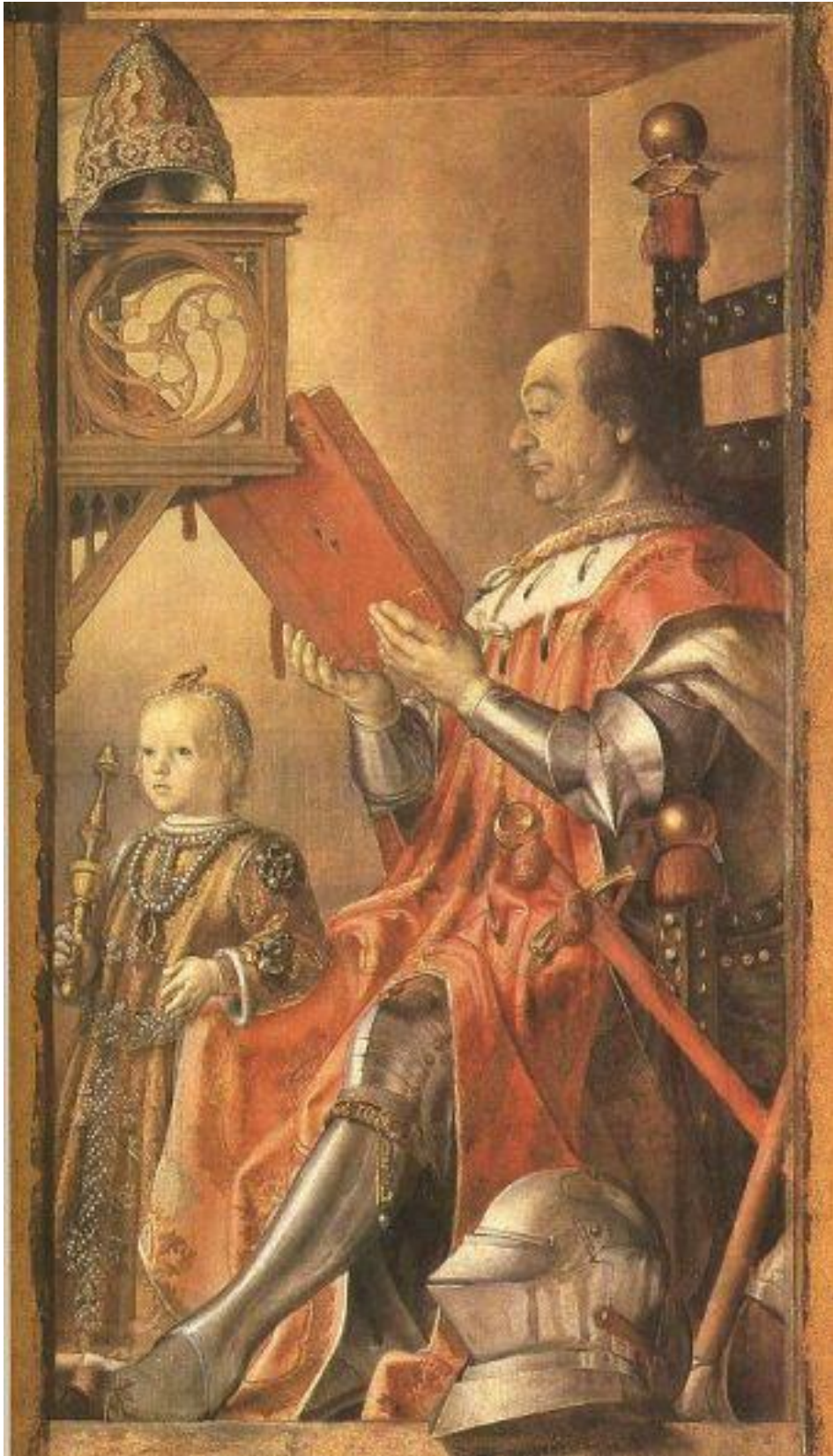


**Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day*:
Presidential Mythology, Cultural (Mis-)Representation and Actual Politics after 9/11**

This paper comments on how the representation of the US-President in Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996) follows a popular myth that emerged in Renaissance Europe. After presenting a brief archaeology and contemporary manifestations of Presidential discourse, it will show how Emmerich's fashioning of the Presidential *persona* in his highly fantastic movie penetrates the borderline of fact and fiction and contributes to actual American politics in the wake of 9/11.

A Brief Archaeology of the Presidential Myth: The representation of the American President in contemporary culture can be traced back to a role profile that emerged in early modern England and Italy. It echoes Sir Thomas Hoby's book on *The Courtier* (1561)¹ which defines the Elizabethan political man as a 'soldier and scholar', or as a famous contemporary reader puts it: "Above all things it importeth a courtier to be [...] skillful and expert in letters and arms; [...] nimble and speedy of body and mind"²

As Hoby's book is a translation of an earlier work from Italy – Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (1528) – the definition of the political man as a soldier and scholar can be traced back to early modern Italy or – to be more precise – to the court of the city state of Urbino: Castiglione celebrates the Duke of that city – Federigo da Montefeltro (1422-82) – as an archetypal gentleman-politician who turned his dukedom into the most important cultural centre of his time and was one of the first rulers to apply artistic representation as a means of political self-empowerment. With a grain of salt, gentle Federigo may be addressed as the founding father of what Stephen Greenblatt has called 'Renaissance Self-Fashioning'.³ As an illustration of that aspect, one may refer to a painting by Pedro Berruguete (c. 1450-1504) that propagates the Duke's public image as a soldier and scholar by presenting the fully armed Federigo as a humanist reader in his study:⁴



With regard to political Self-Fashioning in early modern England, the best known example of soldier- and scholarship is Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86) who has become widely known as the perfect Renaissance gentleman. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for instance, Ophelia's comment on Hamlet's melancholy has often been interpreted as a topical allusion to Sidney in connection with Castiglione's gentility-myth appropriated by Hoby:

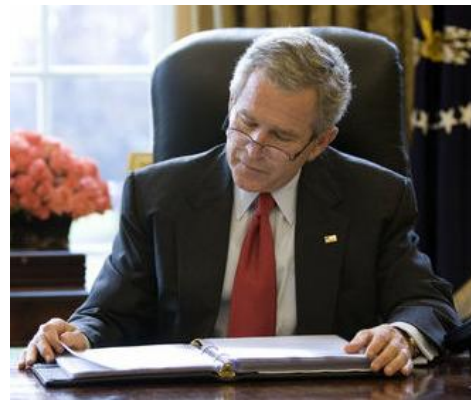
O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
 The *courtier's*, *soldier's*, *scholar's*, eye, tongue, sword;
 Th'expectancy and rose of the fair state,
 The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
 Th'observed of all observers quite, quite down! (*Hamlet*, III.1.151-5, my emphasis)⁵

In continuation of the Anglo-Saxon tradition modelled on Italian Renaissance culture, the iconography of the soldier and scholar-myth can be found among samples of US political discourse. It is no coincidence that more than fifty percent of the forty-three American Presidents have both a military and an academic background. Owing to the fact that, after World War II, this figure rises to more than eighty percent, one can observe that the early modern fashioning of the political man as a soldier and scholar – which is nowadays known under the more republican term of the 'gentleman-politician' – is of increasing rather than declining significance for contemporary US politics.⁶ One of the reasons for this development may be derived from the fact that – like the roots of Presidential discourse in the early modern court – contemporary culture is image-centred – an aspect which can be observed from the carefully staged theatricality of politics, election campaigns and the current vogue for 'Presidential movies' such as *Hello, Mr. President* (1995), *Independence Day* (1996), and *Air Force One* (1997). Living in the media-dominated age of the 'iconic turn', the successful dissemination of a public image has become more significant than the actual person this image refers to.

Although it culminates in the present age and counteracts the iconoclastic heritage of white Anglo-Saxon Protestantism as a dominant current in American history, the iconicity of Presidential Self-Fashioning can be traced back as far as to the origins of the United States. Although George Washington – as the Presidential archetype that every successor has to live up to – had never received academic training, his political *persona* was fashioned in imitation of the imagery known from Castiglione's soldier and scholar myth translated by Hoby:⁷



If we now look at contemporary US politics, the self-fashioning of George W. Bush corresponds to the same phenomenon: although he is not a scholar in the truest sense of the word and though his military valour has been subject to sceptical debate, he cultivates the public image of the gentleman-politician based on the soldier and scholar myth. This is, for instance, the case when, in times of crisis, he dresses up as a naval aviator rather than a top politician:⁸



As an indicator of public opinion, mass-cultural phenomena point in the same direction. When we check the market for Presidential action figures, we find representations of both, George W. Bush the soldier and scholar.⁹



According to a commercial for one of the scholarly dolls, “These are fantastically detailed and respectful products that will be cherished for generations to come.”¹⁰ Although the action figures are mass-produced trash, the product-description styles them as political icons in the truest sense of the word. Like a religious icon from Byzantium – which functions as a super-sign that ‘embodies’ rather than represents the saint it depicts – the description tries to make us believe that the doll is a valuable object of desire and worship endowed with an aura of Presidential authenticity. In other words, the commercial tries to make us believe that the action figure *is* the President rather than a cheap and trashy representation. This is why the advertisement continues to say that:

“Each figure is limited in production [...] and includes an individually numbered certificate of authenticity [...]. The figures [sic!] clothing is made from actual suit material and is custom tailored and era specific. This figure has 25 voice clips using the actual voice of the president.”¹¹

Roland Emmerich's Independence Day, 9/11, and its Relationship to the Presidential Myth in Contemporary US-Culture: This brings us to the second part of the paper, which focuses on Emmerich's *Independence Day* – a highly fantastic movie that, like the Presidential action figures, has come to be acknowledged as fact rather than fiction. As far as public opinion is concerned, Emmerich's invented characters are about to be perceived as actual people. When we check the Wikipedia entry on the characters of *Independence Day* as a popular source of information, for instance, Emmerich's fictitious President of the USA – Thomas J. Whitmore – and his wife are presented as persons that are as real as the empirical President George W. Bush and his First Lady:

“President Thomas J. Whitmore (Bill Pullman): President of the United States throughout the movie, Whitmore is a former fighter pilot who served in the Persian Gulf War. Although his approval rating has fallen recently, he wins back the public thanks to his leadership of the resistance against the alien invaders.”

“First Lady Marilyn Whitmore (Mary McDonnell): President Whitmore's wife. Was fatally injured while fleeing the destruction of Los Angeles. Died later of internal bleeding.”¹²

With the exception of the names of the actors starring in these roles and the distancing phrase “throughout the movie”, fiction is presented as fact in a news-like, objectifying manner. Like Oscar Wilde's famous dictum that life should imitate art rather than art life, Emmerich's production inverts the hierarchy of life and art and produces a mimetic fallacy.¹³

The same phenomenon can be observed from Davide Girardelli's statement that “Mainstream media emphasized an intertextual connection between the events of September 11th and specific scenes in *Independence Day*”, which means that the reality of 9/11/2001 has been partly fashioned in imitation of aspects presented in Emmerich's fantastic movie from 1996.¹⁴ When the empirical US-President Bush addressed the nation in the wake of 9/11 and fashioned the war against terror as the civilized world's ‘apocalyptic’ fight for freedom, parts of his speech echo that of Emmerich's fictitious President Whitmore:

George W. Bush:

“Today, [...] our way of life, our very freedom came under attack [...] This is not [...] just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. [...] We ask every nation to join us. [...] Freedom and fear are at war. [...] Our nation – this generation – will lift a dark threat of violence from our people and our future. [...] We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail.”¹⁵

Thomas J. Whitmore:

“In less than an hour, aircrafts from here will join others from around the world. And you will be launching the greatest area battle in the history of mankind [...] - we will be united in our common interests [...], and you'll be once again fighting for our freedom – [...] for our right to live, to exist, and should we win the day, the fourth of July will no longer be known as an American holiday - but as the day when the world declared in one voice, [...] we will not finish without a fight, we are going to live on, we are going to survive.”¹⁶

As the parallels to be found in these speeches indicate, Girardelli's claim – that “with numerous intertextual references, mainstream media created a ‘global narrative’, which connected *Independence Day* with September 11th tragedy” – cannot be denied.¹⁷

Although it reduces the world's most important politician and his advisory board to puppet dolls imitating Emmerich's fiction, this strategy works out perfectly as far as public opinion and knowledge are concerned. It is not an individual performance that the public expects from its President, but a re-enactment of the collectively known Presidential soldier and scholar-myth whose cultural iconography is activated by collective stories such as Emmerich's *Independence Day*. It is no coincidence that in times of crisis, George W. Bush fashions himself in a similar way to the invented President Thomas J. Whitmore, the naval aviator who exchanges his sophisticated pin-stripe suit for his combat-equipment in the climactic scene of the movie:¹⁸



As cultural representations, Thomas J. Whitmore, George W. Bush and even the Presidential action figure, become interchangeable because they all have in common the fact that they are filled with the same cultural meaning in the context of the American Presidential meta-narrative.¹⁹ In other words, it is the representation of the Presidential role as a soldier and scholar that matters for culture as a process of meaning making rather than the individual subject or – in the case of the doll – object that has to fill this role. As far as discourse as the production of social knowledge and power is concerned, it is quite irrelevant whether art represents life, or vice versa – an aspect which is confirmed by Girardelli's observation that after the events of 9/11 politicians and mass-media immediately acknowledged and consciously elaborated the connection between the fantastic fiction of *Independence Day* and actual politics. When President Bush was advised to follow his fictitious counterpart Thomas J. Whitmore's approach to the crisis – which corresponds with the soldier and scholar-myth every actual President has to subscribe to – such a decision seemed to be the absolutely right thing to do in 2001.

Judging from a more recent perspective which includes the Bush administration's failure to cope with the crises that followed 9/11, the Presidential myth has lost much of its authority. Probably the Presidential advisory board has laid too much emphasis on the soldier and forgotten the scholar. Roland Emmerich's 2004 movie, *The Day After Tomorrow*, can be considered as a reaction to this experience. In contrast to *Independence Day*, the character of the US-President only plays a marginal role and has to acknowledge his errors of the past. It is not the President or his deputies who help the people to survive the new Ice Age and to restore America as the promised land of the soldier and scholar. For the group of people entrapped in icy Manhattan, the life-redeeming hero is the New York Public Library and its books – the symbol of scholar- rather than soldiership.

¹ Thomas Hoby, *The Book of the Courtier (Il Cortegiano)*. From the Italian of Count Baldassare Castiglione: Done into English by Sir Thomas Hoby, Anno 1561. With an Introd. by Walter Raleigh. (London: Nutt 1900). Facs. Repr. (New York: AMS Pr. 1967).

² Gabriel Harvey's (1550-1630) entry in his copy of Hoby's book, quoted from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 5th Ed. Vol. I. Gen Ed. M.H. Abrams (Norton: New York, 1986), p. 1005.

³ Cf. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning. From More to Shakespeare*. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980). As outlined in Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation" in Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Sage: London, 2003), pp. 13-74, this paper regards representation as a semiotic and a discursive process of meaning making. With regard to the function of myth in contemporary culture, cf. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: du Seuil, 1957).

⁴ Pedro Berruguete, Federico da Montefeltro and his son Guidobaldo, ~1480, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino.

⁵ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. Ed. G. R. Hibbard (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1987). With regard to this passage as a possible allusion to Sidney, cf. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* Vol. I., p. 1005.

⁶ With exception of Bill Clinton (who refused to join the Viet Nam War) and Harry S. Truman (who didn't attend a university), every post-war President has both an academic and a military background: Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush and his son George W. Bush.

⁷ Charles Willson Peale, Washington as Colonel of the Virginia Regiment, 1772. Washington-Curtis-Lee Collection, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, VA & Gilbert Stuart, George Washington, Lansdowne Portrait, 1796, National Portrait Gallery Washington D.C.

⁸ <http://www.defendamerica.com/archive/2003-05/20030501.html>,

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/stateoftheunion/2006/photoessay/images/p013106ed-0163-398h.jpg> (07/09/2007).

⁹ www.wartoyz.com/.../george-bush-aviator-400.jpg & <http://www.talkingpresidents.com/products-af-bush.shtml> (07/09/2007).

¹⁰ http://www.dcgiftshop.com/items/President_George_W_Bush_Action_Figure.html (07/09/2007).

¹¹ http://www.dcgiftshop.com/items/President_George_W_Bush_Action_Figure.html (07/09/2007).

¹² [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independence_Day_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independence_Day_(film)) (07/09/2007).

¹³ Cf. Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying" in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. Eds. Terence Brown, Owen Dudley Edwards et. al. (Harper Collins: Glasgow, 1994), pp. 1071-92, at pp. 1082, 1085, 1091.

¹⁴ Davide Girardelli, "just like independence day",

<http://www.disinfo.com/archive/pages/article/id2296/pg1/index.html> (07/09/2007), pp. 1-10, quoted from p. 5. In an appendix to his article, Girardelli documents his database research in support of his thesis. On p. 8, he quotes a CNN comment, saying that after September 11, life imitated art. This aspect corresponds with Baudrillard's claim that the concept of 'reality' is an essentialist myth: rather than reflecting the world in a mimetic manner, cultural texts construct, or *simulate*, what is perceived as real: Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l'économie du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972) and *Simulacra and Simulation*, transl. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994). With regard to Baudrillard's contribution to the debate on global terror, cf. "The Spirit of Terrorism", transl. by Rachel Bloul, *Le Monde* 2 November 2001.

¹⁵ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html> (07/09/2007).

¹⁶ Quoted from *Independence Day*. Dir. Roland Emmerich. Twentieth Century Fox, 1996.

¹⁷ Girardelli, p. 6.

¹⁸ http://www.probush.com/elite_force_george_w_bush.htm &

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0116629/photogallery-ss-0> (07/09/2007).

¹⁹ In contrast to Lyotard's analysis of postmodern culture, which foregrounds the shakiness of the traditional meta-narratives of truth, Emmerich's movie affirms these narratives: Cf. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, transl. from the French by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1997). As parts of the plot of *Independence Day* can be traced back to Byron Haskins' movie *War of the Worlds* (1953), a radio play by Orson Wells (1938), and H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898), a diachronic cultural analysis of this rewriting process, which is beyond the scope of this paper, would reveal a series of ideological shifts and transformations. Whereas H.G. Wells' text is a harsh satire on late Victorian British imperialism, Emmerich's *Independence Day* turns out to be a hegemonic celebration of the neo-imperial 'Pax Americana'. Whereas Byron Haskins' science fiction movie represents anxieties of the cold war period (atomic holocaust, the alien invaders as a symbol of Soviet aggression), Orson Wells' radio play, which was broadcast as a faked news report, may be considered as a confirmation of Baudrillard's theory of 'reality as simulacrum' (cf. footnote 14): As the myth of the reception goes, the radio play was mistaken for an actual news report and caused a panic among the audience.