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Popular visual language as global communication: the remediation of United Airlines Flight 93

CYNTHIA WEBER*

Abstract. This article argues that while the linguistic turn in mainstream IR is important in broadening how IR approaches global communications, the linguistic turn has its limitations because mainstream IR tends to, in Mattelart's terms, 'ex-communicate' the visual from the linguistic. This is highly problematic, considering, firstly, that popular visual language is increasingly the language that amateurs and experts rely upon in order to claim contemporary literacy and, secondly, that much politics is conducted through popular visual language. If the challenge of this Special Issue is to think about how to bring the discipline of IR to meaningful, political life, then a very good place to start is by asking mainstream IR (again) to take popular visual language seriously as an important aspect of contemporary global communication. This article makes this demand of the discipline of IR. It does so by presenting a case-study – the official US remediation of United Airlines Flight 93 – as an illustration of how contemporary global communications move from the textual to the visual and of what is lost in not taking this move seriously. In particular, it claims that by failing to analyse popular visual language as integral to global communications, mainstream IR risks misunderstanding contemporary subjectivity, spatiality, and temporality.

Introduction

More than a generation ago, the discipline of International Relations took the linguistic turn marked by the introduction of 'discourse analysis' to bear on core questions of international relations. Celebrated by some,¹ resisted by others,² and mainstreamed by still others,³ the linguistic turn reinvigorated IR scholarship. But it had its limitations. Practised in IR as a primarily textually-based set of research techniques, discourse analysis took speech and particularly writing as its focus, often

* Thanks to Roland Bleiker, Costas Constantinou, Kevin Dunn, Jenny Edkins, Mark Lacy, Maureen McNeil, Oliver Richmond, Stephan Stetter, Alison Watson, and to an anonymous referee for comments on this essay.

¹ Richard Ashley and R. B. J. Walker, editors of Special Issue of *International Studies Quarterly*, 34:3 (1990).

² Robert Keohane, 'International Institutions: Two Approaches', *International Studies Quarterly*, 32:4, pp. 379–96.

³ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

to the exclusion of other communicative practices,⁴ like hearing, feeling, and seeing – all of which are (as this volume demonstrates) vital for understanding global politics. Given these limitations, the linguistic turn is not ‘communication all the way down’.⁵

I want to take up one aspect of the sights and sounds of global communications – popular visual language. Visual language – like textual language – has a grammar and a syntax. But it is expressed, circulated, and experienced differently than the texts IR scholars generally study. It is expressed less through words (although these can be visual) than through still, moving, and multiplying media (photography, film, web-based windows). It is increasingly circulated through wireless networks onto the digital screens of our daily lives (computers, telephones, and televisions). And it is experienced as much if not more by amateurs than it is by experts. All of this makes visual language the language of contemporary popular culture – the language that amateurs and experts increasingly rely upon in order to claim contemporary literacy.

It is therefore surprising that mainstream IR is still so resistant to taking popular visual language seriously. And yet, this can easily be explained. On the one hand, the linguistic turn enabled mainstream IR scholars to understand that language frames life and living, structures and agents, institutions and identities. But for the most part, mainstream IR fails to understand how popular visual expressions participate in these framings because it does not make the link between the linguistic and the visual. It fails to link the linguistic to the visual because while the linguistic is understood as the medium through which ‘real’ politics is communicated, the visual is often dismissed as merely popular.

Paradoxically, what this means is that the visual remains largely outside of the domain of legitimate IR – it is in Mattelart’s terms ‘ex-communicated’⁶ – while the visual is effectively the inside of everyday life. And if politics happens anywhere, it happens in the everyday, in all sorts of ‘high’ and ‘low’ ways. If the challenge of this volume is to think about how to bring the discipline of IR to meaningful, political life – how to introduce it to the world as non-experts see it and make it and use it, rather than as expert IR scholars imagine it is or ought to be – then a very good place to start is by (again) asking mainstream IR to take popular visual language seriously as an important aspect of contemporary global communication.

This article makes this demand of the discipline of IR. It does so by presenting a case-study – the official US remediation of United Airlines Flight 93 – as an illustration of how contemporary global communications move from the textual to the visual and of what is lost in not taking this move seriously. In particular, it claims that by failing to analyse popular visual language as integral to global communications, disciplinary IR risks misunderstanding contemporary subjectivity, spatiality, and temporality. By failing to grasp who we are, where we are, and when we are, IR cannot possibly comprehend what we say and do, much less what we hear, feel, and see.

⁴ Michael Shapiro, *Violent Cartographies* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), and Tim Luke, *Shows of Force* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992).

⁵ Mathias Albert, Oliver Kessler and Stephan Stetter, ‘On Order and Conflict: International Relations and the “Communicative Turn”’ (2008), this volume, p. 66.

⁶ This is not to say that mainstream IR does not occasionally publish work on the visual, but it is to say that this work is not seen by mainstream IR theorists and practitioners as having the same value as their own work.

The remediation of United Airlines Flight 93

On 11 September 2001, during the hour of 9:30 to 10:30 am, television and radio broadcasts began reporting on United Airlines Flight 93 (hereafter UAF93). In this time of extreme confusion and shock – what Jenny Edkins has calls trauma time⁷ – little was known about the flight. Yet through that day and the following days, details began to emerge. UAF93 had been hijacked. It had turned off of its original flight path for San Francisco and veered sharply southeast toward Washington, DC. It lost elevation over Shanksville, Pennsylvania, some 20 minutes flying time from DC, where it ultimately crashed a little after 10 am. There were no survivors. While conspiracy theories about faked phone conversations, doctored transcripts based on the plane's recovered voice recorder, and military intervention to shoot down the plane unofficially circulated,⁸ an official story of the self-sacrificing heroism of the passengers and crew of UAF93 began to take hold. It is this official story – the one that is so widely believed by most Americans – that is analysed here as remediation.

At its most general, remediation refers to 'the representation of one medium in another'.⁹ Television news broadcasts that are transformed into other media like documents, documentaries, or feature films are examples of remediation. So, too, are feature films that recycle actual television broadcasts or use digital media effects. But what makes remediation so interesting is not the mere representation of one medium in another but the temporal effect of these remediations, found in what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin call 'the double logic of remediation'. As they put it, 'Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them'.¹⁰ With this erasure of media through remediations, mediated events not only feel real. They feel immediate. They feel live to viewers because viewers are so interfaced with events and characters that viewers seem to be experiencing these events at the same time and in the same place as the characters on the screen. As such, viewers cease to be mere observers and become virtual participants in the event. Remediation refers to the process whereby the desire for this sort of immediate access to the real, live, unmediated experience with virtual reality as its paradigm is paradoxically produced through the multiplication of media and mediations.

By this description, remediation's desire for immediacy through the multiplication of mediations may seem like nothing more than a dream. And maybe it is. But it is a dream grounded in very real media technologies that continuously strive to make media seem more immediate, especially digital technologies like digital special effects in films.¹¹ And while a special effect shown repeatedly at different angles and different speeds draws attention to the hypermediated technologies that make these effects

⁷ Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁸ Christopher Bollyn, 'Flight 93 Shot Down: Eyewitness Reports at Odds with Official Scenario', AmericanFreePress.net, 17 July 2005, (http://www.americanfreepress.net/html/flight_93.html), downloaded 10 November 2006.

⁹ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), p. 45.

¹⁰ Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, p. 5.

¹¹ While their focus is on digital visual technologies, Bolter and Grusin point out that there is nothing new about remediation and trace the desire for immediacy through visual representations in Western culture back to 'medieval illuminated manuscripts, Renaissance altarpieces, Dutch painting, baroque cabinets, and modernist collage and photomontage': Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, p. 34.

possible, '[t]echnology is gradually becoming a second nature, a territory both external and internalised, and an object of desire. There is no need to make it transparent any longer, simply because it is not felt to be in contradiction with the "authenticity" of the experience.'¹²

Once technology is accepted as second nature, virtual reality seems to be as real as reality itself. And this means that the abundant technologies needed to make virtual reality function can often seem to be invisible. If successful,¹³ this blurring of reality with virtual reality has the effect of changing how experience is experienced. In reality, experience is something that is acquired in the first person. You have to be there to have the experience. In virtual reality, experience is acquired in the virtual first-person. You have to have a first-person point of view on a visual experience in order for it to feel real. In contemporary virtual reality, this first-person point of view on a visual experience is achieved in the same way it is achieved in cinema – by using sonic and visual tricks to make viewers feel like they are immersed in the experience itself. If this 'experiment in cinematic point of view'¹⁴ is successful – if this cinematic point of view can be felt as real in spite of *and because of* the hypermediated visual technologies that make it function – then the experience can be felt by its viewers as immediate, real, and live, whether they are wired up with a virtual reality headset or are sitting in a dark cinema watching a Hollywood movie.¹⁵

Remediating UAF93 from an event which no surviving person and no camera witnessed directly into an immediate, first-person experience for any American was never going to be an easy task. Yet it was far easier to pull off than remediations of the other terrorist attacks of that day. For the official story about UAF93 always defied any representation as occurring in 'trauma time'. Trauma time destabilises the narration of history through a linear, unitary temporality because trauma itself has no language in such a temporality.¹⁶ But the story of UAF93 seems to demonstrate that, even when caught up in the midst of a baffling traumatic event, ordinary Americans on that plane comprehended what was happening to them, narrated these events to others on the ground as they occurred, and acted in meaningful ways to change the course of history. The uniqueness of what happened on UAF93, then, lies in its location as an historical, linear, meaning-making event that was narrated as such at the very moment it was occurring by the passengers and crew who experienced it even though it took place in the broader context of trauma time. All of this makes the story of UAF93 more easily recoverable as a centrepiece of official American history.

¹² Erkki Huhtamo, 'Encapsulated Bodies in Motion: Simulators and the Quest for Total Immersion', in Simon Penny (ed.), *Critical Issues in Electronic Media* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 171.

¹³ This is a big if, as Lucy Suchman's work generally shows. See, for example, Lucy Suchman, *Human-Machine Reconfigurations: Plans and Situated Actions*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁴ Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, p. 4.

¹⁵ Bolter and Grusin are not claiming that remediation is always successful and that this sense of virtual immediacy is usually achieved. Rather, they specifically point to the ongoing tension between media that draw attention to themselves and the desire for these media to be experienced as if they were unmediated. Indeed, remediation is very much about the need to refine not-quite immediate mediations as more immediate through repeated mediations in the future. As such, it is a process that is very much ongoing because it fails to achieve its desire of immediacy through mediation rather than a process that achieves its goal and comes to a successful end. See Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*.

¹⁶ Edkins, *Trauma Time*.

To appreciate how this remediation was accomplished and its importance, this article analyses three remediations of UAF93 – early addresses about the war on terror by President George W. Bush, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, and the film *United 93*. It argues that of these remediations, it is only *United 93* that comes close to achieving immediacy through the simultaneous multiplication and erasure of hypermediations. This achievement is down to the fact that by employing popular visual language, *United 93* alone manages to change the viewer's perspective on the event from third person to first person. In so doing, it changes the subjectivity, spatiality, and temporality of UAF93.

'Let's roll'

On 20 September 2001, President George W. Bush began his historic address to a joint session of Congress with a remediation of UAF93:

We have seen [the American people deliver their state of the union] in the courage of passengers, who rushed terrorists to save others on the ground – passengers like an exceptional man named Todd Beamer. And would you please help me to welcome his wife, Lisa Beamer, here tonight. (Applause.)¹⁷

While not explicitly stated, Todd Beamer was a passenger on UAF93. Beamer reportedly used a GTE air phone while in flight to ring his wife but was connected instead to GTE supervisor Lisa Jefferson. Beamer reported the hijacking as it was taking place, and Jefferson gave him information about what was happening with other airplanes. When her conversation with Beamer ended, Jefferson claims that Beamer dropped the phone, leaving the line open, and it was then she heard him say 'Let's roll',¹⁸ a phrase that soon stood for the rallying cry of the passengers and crew.

Enough of this background information was public by the time of the President's speech for Americans to know who Todd Beamer was, and so the President's description of him as 'an exceptional man' who with other courageous passengers 'rushed terrorists to save others on the ground' would have rung true to the general public. The President's transformation of Todd Beamer from one courageous passenger into the iconic figure of all heroic Americans who opposed the terrorists on 9/11 and who would continue to do so afterwards seemed to be welcomed by most Americans. So was the transformation of his wife Lisa into the iconic figure of patriotic wife and mother whose personal loss of her husband was something Americans, including Lisa, seemed to understand as a necessary sacrifice for the nation. For this sacrifice, Lisa Beamer was enthusiastically applauded by Congress as she stood proudly next to First Lady Laura Bush. All of this was televised to the nation.

¹⁷ President George W. Bush, 'Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People', United States Capitol, Washington, DC, 20 September 2001, (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>), downloaded 5 November 2006.

¹⁸ Jim McKinnon, 'The phone line from Flight 93 was still open when a GTE operator heard Todd Beamer say: 'Are you guys ready? Let's roll'', *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 16 September 2001, (<http://www.post-gazette.com/headlines/20010916phonecallnat3p3.asp>), downloaded 9 November 2006.

Several interesting things occur in these opening moments of the President's speech. By naming Todd Beamer, the President provides the American people not only with a figure through whom they could access first-hand what had occurred on UAF93, but an action hero who stood for the activities of all Americans. It doesn't matter that the actions of everyday Americans are on a smaller scale – giving blood, saying prayers. What matters is that these everyday Americans, like Todd Beamer, spontaneously took responsibility when called upon to do so for their nation. In the President's remediation of UAF93 and of 9/11 generally, Todd Beamer becomes a mediator through whom a shaken American public can find their collective purpose. That Todd Beamer is a fallen hero is particularly convenient for the President. For as a dead hero, Todd Beamer cannot speak for himself. He cannot confirm or deny what he said or did. Nor could he confirm or deny the motivation the President attributed to his and his fellow passenger's and crew's actions – 'to save lives on the ground'. This means that others – the President and the Beamer family – are at liberty to provide supplementary information about what Todd Beamer said and did without fear of contradiction by Beamer himself.

But the death of Todd Beamer also means that there is no living hero to whom the American people can look for immediate access to this event. For this reason Lisa Beamer emerges as a necessary figure in the President's remediation of UAF93. Lisa Beamer is positioned not only to speak about her husband, testifying that he would indeed have acted heroically. More than this, Lisa Beamer is positioned as the key survivor through whom other Americans can channel their grief into pride and patriotism. She it is, who makes September 11th, 2001, feel so real and so close for many Americans, for it is she who enables Americans to 'make the grief of strangers their own'.¹⁹ As such, she is the key to the President's remediation strategy of 9/11 – of using a formal, televised speech to close the distance between real life and screened remembrances of lives lost in ways that awaken Americans out of their trauma and activate them as patriotic warriors in the state's narrative about the war on terror.

It is not surprising, then, that in the President's next major speech on the war on terror, he again evokes Todd Beamer:

Above all, we will live in a spirit of courage and optimism. Our nation was born in that spirit, as immigrants yearning for freedom courageously risked their lives in search of greater opportunity. . . .

Courage and optimism led the passengers on Flight 93 to rush their murderers to save lives on the ground. (Applause.) Led by a young man whose last known words were the Lord's Prayer and 'Let's roll'. (Applause) . . .

We cannot know every turn this battle will take . . . But we have our marching orders: My fellow Americans, let's roll.²⁰

In this speech, the President further elaborates on the character of Todd Beamer and enriches the context in which this brave character acted. Beamer is a leader and a spontaneous hero as well as a young Christian man yearning for freedom and a patriot whose courage and optimism were foreshadowed by earlier Americans. Now functioning as this arch of patriotic pride that tempers contemporary uncertainty by

¹⁹ Bush, 'Address to Congress'.

²⁰ President George W. Bush, 'President Discusses War on Terrorism', World Congress Center, Atlanta, Georgia, 8 November 2001, (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011108-13.html>), downloaded 5 November 2006.

connecting it to well-rehearsed (if mythological) historical certainties, Todd Beamer and what he stands for can no longer be adequately captured by something as specific as a proper name. Rather, he can better be remembered by his legendary last words 'Let's roll' – words that, unlike Beamer himself, did survive the plane crash. While these surviving words certainly refer to Beamer, they can also be owned and uttered by all patriotic, freedom-loving Americans as their 'marching orders' in the war on terror.

This is precisely how these words were taken up. 'Expressing the great spirit of this country', the words 'Let's roll' were featured in a range of post-9/11 patriotic products, as the title of a Neil Young tribute song to the passengers and crew of UAF93, and as the topic of blog discussions in which posters elevated these words into American mythology alongside other great expressions of US patriotism like 'Remember the Alamo' and 'I regret that I have but one life to give for my country'.²¹ And they were of course the main title of Lisa Beamer's commemorative book about her husband – *Let's Roll!: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Courage*.²²

This mythologised Todd Beamer as an iconic American. But it also transformed this mediating hero into someone who was himself increasingly superfluous. As is evidenced by the President's November 8th speech, Beamer's story became less about this particular man and more about any patriotic American who exhibited the 'Let's roll' spirit. The result was to unanchor the hero from his deed. It was a short step from there to separate the hero from his heroic words. Once this was accomplished, all manner of identifications with Beamer's words were made possible, even those that had very little to do with him. A case in point is President Bush's address to Olympic athletes in Salt Lake City in February 2002.

These Games come at a perfect time for the country. In our time of sadness and determination and resolve, our Olympic athletes will represent the best of America. . . . And so we're here to wish you all the best, to congratulate you. Let's roll. God bless. (Applause).²³

Speeches like these were seen by many Americans as a step too far. For by making Beamer's words stand for so much, they began to stand for nothing at all. The strong emotions that Americans felt for Todd Beamer and the passengers and crew of UAF93 in that initial televised Bush speech featuring Beamer's real live grieving widow Lisa were increasingly difficult to activate with the overused Presidential sound-byte 'Let's roll'. When Lisa Beamer copyrighted the saying 'Let's roll' on behalf of the Todd M. Beamer Foundation and then licensed its use by Wal-mart and by the Florida State University football team, some Americans came to regard Lisa Beamer as a profiteer rather than as a patriotic medium for their grief.²⁴

All this made many Americans cynical about the President, Lisa Beamer, and any usage of the phrase 'Let's roll'. Rather than function as communicators or

²¹ See, for example, (<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/566943/posts>), downloaded 5 November 2006.

²² Lisa Beamer with Ken Abraham, *Let's Roll: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Courage* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002).

²³ President George W. Bush, 'President Bush to Olympic Athletes: Let's Roll', HPER Complex, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah, 8 February 2002, (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/02/20020209.html>), downloaded 5 November 2006.

²⁴ Nick Gillespie, 'You can trademark words but not meaning', *Reason*, November 2002, (http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1568/is_6_34/ai_93090054), downloaded 9 November 2006.

communications that made the experience of UAF93 more genuine and immediate, they instead had the effect of making it more difficult for everyday Americans to access this experience in any ‘real’ way. It took the extraordinary document *The 9/11 Commission Report* to restore ‘real’ access to this event and the emotions it evoked.

‘*The Battle for United 93*’

The 9/11 Commission Report is the official historical document on ‘terrorist attacks upon the United States’. Published in July 2004, this 567 page report is the result of a bi-partisan Congressional investigation. It begins by recounting the hijackings of the four planes on September 11th, 2001, according to a strict, verified timeline. Consider the example of UAF93:

At 8:42, UAF93 took off from Newark (New Jersey) Liberty International Airport bound for San Francisco. The aircraft was piloted by Captain Jason Dahl and First Officer Leroy Homer, and there were five flight attendants. Thirty-seven passengers, including the hijackers, boarded the plane. Scheduled to depart the gate at 8:00, the Boeing 757’s takeoff was delayed because of the airport’s typically heavy morning traffic.²⁵

This short paragraph ends with a footnote longer than the paragraph itself, in which flight attendant names and seat assignments for takeoff are noted. Four pieces of evidence are listed as verification of this information – an interview, a questionnaire, a briefing, and electronic copies of boarding passes.²⁶

In paragraphs and footnotes like these, *The Report* could not be more different from President Bush’s speeches on the same subject. For if the goal of the Bush speeches is to rally the American people around the sound-byte ‘Let’s roll’, the goal of the report is to elaborate in great detail all credible information collected about 9/11 in the nearly three years since the attack and use this as the basis of national policy recommendations for combating terrorism. In so doing, *The Report* does not play with shifting points of view or voice. While it offers direct quotes from interviews or documents, *The Report* is written entirely in the third person, and it is meticulously documented, with the 46-page first chapter containing six maps and 240 footnotes. It might come as a surprise, then, to learn that *The Report* was an instant bestseller in the United States and that it has sold more than a million and a half copies. It was so praised for its literary style and clarity that it was nominated for the US National Book Award.²⁷

The above exemplary paragraph notwithstanding, *The Report* does make for gripping reading, often feeling more like a novel than a Congressional document. Consider how *The Report* opens:

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, dawned temperate and nearly cloudless in the eastern United States. Millions of men and women readied themselves for work. Some made their

²⁵ The 9/11 Commission, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 10.

²⁶ 9/11 Commission, *The Report*, p. 455.

²⁷ Kathryn Lopez, ‘A Garden State of Political Mind: Kean – Then and Now’, *National Review*, 20 September 2006, (<http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=YWFjYWE4OThmMTRkMDk3MjI0ZmEyZTNjN2JhMGM3MDA=>), downloaded 10 November 2006.

way to the Twin Towers, the signature structures of the World Trade Center complex in New York City. Others went to Arlington, Virginia, to the Pentagon. . . . For those heading to an airport, weather conditions could not have been better for a safe and pleasant journey. Among the travelers were Mohamed Atta and Abdul Aziz al Omari, who arrived at the airport in Portland, Maine.²⁸

This writing draws readers in, making them want to know more, even though readers already know the story and how it ends. As such, *The Report* is an illustration of what Hayden White famously called ‘the historical text as literary artifact’. For as an historical document, it is very much like ‘verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented as found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences’.²⁹ The verbal fiction that structures *The Report*’s remediation of UAF93 is the battle. Indeed, the key section of *The Report* that recounts what is understood to have taken place on the plane is entitled ‘The Battle for United 93’.³⁰ This is in contrast to how *The Report* titles its accounts of what took place on the other three planes – ‘The Hijacking of American 11’, ‘The Hijacking of United 175’, and ‘The Hijacking of American 77’. ‘The Battle for United 93’ matter-of-factly narrates the facts as they are known to have occurred between 8:42 am and 10:02:23 am, when the plane crashed. Drawing upon air traffic control communications, the flight voice recorder and passenger and crew phone calls with people on the ground, *The Report* re-narrates ‘the battle for United 93’ along a strict timeline.

It confirms passengers knew ‘two aircraft had slammed into the World Trade Center’³¹ and ‘[f]ive calls described the intent of passengers and surviving crew members to revolt against the hijackers. According to one call, they voted on whether to rush the terrorists in an attempt to retake the plane. They decided, and acted . . . the assault was sustained’.³² *The Report* does not confirm that the passengers and crew of UAF93 were acting selflessly to save lives on the ground. Rather, it notes that ‘[a]t 10:00:26, a passenger in the background said, ‘In the cockpit. If we don’t we’ll die!’³³ It continues, ‘Sixteen seconds later, a passenger yelled, “Roll it!”’³⁴ *The Report* does not speculate on what passengers meant by these pronouncements, nor does it make any mention of Todd Beamer or “Let’s roll”. While *The Report* concludes passengers and crew failed to break into the cockpit and suggests that the hijackers brought down the plane themselves, it concludes that the hijacker pilot’s ‘objective was to crash his airliner into symbols of the American Republic, the Capitol or the White House. He was defeated by the alerted, unarmed passengers of United 93’.³⁵

By carefully specifying details in the third-person, *The Report* maintains the feel of a credible document. But it is neither the specific historical details in *The Report* nor *The Report*’s mostly dispassionate narration that stays with readers. It is *The Report*’s passionate structuring of the hijacking of UAF93 as a battle. For it is this assumption – that a battle and not a skirmish or a fight – took place on the plane that

²⁸ 9/11 Commission, *The Report*, p. 1.

²⁹ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 82, italics in original.

³⁰ 9/11 Commission, *The Report*, p. 10.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

not only officially dubs the passengers and crew of UAF93 as the first civilian soldiers in the war on terror; it also makes it easier for American readers to imagine the experience itself. For Americans are summarily taught in grade school how battles take place and can easily draw upon this knowledge to fill in the action and emotional details that *The Report* cannot comment upon if it is to retain its fiction that it is historical fact. The primary material Americans draw upon to fill in these gaps are statements made by President Bush in his early speeches about UAF93.

It might seem like a contradiction for a mostly American readership to supplement this painstakingly 'objective' historical report with the obviously subjective statements made by the President. Yet actually there is no contradiction. This is not because *The Report* ever validates the President's claims. It does not confirm that passengers and crew were motivated by their desire to 'save lives on the ground'. It does not confirm that anyone, much less a named individual like Todd Beamer, uttered the words 'Let's roll' or that these words or words like them were used to rally passengers and crew into action. And it does not claim that the passengers and crew of UAF93 were heroes. Instead, *The Report* allows these subjective, unverifiable ideas to supplement its presumably objective analysis merely by refusing to deny them. In this way, *The Report* allows for the idea that passengers and crew *might have* been motivated by their desire to save lives on the ground, that Todd Beamer *might have* said 'Let's roll' as a rallying cry for action, and that all of this means that passengers and crew acted heroically. Because these ideas had so taken hold in the American imaginary by the time *The Report* was released, not explicitly denying them was the equivalent to many Americans of official confirmation that all of these unverifiable subjective claims were now objectively verified.

All this makes *The Report* an engaging read. By sketching out a strict sequence of events, interspersing it with quotes and notes about settings, and still leaving room for one's imagination to fill in the details, *The Report* reads less like an historical document or even a novel and more like a screenplay – like a treatment for a live action adventure that readers can conjure up in their minds. This sort of reader/audience interaction with *The Report* gives it a sense of immediacy, and this is what makes *The Report* a successful remediation of UAF93. But this has the unanticipated effect of undermining *The Report's* authority. For as a metaphorical screenplay for a film that has yet to be made, *The Report* seems less like what it was intended to be – a monumental document that is the last word on what happened to UAF93 – and more like a coming-attractions trailer for a soon-to-be-released feature film. In Paul Greengrass's *United 93*, that is precisely what *The Report* becomes.

United 93

Director Paul Greengrass makes no secret of the fact that *The 9/11 Commission Report* is 'the bible' upon which his remediation of UAF93 into the Hollywood film *United 93* is based.³⁶ Greengrass is not alone in using *The Report* in this way. Between July 2004 when *The Report* was released and April 2006 when *United 93* was released,

³⁶ Paul Greengrass, 'Feature Commentary on *United 93*, *United 93* DVD, Universal Pictures, 2006.

two made-for-television documentaries based largely on *The Report* were aired – *The Flight that Fought Back* and *Flight 93*.

Both films drew large audiences and were nominated for Emmies, with *Flight 93* winning in the sound-editing category. But despite being acclaimed documentaries, neither film is a terribly successful remediation of UAF93 because neither changes the temporal feel of the event from past to present. Some of this is due to how these documentary films were made. For example, both films use dramatic re-enactments to tell their stories, but they intercut dramatic sequences with interviews of officials and family, thus breaking the hold of the dramatic effect. In addition, *The Flight that Fought Back* uses Kiefer Sutherland as the off-screen narrator. This has the effect of temporally distancing viewers from the event and potentially distracting viewers from the documentary itself, as in the case of one viewer who complained that the documentary had a 24 feel to it, a reference to Sutherland's starring role in that television drama.³⁷

But the most important reason why neither documentary achieves a sense of immediacy is because of how the medium they were made for – television – mediates time. While there are many types of televisual time, two major types are television programming time and television news time. Television programming time is marked by frequent commercial interruptions on-screen and the potential for further interruptions off-screen (such as when viewers walk in and out of rooms, change channels or speak to one another). This makes it more difficult for viewers to experience, much less sustain, any sense of immediacy in relation to the programme they are watching. But even more than this, television viewers understand that if the televised event they were watching was actually occurring in real time, then the entire format of the broadcast would be different. There would be few if any commercial interruptions, there would be a ticker-tape along the bottom of the screen updating the facts as they came in, and there would be no dramatic soundtrack accompanying the news broadcast. For viewers to experience a television programme as if it were a live television news broadcast, they would have to suspend all of this knowledge about these different formats, something that is very difficult to do.

United 93 had none of these obstacles to overcome in its remediation of UAF93. The film has no narrator either on-screen or off-screen. It does not make use of on-camera interviews. And it was not broadcast on television but instead shown in cinemas. As such, *United 93* suffers from none of the typical constraints of programmed television and benefits from all of the possibilities of cinema. This is particularly the case when it comes to time. For while cinema and television (especially television documentaries) often share what Mary Anne Doane calls the cultural imperative of 'structuring time and contingency in capitalist modernity'³⁸ by imposing a linear narrative onto what would otherwise be understood as the chance event, cinema has the benefit of doing this in the absence of interruptions that are structured into televisual viewing. As such, it is much easier to produce an event as a virtually real event being experienced in the present through the medium of cinema than it is through the medium of programmed television.

³⁷ Revraven, 'Tasteful, but Occasionally Like an Episode of 24', 11 September 2005, <<http://imdb.com/title/tt0470764/usercomments>>, downloaded 13 November 2006.

³⁸ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 4.

What is often lost in the move from television documentary to cinema is the historical accuracy of the story. While documentary is classically understood not as the truth but as ‘the creative treatment’ of ‘actualities’,³⁹ cinema makes the further move away from the creative treatment of ‘actualities’ to the much vaguer ‘based on a true story’. The challenge for director Paul Greengrass was to achieve the truth effects of documentary in the less truthfully-felt medium of film without losing the fast pace of cinema that produces a feeling of immediacy much better than does documentary. He does this by writing his screenplay largely as an adaptation of *The 9/11 Commission Report*⁴⁰ and shooting and editing it using a combination of documentary and feature film techniques.

These techniques are apparent from the pre-title sequence. As we watch a black screen, we hear what sounds like a prayer being said in Arabic. These are the words from hijacker Mohammed Atta’s last will and testament found in his car the day after the hijackings.⁴¹ Cut to a close-up of a prayer book held in a man’s hands. Cut to a medium shot of the man sitting on a bed in a hotel room holding the prayer book, praying aloud. A second man enters the room and tells the first man in Arabic ‘It’s time’. The second man exits the main room and enters the bathroom. The camera then lingers on the first man sitting on the bed, before the film cuts to its opening titles.

All of this is a typical opening of a feature film. It establishes characters, place, and a sense of impending action without giving too much away. Yet this opening sequence is also very much like a documentary. Not only is this sequence (like the rest of the film) shot entirely with a handheld camera; the camera’s movements are shot and edited in documentary style. For example, when the second man enters the room, the camera continues to roll, with the second man’s out-of-focus body blocking our view of the first man. This shot is followed by a longer shot of the same action from the same side of the room, and then it returns to its initial closer shot with the second man out of focus, then in focus, as it follows him out of the room.

What is established with this style of shooting is a unitary point of view. Even though Greengrass shot his film using two cameras – one shooting the action in close-up and the other in medium and long shots⁴² – very often this action was shot from the same point of view. In the pre-title sequence, this point of view is of someone looking into this hotel room. This is completely different to how a feature film would typically shoot and edit this sequence. In feature films, the convention is to shoot the dialogue between two characters using the shot/reverse shot style which creates two distinct points of view in the same sequence. Usually this means that the camera records all the action from the point of view of one speaker, and then the entire scene is reshot with another camera from the point of view of the second speaker. Then these two takes of the same scene are edited together into one sequence, with the point of view switching back and forth during the conversation.

³⁹ John Grierson, quoted in Philip Rosen, ‘Document and Documentary: On the Persistence of Historical Concepts’, in Michael Renov (ed.), *Theorizing Documentary* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 77 and 74.

⁴⁰ Greengrass supplements *The Report* with background interviews with UAF93 family members to create character profiles to be used by actors portraying passengers and crew, a move which further blurs the boundary between factual history and hoped-for remembrances. Greengrass, ‘Feature Commentary’.

⁴¹ Greengrass, ‘Feature Commentary’.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Documentary films rarely use shot/reverse shot techniques because documentary films are most often shot with just one camera that records the action as it occurs. As such, the camera cannot be in two places at the same time, recording two distinct points of view. What this means is that documentary films not only tend to offer a single spatial point of view; they offer a single temporal point of view. That temporal point of view is of live action as it is occurring. This is what Greengrass accomplishes with his documentary shooting and editing style – a single spatial point of view and an ‘as it is happening’ temporal point of view. What Greengrass is telling his viewers is ‘This is happening now, and you are there as it happens’.

This does not mean that *United 93* is not ‘cinematic’. It employs all sorts of feature-film techniques to tell its story. It splices digital effects shots into its documentary-like camera-recorded shots. It sets its story to a strong musical soundtrack. And it uses mostly actors to re-enact the events of that day. Yet it deploys all of these cinematic techniques differently than feature films generally deploy them.

The film’s digital effects are mixed in with shot footage in ways that make them unnoticeable. As Greengrass explains, ‘the watchword for [visual effects] . . . was that they be completely “thrown away”, completely not the center of your attention’.⁴³ Greengrass uses the soundtrack in a similar way, never as something that disrupts the continuity of the piece but rather as something ‘delicate, often inconspicuous’.⁴⁴ In moments when the music is noticeable, it is so for a specific purpose and without dominating the film. In the rebellion scene, the music is audible as ‘heavy, belabored breathing . . . The breathing of a nightmare, literally.’⁴⁵ As the plane is about to crash, the music first lifts its volume and then resolves in a final, softer cord after the screen has cut to black at the moment when the crash would be taking place. This is not only tasteful; it is deeply moving. And it enhances a sense of reality rather than detracts from it.

But it is with his selection and use of actors that Greengrass makes his most significant departures from conventional cinematic techniques. For Greengrass’s cast consists of a mix of professional and non-professional actors. None of the professionals are recognisable stars, and most of the non-professionals are either re-enacting the roles they lived on 9/11 or portraying characters who match their day-to-day lives. By mixing real actors with those who really experienced the events of that day, Greengrass claims this ‘gives scenes a special veracity’.⁴⁶ He continues, ‘I felt it was no longer acting, it was no longer make-believe. They were reliving these events, at some quite profound level for us’.⁴⁷

The most innovative move Greengrass makes is in the way he directs and captures scenes. Instead of shooting the film as feature films are usually shot – in short sequences that are later edited together – Greengrass shot *United 93* in ‘tremendously long takes. Sometimes it was an hour at a time.’⁴⁸ This is unheard of for a Hollywood feature film, being a technique that is used in documentary film-making to capture real live action. As Greengrass explains, ‘it enabled all these actors . . . to relive a total

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., emphasis in original.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

experience which we then recorded as if it were live. And I think that's at the heart of why this film feels so real, to me anyway'.⁴⁹

These techniques are never more successful than in the final twenty minutes of the film during which passengers and crew of UAF93 devise and execute a rebellion. Here, Greengrass switches from camerawork that preserves a unitary point of view to camerawork that has difficulty establishing any point of view. He does this by employing 'constant roving camerawork, roving because [the passengers and crew] didn't themselves know exactly what was gonna happen. . . . And when you've got camerawork like that . . . [it] crackles with reality.'⁵⁰

Greengrass's description of these final scenes is not an overstatement. As reviewer Sam Osborn noted, 'Those final scenes are devastating; because, by then, we're convinced of *United 93*'s reality. The characters have transcended into real, breathing people and their reactions have risen somehow above authenticity.'⁵¹ By suggesting that *United 93* captures something 'above authenticity', Osborn effectively reclassifies *United 93* as neither a documentary nor a Hollywood action adventure but as an experience in virtual reality. As he elaborates, 'To imagine the film would be not just reading the newspaper on September 12, but for the newspaper to come to life before your eyes. This isn't Hollywood; this is a cinematic manifestation of a headline.'⁵² This is remediation at its most successful.

Of course, *United 93* is not a true story, for no one knows for sure what happened on UAF93. Greengrass appreciates this and is always careful to distinguish in his comments between the truth of what happened on UAF93 and the truth-effects his filming techniques create in his film *United 93*. All this is fair enough. But it is beside the point when analysing *United 93* as a remediation of UAF93. For if Greengrass's filming and editing techniques so effectively recreate the events of UAF93 in ways that transport viewers to that place at that time, then viewers are utterly unable to do anything but experience the sounds and images of *United 93* as more than mere truth-effects. For them, these sounds and images are the truth, for viewers are experiencing them in the virtual first person at the time and place they occur. This transforms viewers of *United 93* into not only witnesses to what occurred on that plane but into survivors of the event itself. They are not survivors in the real sense that they have access to the reality of what occurred that day. More troublingly, they are survivors in the virtual sense because they have access to the virtual reality of what occurred that day. While as virtual survivors of UAF93, these viewers completely comprehend when the film ends that they are not actually on that fateful flight, they may not so completely comprehend that what they have just experienced *as if it were real* is not reality itself – is not necessarily the true story of UAF93. This makes the content of *United 93* and the popular visual language it employs to effect its remediation vitally important.

This is particularly the case when we consider how Greengrass ends his film. Going further than *The 9/11 Commission Report*'s conclusion that passengers and crew never entered the cockpit and that the hijackers brought down the plane themselves,⁵³

⁴⁹ Ibid., my emphasis.

⁵⁰ Ibid., my emphasis.

⁵¹ Sam Osborn, 'United 93', 2006, (<http://imdb.com/Reviews/404/40446>), downloaded 6 November 2006.

⁵² Osborn, 'United 93'.

⁵³ 9/11 Commission, *The Report*, p. 14.

in the final moments of *United 93* we can clearly see that ‘The Battle for United 93’ has moved into the cockpit, with passengers frantically trying to wrestle the controls of the plane from the hijackers. Because we were there – in that place as it was happening – we not only know this is true. We experienced it, and we survived it. As such, it is as if Greengrass is granting us Americans the moral authority to communicate this experience to the world and to expect others to respect how difficult this experience has made our lives, again.

Conclusion

Director Paul Greengrass had the best of intentions when he made *United 93*. As he explains:

What are we going to do? What can we do? What will be the consequences of whatever we do, once we have entered the post-9/11 world?

If we could create a film that allowed an audience to walk through 9/11 at eye-level, then that would give us some basis for evaluating this enormously important event. That’s what I think drove all of us separately and together to try and make this film. . . .

To me, the answer to that question [what are we going to do?] is that we haven’t got the answers yet but we have to struggle on. We have to find answers to this problem. Because we’re all on United 93. . . .

A fight for the controls of our world. We still have time to find another way.⁵⁴

All of this accounts for the urgency Greengrass feels in releasing his film nearly five years after the event. He explains, ‘That’s why when people say “Is it too soon?”, I say, “It’s high time. It’s high time we went back to the event of 9/11 and explored what happened . . . unless we find the courage to look at it closely, how can we possibly find answers?”’⁵⁵

Greengrass is absolutely right. There is value in looking closely at the events of 9/11 and exploring his question ‘What are we going to do?’ But there are two major problems with Greengrass’s approach to 9/11 as it is remediated in *United 93*. The first major problem is that by remediating UAF93 as an event viewers experience in virtual time as if it were real, immediate time, Greengrass’s *United 93* accomplishes something that both President Bush and the 9/11 Commission failed to accomplish. *United 93* achieves the status of having the ‘last word’ on what happened on UAF93 because it is felt to be the most accurate historical account of what happened in that place at that time by the vast majority of Americans who saw this film, who experienced this virtual event. And how could these viewers be wrong? For they were ‘there’, spatially and temporally. Contrary to Greengrass’s intentions, then, *United 93* closes down meaningful debate about what happened on and to UAF93.

None of this is as disturbing, though, as the second major problem with Greengrass’s remediation of UAF93. This second major problem is that by remediating the story in a way that so convincingly returns its viewers to those two confusing hours on 9/11 when they were forced to confront the urgent question ‘What are we going to do?’, *United 93* deflects attention away from what I would argue is the more urgent question five years after 9/11 – ‘What have we done?!’ This

⁵⁴ Greengrass, ‘Feature Commentary’.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

is a much more difficult question to ask because it requires particularly Americans to occupy a far more uncomfortable temporal moment – the present. For this is a present that comes after a recent past marked by wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the indefinite detention of ‘enemy combatants’, the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, the systematic suspension of civil rights, and the re-election of a President who made all of this possible.

United 93 allows Americans to duck all of these issues by escaping their contemporary temporality in favour of the virtual immediacy of five years ago, before any of these things occurred. This is the real tragedy of *United 93*. By offering Americans a catharsis based, not upon any real working through of the trauma they experienced that day or of the traumas experienced by themselves and their enemies in the five years since that day, but on the virtually real immediate experience of UAF93, *United 93* unfortunately remediates political responsibility out of America’s real present and instead locates it in a cinematically structured, virtually real American immediacy that makes no difficult demands on Americans politically or morally.

Herein lies the danger of successful remediation – that by making the past so present, so hyper-immediate, remediation obliterates altogether the time between past and present. How remediation accomplishes this temporal shift is by shifting the point of view of those who interact with ‘the past’ from the third person to the first person. And how it does this is by drawing upon popular visual language like documentary and cinematic techniques that enable viewers/users/experiencers to ‘walk through [the event] at eye-level’.⁵⁶ As such, remediation reminds us of the power cinema has always had – its power to shift our point of view and, in so doing, to shift our spatial and temporal locations. When coupled with remediation – with the desire for immediate access to real, live, unmediated experience with virtual reality as its paradigm – successful cinematic remediation potentially changes not only where we are and when we are but *who we are* as well.

In the case of *United 93*, we viewers have been transformed from those who wished to commemorate the events of UAF93 by watching *United 93* into those who experienced these events at the time they occurred. As such, we viewers are the virtual survivors of UAF93. Like real survivors on that plane (if there had been any), we are destined to relive the trauma of this event over and over. This we have in common with the survivors of trauma time. But, unlike the survivors of trauma time, we have far less scope for resistance. For while the survivors of trauma time struggle to speak differently about their experiences because there is no language for these experiences that themselves broke the social order and the linear temporality which makes a narration of a coherent history possible,⁵⁷ we virtual survivors of *United 93* have no such problem. For our experiences were never beyond the social order. They were never beyond language. Indeed, what *United 93* does is supplement the linguistic language of the history of UAF93 given to us by President Bush and the 9/11 Commission with a popular visual language of the history of UAF93 – a language that is far more powerful and therefore far more difficult to resist. Immersing ourselves in this language by watching *United 93* compels us to speak of our virtual experience not only as cinema or as virtual reality but as real history itself. This is

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Edkins, *Trauma Time*, p. 8.

terribly dangerous, for our 'history' is a history rooted in an amnesia about the five years between 9/11 and the release of *United 93*. As the virtual survivors of UAF93, all we are called upon to do is to bear witness to this partial history by urgently asking the wrong question for the present time – 'What should we do?' – rather than the more demanding question that always ought to proceed it – 'What have we done?'

This does not mean that successful remediations like *United 93* cannot be resisted. It just means that this resistance is located in a different time. This time of resistance is the moment when one recognises a gap between the time the remediation depicts (9/11) and the time the remediation is experienced (five years after 9/11). For even without any acknowledgement of what occurred during this missing span of time, viewers/users/experiencers still may feel a disjuncture between this remediated, virtually real time and the time in which they live. This seems to be precisely what is happening in contemporary America, where these two temporalities are increasingly out of sync. There is no better evidence for this than the 2006 US mid-term elections which effectively were a referendum against President Bush's handling of the war on terror by extending it into Iraq.

What this means is that *in spite of* remediations like *United 93*, Americans are beginning to ask the more difficult question 'What have we done?!' rather than the cosier question 'What should we do?' This goes some way toward demonstrating the limitations of remediations, even extremely successful ones like *United 93*. In so doing, it highlights how in moments of temporal disjuncture, political responsibility can be reclaimed and reactivated. But it also alerts us to how contemporary popular visual language might more successfully evacuate political responsibility from politics than textual language now can. This suggests that the continued supplementation of the linguistic turn with the visual turn should enable IR scholars to better understand how power and political responsibility function through contemporary forms of global communication.