

The Talk of the Town:  
9/11, the Lost Image, and the Machiavellian Moment

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***Abstract:***

A “lost” 9/11 photograph re-surfaced publicly in 2005/2006 and triggered some revealing debate in the United States about what 9/11 images “should” show. The paper unpacks the image and some key responses to it in order to describe a contemporary “Machiavellian moment” in which civic humanist ideals turn out to deny a reality that the image briefly hinted at, a reality recovered in the paper via discussion of a YouTube commentary thread concerned with a 9/11 “tribute” mashup video derived from comic books. Contrasting the latter with “proper” debate in *The New Yorker* and elsewhere, the paper argues for the necessity of hearing a different conversation that is discernibly “out there”. The result of doing so will be a better understanding of the materialization of affect in images and speech acts. It is argued that this will help us better grasp the nature of the “hot cognitions” that focus around a major event such as 9/11 and the ways in which those are mediated.

***Keywords:*** 9/11; Affect; Cognition; Comics; Photography; Speech Acts

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**Résumé:**

Une photo “perdue” du 11 septembre a refait surface publiquement dans les années 2005/2006 et a provoqué un débat aux États-Unis à propos de ce que les images du 11 septembre “devraient” montrer. Cet article déballe l’image et certaines réponses clés en réaction de celle-ci afin de décrire un “moment machiavélien” pendant lequel les idéals d’humanisme civique rejettent une réalité à laquelle l’image fessait allusion, une réalité récupérée dans cet article via une discussion de la suite de commentaire d’une vidéo YouTube rendant “hommage” au 11 septembre dérivée par une bande dessinée. En faisant le contraste entre ce dernier et un débat “approprié” dans *The New Yorker* et d’autres publications, cet article défend la nécessité d’écouter une conversation différente qui manifestement farfelu. Le résultat d’en faire ainsi serait de mieux comprendre la matérialisation de l’effet des images et des actes de parole. Il est discuté dans cet article que cela aidera à mieux comprendre la nature de la “cognition chaude” qui se concentre autour d’un événement majeur, tel que le 11 septembre, et les façons dont ils sont médiatisés.

**Mots-clés:** 11/9; Acte de Parole; Bande Dessinée; Cognition; Effet; Photographie

Many of my acquaintances, I realized, had passed the last decade or two in a state of intellectual and psychical yearning for such a moment—or, if they hadn’t, were able to quickly assemble an expert arguer’s arsenal of thrusts and statistics and ripostes and gambits and examples and salient facts and rhetorical maneuvers. I, however, was almost completely caught out.

(O’Neill, 2009: 130)

**The Machiavellian Moment**

In what ways might it make sense to think of the decade since September 11, 2001 (9/11) as a “Machiavellian moment” in the history of the U.S.’s relations with the world? There is a popular usage of the term Machiavellian in its more generalized sense to mean the ruthless political schemes of the “princely” power prosecuted where necessary with cavalier disregard for legal constraints, even while preaching peace and order. But the soapbox stance encouraged by that usage then gains relatively little traction on the complexities which interest us here. It retains some pertinence, as Enzo Cannizzaro (2006) demonstrates in analyzing the U.N. Security Council’s post-9/11 tendencies, but the “Machiavellian moment” identified there by Cannizzaro remains one in which “princely” power seeks the means to attain its ends with as few restraints as possible, including in this instance international judicial restraints. What is missing from this conception of a “Machiavellian moment” is the depth that John Pocock (1975) gave to the phrase when he documented an early series of such moments undergirding America’s sense of its own democratic authority, a series traceable back to an idealized image of the Florentine republic. The “Machiavellian” in the moment identifies the ways in which the pursuit of politics in secular

time, to use Pocock's terms, has to reconcile its practical operations with the "timeless" vision of a true and virtuous republic, a vision which disorderly secular time inevitably corrupts. This becomes a matter (and Pocock's language here seems startlingly apt) of "attempting to remain morally and politically stable in a stream of irrational events" (Ibid: viii), where the "stable" and the "irrational" are mutually constitutive, and are both produced by the binary opposition of the idealized image of virtue (the stable) and anything perceived as corrupting that image (the irrational).

So the "Machiavellian moment" becomes something other than simply the "princely" pursuit of as much untrammelled power as possible. It becomes rather a complex site of profound tensions around "the moment in conceptualized time in which the republic was seen as confronting its own temporal finitude" (Pocock, 1975: viii). The shape and consequences of such a repeated confrontation have taken various forms historically, and Pocock remains an excellent guide to those differences, but he reminds us of a common thread that recurs since it first linked the idealized image of the Florentine republic in a state of civic humanist grace with the realities of Machiavellian politicization: "the politicization of grace came remarkably close to the replacement of grace by politics", and this led historically to various attempts at adjusting a "conceptual scheme" (Ibid: 80) that too uncomfortably set civic humanist grace and politics in such stark contrast with each other, to the detriment of the former. The Americanization of this "scheme" and this problem has played out in all sorts of ways of course, so our present evocation of it needs to be anchored quite specifically here in order to be rendered instructive. We shall anchor it in fact to one specific image of 9/11.

### **The "Lost" Photograph, Public Speaking and a State of "Grace"**

The image in question (*Thomas Hoepker*, 2005: 25), taken on 9/11 but not shown until five years later (in a retrospective exhibition of the photographer's work in his home city of Munich and on the front cover of the book of the exhibition), then picked up by fifteen newspapers in Germany, and reprinted in David Friend's *Watching the World Change: The Stories behind the Images of 9/11*, is described by Friend: "The picture seemed to capture and *invite* complacency. It lacked any sense of outrage. . . . It didn't meet any of our standard expectations of what a September 11 photograph *should* look like". And so, as Friend notes, it had joined for a while a special category of 9/11 photograph: "certain moments like these were kept out of the image supply" (2006: 143). When it resurfaced what did we see?

Taken in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, [the photograph by Magnum's Thomas Hoepker](#) shows the site of the just devastated World Trade Center in the background, obscured by the now iconic massive plume of smoke looming over the Manhattan skyline, the blackish grey smeared across the otherwise blue sky occupying the top third of the photograph. On this side of the intervening East River, we see in the foreground five people, the oldest probably no more than 40. Covering the top half of the image leaves a picture of apparently sunny conversational normality, a bicycle center frame where one of the group has evidently alighted to talk. A woman lounges on the low plank-clad shoreline bulwark that serves between sidewalk and riverside scrub as both barrier and seating. Another hunkers frame left establishing a strong diagonal sightline across the image as she talks to the man sitting on the right of the group. The organization of all their attention around this line is compositionally and semiotically insistent, as if to take priority over the expected—the "normal"—sightline, which is to say the one that *should* be focused intently on the spectacle unfolding in the background.

Instead of being awed into uncomprehending silence or registering shock or outrage or fear in every visible muscle as so many others were in so many other photographs, these people have at this moment something to say to each other. “Was it just the devious lie of a snapshot, which ignored the seconds before and after I had clicked the shutter?” asks Thomas Hoepker (2006, September 14), acknowledging that these five people (“cool-looking young people”, he calls them) should surely be reacting differently. He says, quite simply, that his photograph did not “feel right”. On the other hand, Thomas Hoepker is a good enough photographer to acknowledge that something striking *is* going on in his image when he calls it “ambiguous in all its sun-drenched sharpness” and “bright and colorful like a Hitchcock movie” (Ibid).

To grasp what is at stake in reactions to the Hoepker photograph, we can shift our attention to four years before 9/11 and to a remarkably suggestive piece in the journal *Social Epistemology* by the then director of a major U.S. university’s public speaking program. If Thomas Hoepker’s 9/11 photograph now resonates because it seems partially to block the transfixed gaze in favour of its depiction of young people talking to each other (in favour of the assumed speech acts), then what William Fusfield (1997) was saying about young Americans speaking becomes very interesting indeed.

Fusfield identifies his own case as “un-American” in a particular sense (though after 9/11 one might not have used this term quite so easily). The “American” in public speaking instruction that Fusfield identifies is, to a great extent, the commitment to the civic humanist ideal that Pocock traces back to the Florentine republic, the ideal that when individuals speak (and therefore think) like citizens they participate in “an autonomous decision-making political community, the polis or republic” (Pocock, 1975: 85), in short a public sphere. By clinging to the continuing appeal of this imaginary state of civic humanist grace, “we inadvertently perpetuate the pervasive illusion that we do in fact live in an, albeit deformed, ‘representative democracy’ rather than—call it what your pet theory will—some new form of governmental-corporatist-managerialist-techno-élitist-propagandocracy” (Fusfield, 1997: 255). The key point here is “inadvertently perpetuate”, for the civic humanist imaginary is not just dreamily self-deluded (which though sad would not matter quite so much) but turns out to be deeply complicit in disguising the complex conjuncture of powerful forces that Fusfield’s hyphenated construction seeks to name (which does then matter a good deal). That complicity is at the very heart of the historical problem Pocock describes in such detail—the relationship between “grace” and “politics” and the informing of a series of “Machiavellian moments” by that tension.

To be blunter about this, the fear that circulates around Thomas Hoepker’s 9/11 photograph is not the fear that characterized almost every other publicly disseminated image of the event (fear of catastrophe, fear of the Other) but the fear that the five people might not be existing in a state of civic humanist grace, and therefore as a corollary that many more like them might not be either. In short, the question raised by the image is this: *What are these young Americans talking about and how?* William Fusfield’s pre-9/11 article is important precisely because it exposes the grounds for that shiver of apprehension: it is quite possible, he says in effect, that should we be able to hear what they are saying we might not find much if any of the civic humanist ideal there to cling on to.

In fact this fear surfaced publicly almost as soon as Hoepker’s photograph did. If we have indeed been living through a “Machiavellian moment” then this was right on cue. It came, appropriately enough, in the form of a *New York Times* op-ed column by Frank Rich (2006). Rich has been an astute critic of media servility to political agendas. His book *The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9/11 to Katrina* (2006) evinces a continuing faith

that the public sphere in America can be cleaned up, so his civic humanist credentials are well established. Thus his worry begins to surface when he writes, “The young people in Mr. Hoepker’s photo aren’t necessarily callous. They’re just American” (Rich, 2006, September 10) and when he suggests that even on that day the capacity of “ordinary Americans” for maintaining a superficial life-goes-on “forgetfulness” was just beginning to show itself, as if the five in Hoepker’s photograph were momentarily forgetting what was happening behind them and perhaps even *talking about something else*. Now there is of course no evidence that they were—this is just a reading of the image that tells us more about a pre-existing and continuing apprehension than it does about the represented or representative five themselves. Hoepker’s photograph touched a raw nerve in the civic humanist sensibility by not convincingly depicting a moment of civic humanist grace where it had already failed to depict the dominant sense of traumatic spectacle. To suggest that, from this perspective, the five people in the photograph have lapsed from their civic duty to stay focused, and that they look graceless in that particular sense, their responses without visible virtue in their own etched Hitchcockian moment, is to say very little about the people themselves of course (who remain for now unknown to us, although two will be identified shortly) but a great deal about the hopes and fears invested still in the civic humanist ideal that would want them at least to be saying important things to each other.

But what happened after Frank Rich’s column is even more revealing. A circuit closed. *The Washington Post*-owned online current affairs magazine *Slate* picked up the story from Rich’s op-ed column, and *Slate*’s soon-to-be-editor David Plotz questioned Rich’s skepticism: “The subjects are obviously engaged with each other, and they’re almost certainly discussing the horrific event unfolding behind them. They have looked away from the towers for a moment not because they’re bored with 9/11, but because they’re citizens participating in the most important act in a democracy—civic debate” (Plotz, 2006). Now there is of course something of a phony disagreement going on here between Rich and Plotz, two public sphere believers and serious journalists, with Plotz’s quick intervention more of a reassurance regarding Rich’s wavering moment of apprehension. *Slate*’s participatory ethos quickly showed itself when it ran, not only Thomas Hoepker’s volunteered account of his own photograph (Hoepker, 2006), but emails from two of the five people photographed by Hoepker, Walter Sipser (the slightly older man on the right) and Chris Schiavo (the woman sitting in the middle of the photograph). Walter Sipser wrote,

It was clear that people who ordinarily would not have spoken two words to each other were suddenly bound together. . . . We were in a profound state of shock and disbelief, like everyone else we encountered that day. . . . Had Hoepker walked fifty feet over to introduce himself he would have discovered a bunch of New Yorkers in the middle of an animated discussion about what had just happened.

(It’s me in that 9/11 photo, 2006, September 13)

Chris Schiavo wrote,

I am one of the ‘disaffected sunbathing youth’ in the photo. . . . I am a third-generation native New Yorker, who knows and loves every square inch of this city, as did her ancestors before her. . . . The point being, it was genetically impossible for me to be unaffected by this event.

(It's me in that 9/11 photo, 2006, September 13)

Virtue returns to the image. Not only can it now be retrospectively recovered for an ideal of civic debate but that contemporary ideal is grafted to a “genetic” tree with roots going back to “ancestors” who can safely be assumed to include the very citizenry on which the Americanization of the civic humanist ideal depended (serendipitously there was even a painter of the Florentine city-state named Schiavo).

### The Redemptive Circuit

Without doubting for a moment the good faith of Hoepker's two self-identified subjects (neither of whom was happy about being misrepresented to their way of thinking), it remains important to note the neatness of this whole series of rapid recuperative steps and the public rehabilitation of Hoepker's photograph they so efficiently achieved. The mending circuit connecting *New York Times*, *Slate* and two now more happily “representative” New Yorkers itself comes to embody the very civic humanist ideal that the photograph originally seemed to put into jeopardy, indeed feels like the public sphere itself alive and well and in palpable action, enlivened even by the participatory potential of the new means of communication (*Slate* plus email). So, from such dreamy complacency, we have to shake ourselves back to consciousness of William Fusfield's central points: that civic humanism is an ideological construct and it propagates an illusion of unmediated democratic participation “already antiquated at the nation's founding” (Fusfield, 1997: 270), an “ideal that cannot be realized historically and whose continued pursuit . . . can bring much mischief” (Ibid: 273) because it is an “ideological ruse” that serves both to garner consent for “those projects that the ruling élites falsely proclaim are in the interests of all” (Ibid: 281), and ultimately to secure an unwarranted *feeling* of consensus, the feeling that the Hoepker subjects in their emails to *Slate* clearly did not want to dissociate themselves from.

Further still, it becomes readily possible to see the re-closing of this momentarily broken circuit in terms of the logic of the American jeremiad that Fusfield also fingers. According to this logic, every so often it is necessary to become publicly paranoid about a feared fall from grace in order, then, to grasp “one last chance at redemption” (Fusfield, 1997: 262). The re-closing of the circuit of civic humanist virtue through the rupture-threatening (i.e., “Hitchcockian”?) scene of the Hoepker photograph afforded the photographed subjects that “last chance”, not least as possible representatives of a supposed generation of forgetful, easily bored, civically disaffected, and even “callous” young Americans. Their neat recuperation then feeds back into the kind of reassurance offered by Thomas Sander and Thomas Putnam in their “Sept. 11 as Civics Lesson” piece in *The Washington Post* (Sander & Putnam, 2005, September 10) when they note, “After a quarter-century decline of interest and participation in national politics among young Americans, a host of measures turned upward after 2001” and they list the evidence for the possible emergence of a “new generation of better citizens” (increased post-9/11 voting rates among the young, increased “volunteering”, surveys suggesting “heightened interest both in ‘government and current events’ and ‘social issues’”, etc.).

However, rather than sharing in this tempting closure, with its reinstatement of civic humanist pieties, I want to try a *Gedankenexperiment* which begins by asking, with reference to what the subjects of the Hoepker photograph could have been talking about, *how bad might it have been anyway?* What might they have been talking about that would have blocked this

recuperative closure, justified Frank Rich's proto-jeremiad, validated Fusfield's lack of faith in the civic humanist ideal, and expanded rather than re-sealed the image's rupture?

It is easy to take the next step by turning to the two "black cover" publications that followed fast on 9/11, the first the now famous September 24, 2001 issue of *The New Yorker* (the one with Susan Sontag's piece), the second being volume 2, number 36 of *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Marvel Comics, December 2001). Set side by side the two covers look very similar—both "empty" black with the respective titles in somewhat overwhelmed white at the top—except that *The New Yorker* sophisticatedly reveals, if tilted at just the right angle in the right light, [Art Spiegelman's lithographic black ghosts of the Twin Towers](#), appearing and disappearing into the identically black ground with gestural ethereality. These two periodical special issues triggered two specific debates: in one instance about Susan Sontag's views, in the other about whether a comic-book character called Dr. Doom would have shed tears at the site of the 9/11 attacks in New York, as he was shown to do in number 36. The respective discourse communities were of course different. The benefit in juxtaposing them here is that they mark out the presumed extremes which define whether an illocutionary act does or does not align itself with the civic humanist ideal. Whatever one's own position might be with regard to Sontag's piece in *The New Yorker*'s "The Talk of the Town" section, her trenchant and courageous outspokenness about the "disconnect between last Tuesday's monstrous dose of reality and the self-righteous drivel and outright deceptions being peddled by public figures and TV commentators" (Sontag, 2001: 32) might be taken as the very model of a civic humanist illocutionary act and intervention. When she went on to say, "In the matter of courage (a morally neutral virtue): whatever may be said of the perpetrators of Tuesday's slaughter, they were not cowards", Sontag knowingly drove deep into the center of a storm in the interests precisely of "Sept. 11 as Civics Lesson", as Sander and Putnam would look for but not envisage in quite that form.

The latter also called 9/11 a "teachable moment", seeing in it the potential for re-energizing civic debate among the young. But any of us who has worked in education over the last quarter-century and listened every day to how young people talk, knows that it is not so simple, and our sympathies might much more easily lie with William Fusfield, his own depth of experience with young Americans in this area leading him to conclude, with Walter Lipmann, that there is no embryonic "omnicompetent citizen" in our charge who can genuinely and sustainably rise to the teachable moment either in the spirit of a Sontag or in realization of the larger civic humanist ideal, and this not because they are stupid but because we would be expecting something unrealistic and the ideal itself is chimerical. The debate triggered by number 36 of *The Amazing Spider-Man* tells us rather more about how so many of these young people today actually do talk.

### **What the Angry Boys Understand**

From the writer-artist teaming of J. Michael Straczynski and John Romita Jr., the 9/11 themed issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man* opens with a double-page spread depicting the dust clouds settling after the collapse of the towers, billowing out through neighboring streets as Marvel's signature superhero Spider-Man looks down unbelievably from a neighboring skyscraper. Swinging down to street level he answers the challenge of distraught New Yorkers who ask where he and the other superheroes were when people needed them: "We could not see it coming. We could not be here before it happened". Romita's eye-catching artwork captures much of the devastation with precisely rendered detail, as firefighters and police struggle through

the rubble. And then, just before the comic's mid-point, a figure appears on the scene who has perhaps been the Marvel Universe's greatest and most enduring villain, Dr. Doom, pictured standing solemnly in the debris along with Magneto, another Marvel villain who would come to wider public prominence in the X-Men films based on the comic books of the same name. But it is Doom who claims the most visually prominent presence in [number 36 of \*The Amazing Spider-Man\*](#), his green-cloaked figure dominating one page, which ends with a mawkishly memorable close-up of his masked eyes as tears well up "because even the worst of us, however scarred, are still human, still feel" (*The Amazing Spider-Man*, 2001: 12).

In February 2007, a YouTube user called *nygambit* uploaded a mashup "tribute" video to the video sharing site where, by the time of writing, it was subsequently viewed over 28,000 times (*nygambit*, 2007). The 4-minute video assembled scans from number 36 of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, deftly edited against a soundtrack consisting of Linkin Park's track "Pushing Me Away" from their 2000 debut album *Hybrid Theory*. Music critic Robert Christgau gave this album one of his most memorable capsule "reviews" in his legendary *Village Voice* "Consumer Guide" column when he wrote "the men don't know what the angry boys understand", a tersely apt encapsulation of the feeling that, intentionally or otherwise, *nygambit* tapped into with his mashup video. In early 2009, a copyright infringement notice for using the Linkin Park track compelled *nygambit* to swap it out for another more yearningly emotional piece of music, which lost what had been a particularly edgy match between visuals and soundtrack in the original mashup. The video (in its two forms) elicited over 200 comments from YouTube viewers, from which the following is a selection.

*plaparen*: Doom wants to rule the world. He is a goddamn dictator.

*choppaholic26*: And you're a retarded comic book reader. You don't know two shits about why doom wants to rule the world. He has seen into the future and seen that the only way to unite the world under global prosperity, peace, and to end world hunger, is for him to rule the world. Though he must use extreme measures to achieve that. So why wouldn't he give a shit? This is exactly what he's fighting against.

*Hinohimechan*: guys i have a question, in the original comic, spidey says that Captain America has seen the disaster before, why does he say that?

*jordanflex12*: i'm not 100% sure but it could be that captain america witnessed what hitler did to the jews back in WW2. not 100% sure though

*Hinohimechan*: ok thanks

*np112983*: I'm from New York and I remember that day like it was yesterday. I was fortunate enough not to lose anybody, but unfortunately so many others were not so lucky. I remember seeing people everywhere on their phones, crying, looking for loved ones. So many civilians, cops, firemen... It didn't matter if you knew them or not. Even those who were looked on as despicable (Doom, Magneto) felt the pain, injustice, and sadness of that day. Criminals aren't necessarily monsters.

*leather666face*: Why would Doom shed a tear for this? The guy never cries, crying is beneath Doom... and even if he would cry once, why the hell would it be for this? Hell, Doom could be behind the attack! What does he care for american deaths? I understand it's meant to be symbolic, they just took the best known marvel villains for this, but canon-wise it sucks. Then again, at least they didn't

pick Red Skull to cry. If the Skull was there he'd rather dance around in evil happiness

*Diego1999ist*: 9/11 isn't from terrorists, its from the government. I hate the government.

*NinjaGhostScorpion*: You're a fucking idiot!

*Diego1999ist*: shut the hell up! i have my own opinions!

*zarathos81*: You can pretend to hate the government all you want but they weren't behind this attack. No proof and the facts are the facts.

*farias1280*: is sad this day the world need super heroes -- spiderman save the jumpers -- superman green lantern hulk thor used their powers for the towers no collapse

*CAteen69*: It took a real man like Dr. Doom to cry for the loss of many people in 9/11. Damn, we Americans are scarred for this and we need to bring this to justice now!! We must find those terrorists and do what's right.

*TyroneSandalphon*: if you genuinely want to know why millions of people around the world believe that a faction of extremists operating from within the US government carried out 9/11 as a false flag attack [inside job] then please watch "9/11 Mysteries" still the most informative film on the subject of the destruction of the World Trade Centre. Available on YouTube here.

*NinjaGhostScorpion*: Spread your foolish bullshit theories elsewhere!

*inromowetrust9*: bring on every punk fucking muslim, ill fucking kill u, the ones that r here wish to build a church in their name, i as a USA citizen will not allow this w/e i gotta do

*killzone10*: Omg i'm sorry but the text you put in it really ticks me off it's just so terrible bad.

*NinjaGhostScorpion*: The 9th anniversary of this travesty is only a stone's throw away, but the impact of so many dead hasn't eased up one bit.

*cjochim7*: Man i read this comic back in middle school and 5 years later still remember it and had to see if someone made a tribute. Being only in the 3rd grade when 9/11 happened it still had a major impact because my cousin was one of the first to be sent over. Now today I joined not to be a hero but to fight alongside heroes who i looked up to my whole life. Never forget what happened that tragic day and honor those who serve us in every way. Firefighters, Police officers, Medics, and Soldiers.

*Leatherbubba*: Dr. Doom: "Trying to destroy the world is one thing, but killing a few thousand people?! Monstrous!"

*zarathos81*: Silly, Doom doesn't wish to destroy the world. Doom wishes to RULE the world.

*JordanFlex12*: yeah, you got a point if doom wanted to destroy the world why would he have his own country, also i don't think doom is into mass murder

*zarathos81*: I can't recall an example of him being one either. He has been known to kill individual people who cross him and, in early books, small groups of people if I recall. But MASS murder, especially on a 9/11 scale, goes against what he wants I think.

*ProjectTheLife*: So this really happened? I never saw him in the news or anything... weird.

*Detrain*: Too bad the middle east doesn't have heroes to prevent their innocent dying in the hands of US troops either.

*serzh123aaa*: doom could care less about america, he's the tyrant of latveria

*supu6*: Get over it....IT IS A FUCKING COMIC BOOK

*carrillosk8*: I have that magazine original. I want to sell it. Interested?

*nygambit*: It's as if their characters (Spider-Man, Dr. Doom, etc.) were just actors and were breaking from the script to mourn a real life event.

*HabanaBoyJDog*: I have this comic does anyone know if its worth a lot of money or not?

Some 200 more comments continued in this vein, the selection above capturing most of the themes and the tone that the “conversation” developed over time. Now, not only might a first reaction to these illocutionary acts position them at the opposite end of a scale of civic engagement from Susan Sontag's, but we might be justified in thinking that this was exactly what Frank Rich momentarily thought he saw (or imagined he heard) going on in the Thomas Hoepker photograph that had re-surfaced just a few months before this YouTube example. If so, then surely it was because Frank Rich knew—as really we all do—that this sort of talk is going on everywhere and, in so many instances, is often the best that these mostly young people can do when they publicly perform the act of expressing an attitude.

That the YouTube conversation here is largely illocutionary in that sense is clear from the way that the occasional locutionary act (e.g. is this comic worth a lot of money?) feels isolated when it occurs and gets largely ignored in the stream of comments. Without necessarily accepting Searle's taxonomy of illocutionary acts as the last word on the matter, it none the less provides a handy way of sorting the comments above (Searle, 1975).

There are a few assertives—enactments of the speaker's commitment to an asserted “truth” (as in *Diego1999ist*'s interjection, rapidly shut down by *NinjaGhostScorpion*). There are a few commissives—enactments in speech of an intention to do something (as in *inromowetrust9*'s promise to kill Muslims, rapidly countered by the ironically named *killzone10*'s aghast response and simply ignored by everybody else). There are a few declarations—enactments in speech of personal reality-changing circumstances (as in *cjjochim7*'s announcement that s/he has joined the military the same day he posted her/his comment). Directives—enactments in speech of instructions to hearers—are rarer here (unsurprising given the dispersal of the virtual “conversational” group involved), but occur for instance in *TyroneSandalphon*'s interjected infomercial for conspiracy theorizing and, again, in *NinjaGhostScorpion*'s curt reply. Overwhelmingly, though, these comments are *expressives*—the category of illocutionary speech act concerned with communicating attitudes and emotions. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly at first glance, the self-policing by such a large dispersed group of strangers in order to maintain the flow of expressives is quite rigorous, with other kinds of commenting either getting briskly stamped on or ignored, and the selection offered here is very much representative in that respect of the larger body of commentary elicited by the mashup video.

It quickly becomes clear, therefore, the extent to which the question of Dr. Doom's reaction to 9/11 energized so much of this interest. Surely the debate elsewhere about Susan Sontag's views expressed in *The New Yorker* in September 2001 remains exemplary of the civic humanist conversation, Sontag herself setting the bar high in terms of the seriousness required. And surely then this debate about Dr. Doom's comic-book presence on 9/11 is exemplary of the

opposite that Fusfield effectively predicted at the end of the 90s, a level of engagement with “Sept. 11 as Civics Lesson” that is superficial, ill-informed, trivializing and in the end depressingly indicative of what happens to people whose principal reality since birth has been the contemporary media environment in which “the visual-emotive *icon* has triumphed over the older communicative forms of public speech” (Fusfield, 1997: 271) and so young people’s talk—especially about 9/11—ends up frequently reduced to “expressives” triggered by a visual-emotive icon like Dr. Doom. The recuperation, within “serious” channels of debate, of the Hoepker photograph’s flirtation with this parallel reality served only to reassure those whose attention would mostly have been on *The New Yorker* at the end of 2001, not on *The Amazing Spider-Man*.

### **Hot Cognitions and Affective Tagging**

It might be objected, however, that contrasting the Sontag and the Dr. Doom styles of “conversation” about 9/11 and testing them against the civic humanist ideal, whereby one becomes evidence of “cultured” grace and the other of a widespread fall from grace, is not to compare like with like; except that 9/11 is a prime example of an event which triggered what have been called “hot cognitions” and these two examples definitely share the “heat”. Lodge and colleagues are among those building the body of empirical evidence for the hot cognition hypothesis, which they summarize as the proposition

that all socio-political concepts are affect-laden . . . all political leaders, groups, issues, symbols, and ideas you have thought about and evaluated in the past have become affectively charged—positively or negatively—and this affective tag is stored directly with the concept in long-term memory.

(Lodge, Taber, Burdein & Sundquist, 2005: 2)

It then seems a safe assumption that when something like 9/11 occurs, the affective tagging (the “hot” in “hot cognition”) is going to be both immediate and foregrounded precisely because of the event’s instantly perceived and discursively reinforced magnitude. Lodge and colleagues note that, “Normative democratic theory imposes truly heroic expectations about the capacity and motivation of *homo politicus* while modern empirical research portrays a much more mortal creature”, one too often found to be “distressingly ignorant” and “uninterested” (Lodge, Taber, Burdein & Sundquist, 2005: 17). But they take some comfort in the hot cognition hypothesis, arguing that there is none the less an “evaluative distillation of the stream of information to which one has been exposed”, something occurring already in the affective tagging. So the implication might be that the civic humanist expectation of illocutionary speech acts which demonstrate the required rationality and sophistication, if disappointed, may not after all leave us hopelessly with only mortal creatures who are genuinely incapable of rising to the challenge of “Sept. 11 as Civics Lesson”, and not merely because we might be pointed towards some flimsy and superficial evidence of supposedly renewed civic interest.

Thus Dr. Doom from this perspective becomes largely an artifact of affective tagging, a place where the “automaticity of affect” (Lodge, Taber, Burdein & Sundquist, 2005: 17) attached itself because readily available in the ordinary lives of those without the means to articulate a “better” response in the eyes (or to the ears?) of the civic humanist idealist. We can push this insight further by going back to Robert Zajonc’s work on affect, which is cited by Lodge and

colleagues and by most others working empirically in this field. Zajonc picked up the notion of hot cognition from Robert Abelson who coined the term but Zajonc ended up wondering if hot cognition was not in fact “quite short on cognition” (Zajonc, 1980: 162); in other words he asked, “How fully and completely must objects be cognized before they can be evaluated?” Zajonc’s answer, based on his own experimental work, was that “to arouse affect, objects need to be cognized very little—in fact, minimally” (Ibid: 154). This is not the place to look at the empirical evidence, either from Lodge and colleagues or from Zajonc, but it is important for the present purpose to underscore the robust nature of Zajonc’s challenge to the then dominant view that “affect is postcognitive”, that affect comes after “a prior cognitive process in which a variety of content discriminations are made and features are identified, examined for their value, and weighed for their contributions” (Ibid: 151). That kind of cognitive process would of course describe very well the sort of rational thinking (O’Neill’s “arguer’s arsenal”) required to attain a civic humanist state of grace *if such a state really existed*. It is what the anxious reactions to Hoepker’s photograph wanted to believe was going on in the heads and in the talk of Hoepker’s five subjects, even while it was feared that it might have been much more like our “conversation” about Dr. Doom.

What this perspective means in effect is that we should understand “Susan Sontag” as also affectively tagged, her name triggering a response as soon as it occurred back in the fourteenth paragraph here. For whom is that name affectively tagged, and for whom does the word “Susan Sontag” on the page function as another of Fusfield’s “visual-emotive icons”? For me, of course, and thus I would assume for more than a few of the readers here since, whatever our differences, we constitute yet another interested discourse community. Indeed I treasure my original copy of *The New Yorker*, September 24, 2001, precisely because I feel so good—so justified—every time I re-read Susan Sontag’s short piece on page 32, her public courage validating my own sense of what I try to do as an educator in so many small ways, which might otherwise feel so damnably isolated and stubborn; which does not stop me from also storing the magazine in an archival envelope because, as *HabanaBoyJDog* sensed, these things will be worth something. The overtaking of that affective tagging by a whole discursive edifice concerned with civic responsibility and proper speech acts, is the closing of another circuit around a threatened rupture: as Fredric Jameson says in “The Dialectics of Disaster”, his own exemplary 9/11 essay, “One can say these things now, despite media intimidation and the scapegoating of the unpatriotic nonmourners” (Jameson, 2003: 56). But in a fundamental sense both Sontag and Doom already function first as affective tags. By moving too quickly to invidious comparisons of speech acts we miss the prior affective dimension where something else is going on first.

A young man from a Balkan country, where he grew up in an ethnically marginalized community, becomes a science student in the United States. Scarred physically and emotionally when a laboratory experiment goes wrong, he goes back to his homeland, finds it ravaged by a new leader bent on both internal tyranny and currying favour with the U.S., and rises to be the spiritual head of a campaign of violence that eventually spreads beyond his homeland’s borders. The “Marvel Universe” that Victor von Doom then finds himself living in would be dominated for the post-9/11 decade by two narrative arcs that stretched across the numerous comic-book titles published by Marvel: the first a “civil war” brought about by a compulsory Registration Act in the U.S. designed to identify and control mutants, the second a “secret war” instigated when the new rulers of Doom’s homeland are found to be harboring global terrorist cells and a plan is hatched to effect regime change there. (See for example Millar & McNiven, 2007 and

Bendis & Dell’Otto, 2009, which collect 12 of the separate comics from previous years). “Mutants” include, of course, the superheroes who populate the Marvel Universe, their “special powers” the result of genetic glitches, environmental contamination or accidents, their metaphorically-charged pulling power for adolescent and young adult readers residing very much in their potent blend of misunderstood uniqueness, flawed normalcy, and hubris, with masks and costumes thrown in for good measure. Their universe, especially during the last decade, has been a governmental-corporatist-managerialist-techno-élitist-propagandocracy, in which power élites jostle with big corporations, high-tech alters all the rules, perpetual war is waged, ordinary people get caught up helplessly in the consequences and are fed epideictic explanations of where their best interests lie: an unstable temporal-spatial world constructed it would seem around Reinhold Niebuhr’s “emotively potent oversimplifications” and Robert Michels’ “iron law of oligarchy” (Niebuhr, 1960/2001: xxvii; Michels, 1962: 354). But wait Spider-Man, does not that *feel* just like the “real world” described, for example, by Fusfield, and even by Susan Sontag? The fact that it does, and so brutally so, is simply to find that the Marvel Universe has registered a post-9/11 structure of feeling with the uncanny accuracy that only those wanting to tap people’s affective energies can pull off.

So would it really have been so bad after all if the subjects of Thomas Hoepker’s 9/11 photograph had been talking momentarily about, say, Dr. Doom? Doom showing up on 9/11 in the Marvel Universe is another attempted closure but actual exposure of an instructive rupture. As a villain, Doom has never been neatly assimilable into the reconsolidated binary of “infinite justice/infinite evil” that Jacques Rancière argues has been an upshot of 9/11 as a symbolic event (Rancière, 2010). So making Doom one of “us” on that day allows the projection of “infinite evil” to be given other faces, their fate ultimately to be erased behind one of *Time* magazine’s “Red X” covers when the long arm of “infinite justice” eventually reaches them. Having the wherewithal to talk about that might ultimately be more valuable to us than the ritual repetition of civic humanist pieties that render talk of Doom too trivial to be contemplated without apprehension of a fall from civic grace.

Properly hearing this other talk is not an end in itself of course; it is a beginning, a way to start discerning and understanding the affective energies that flow there, even more than they flow perhaps through any more civically engaged “talk of the town” in *The New Yorker* sense. This matters because it offers a version of Slavoj Žižek’s “the truth is out there” (1999: 89). The post-9/11 Marvel Universe and talk of Doom are not interesting because, behind a crude and exploitative façade, they afford some hidden progressive meaning that cultural studies might cleverly excavate, but rather because they openly display a “materialization of ideology” that is “out there” being spoken about, no matter how imperfectly, in the contemporary Machiavellian moment.

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