The Canterbury Earthquakes and the Production of Reality in *When a City Falls*
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Introduction

The documentary *When a City Falls* (2011), directed by Gerard Smyth, promotes itself as "the people's story"[1] of the Canterbury earthquakes. Constructed almost entirely from amateur video, CCTV, and the director's own handheld footage, the film creates a startling impression of the earthquakes, aftershocks, and aftermath in their spontaneity and lived immediacy. However, in the following analysis I will problematize the film's construction of reality and community within the context of Melanie Klein's critique of "disaster capitalism" and Jean Baudrillard's analysis of the operation of disaster and moving images in staging reality within a post-9/11 environment characterized by an accelerated devaluation of the sign.

In *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2002), Baudrillard assesses the impact of the attacks of 9/11 on other forms of disaster.

> Another aspect of the terrorists' victory is that all other forms of violence and destabilization of the order play in its favor: computer terrorism, biological terrorism, anthrax, and rumor terrorism. Bin Laden in blamed for everything. He could even claim responsibility for natural disasters (2002, 142).

The above quote reflects Baudrillard's contention that the terrorist attacks destabilized the hyperreal order of global capitalism by rendering it hyper-reactive to subsequent disasters, and exposing it as an empty play of signs. However, for Baudrillard, the notion that such events constitute a return of an extra-referential real is also a form of deception that conceals the very production of the "objective reality" they would presume to exemplify. In this respect, the confrontation provoked by disasters is not between the hyperreal and the real: itself a mirage and deterrent created within the hyperreal order, but between forms of economic exchange underlying the hyperreal and what Baudrillard describes as symbolic exchange associated with "primitive" gift economies.

While economic exchange confers power through accumulation, symbolic exchange does so, by contrast, through loss. For example, in gifting the giver accrues power through the ability to sustain loss and simultaneously places the recipient in one's debt. Thus there is always an element of challenge in symbolic exchange. In phenomena like Potlatch this takes on the form of an overt contest. Symbolic exchange can also be induced by "natural" phenomena,

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[1] Smyth Gerard (2011) Promotional Website for *When a City Falls* http://whenacityfalls.co.nz/

such as failed harvests, diseases, or natural disasters, which require some form of ritual appeasement. In this respect, symbolic exchange does not recognize the boundaries that separate the natural from the human or cause from effect within the modern world. Indeed, the difficulty of conceptualizing symbolic exchange reflects the degree to which our thinking is predicated on the abstract notions of value, utility, objective reality, and subjectivity taken for granted within economic exchange. Although, according to Baudrillard, economic exchange systematically "denies, represses and reduces symbolic exchange," the latter is never completely banished, and threatens the former with the reversal of its fixed values. Consider, for instance, how the above quote that launched this discussion points to the inauguration of a different world in which the normal rules of cause and effect and the demarcation of the natural from the anthropogenic are reversed.

Curiously, the preponderance of conspiracy theories that have circulated around the anthropogenic causes of the earthquakes—even prior to the death of Bin Laden on 2 May 2011—point the finger not at *Al Qaeda,* but at the American military industrial complex. Specifically, these theories cite the use of computerized electromagnetic weapons, such as HAARP (the existence of which is denied by the US government), which reputedly has the power to create storms and earthquakes through invisible waves.[2] Such an "influencing machine," which controls brute matter through the manipulation of signs, offers a displaced reification of the Baudrillardian diagnosis of the simulation of the real within hyperreality. Might this be taken as evidence that the victory lies not with the terrorists after all, but with the hyperreal capacity to simulate the very reversal presented by symbolic challenge and turn it in the service of its own logic? Bradley Butterfield argues as much in his response to Baudrillard's analysis when he states that "what the system did in response to 9/11, or instead of responding to it, was to reabsorb its symbolic violence back into the never ending flow of anesthetized simulation [. . .] (2002, 26).

Disaster capitalism in hyperreality
Butterfield's account would also seem to concur with Naomi Klein's analysis of the function of a globalized "disaster capitalist complex" flexible enough to turn any crisis into opportunity. That 9/11 transformed the meaning and management of both natural disaster and war is also a central premise of Klein's work. However, she points out that rather than 9/11 presenting a threat to globalized capital, it is the fulfillment of a wish that proponents of neo-liberalism, who subscribe to the principle that systematic change can only be realized through crisis, have been harboring for decades. Klein details how the Bush administration's response to 9/11 opened the gates to a new era of privatized war and disaster management, which cynically exploits the destabilizing effects of crises as opportunities and alibis for free market experimentation. She also describes how, beyond the warzones of Iraq and Afghanistan and the ruins of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, disaster capitalism has become a central tenet of neoliberal governmentality on a global scale.

Many critics of the Key government's response to the Canterbury earthquakes, especially in blogs and social media, have drawn analogies from Klein's analysis of the Bush administration's response to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Parallels are identified

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[2] See for example, Matthew Dentith's website, which catalogues conspiracy theories related to the Canterbury earthquakes. http://all-embracing.episto.org/2010/09/15/the-christchurch-quake-conspiracy-plural-part-one/

between the establishment of the Canterbury Emergency Recovery Agency (CERA) and the function of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) post Katrina, specifically in the construction of their respective disaster zones as states of exception in which normal democratic rights, governmental processes, and market restrictions were suspended. The establishment of CERA, which resulted from the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Bill, is a case in point: rushed through the New Zealand parliament in April 2011 with no real consultation of the Christchurch City Council or the people of Christchurch. As John Hopkins from the University of Canterbury School of Law remarked just prior to its passage:

> Parliament is attempting to pass, through urgency, one of the most dangerous pieces of legislation to grace our statute book in modern times, which will, in effect, strip Christchurch of the last remnants of its democratic processes and place them under the control of a single minister. . . . with huge, unchallengeable legal powers, monitored only by a panel of "experts" of his own choosing. . . . (2011).

The list of institutional "reforms" pursued in the wake of the earthquakes also replicates many on the post Katrina agenda, including the disestablishment of elected local government bodies, rezoning of urban areas for redevelopment, redistricting of public schools, introduction of privatized charters schools, and University restructurings. Although rationalized in terms of the need to more effectively provide relief and hasten recovery, many argue that such measures have been most responsive to the exigencies of ideological and market opportunity. As Chris Trotter observes: "It's almost as if, perceiving the region's capacity for resistance to be dangerously compromised, the Government has seized the opportunity to conduct a malign, constitutional experiment upon its exhausted population" (2012).

Among the most contentious, and potentially lucrative, actions pursued by CERA involve plans for the new central city and the processes of re-zoning for the demolition of existing structures. As Lorraine North, Chair of Canterbury Arts and Heritage Trust wrote in September 2012:

> The proposed green frame . . . initially applauded as a way of maximising green space in the new city. . . . is now regarded by many property owners as a cynical means of setting up a land bank to manipulate land values within the new CBD so the Government can profit later from the disaster at their expense.

She argues that this is particularly evident in the number of heritage buildings being demolished not because of the level of quake damage, but because they don't fit with the new central city development plan, which includes controversial items such as a 35,000 seat covered stadium and a convention centre three times the size of the previous one. She quotes Warwick Isaacs, Chief Executive of the Central City Development Unit (CCDU), under authority from CERA, that "the demolitions will not cease until 20 per cent of the original CBD remains", an estimate that Dr Kit Miyamoto, "a structural seismic engineer with 25 years international experience in earthquake recovery . . . described as unbelievable. . . [and] stated he believed that, at the most, about 30 per cent of the CBD might need to be demolished" (North). In the meantime, while the ongoing aftershocks may provide delays to reconstruction, they have not prevented planning and continued demolition, the acceleration of which they instead serve to rationalize.

As in the Katrina aftermath described by Klein, the process of "recovery" in Canterbury, with what North identifies as its "twin casualities of property rights and cultural heritage," has felt to many like a repeat of the disaster. "Citizens are in a state of shock and many avoid the CBD altogether, grief-stricken at how much of their city has been destroyed—not by earthquakes, but by order of the Canterbury Earthquakes Recovery Authority (Cera)". According to Klein, such experiences are increasingly common among disaster victims in the post 9/11 era. In relation to the forced displacement of fishing communities to make way for resort hotels following the 2004 Sri Lanka tsunami, Klein writes of "a second tsunami of corporate globalization. . . . as pillage follows war" (395). In Canterbury, as elsewhere, a state of precariousness becomes the new normal in which perpetual fear of aftershocks, job losses, demolitions, and social restructurings become intertwined. Advocates of the HAARP conspiracies argue that this is part of a larger global plan to depopulate the South Island of New Zealand in preparation for its resettlement by the global elite as they flee escalating socio-economic breakdown and the effects of climate change in their home countries.

In his refutation of Butterfield's critique of Baudrillard, Leonard Wilcox argues that
any genuine threat posed to the hyperreal order by the symbolic challenge of 9/11 would occur on a different level than the "outcomes" of the wars (or disaster recoveries) it stages, which function rather as means of deterrence to preserve the fiction of real political stakes, such as freedom or security. As Baudrillard writes: "When it is threatened today by simulation (the threat of vanishing into the play of signs), power risks the real, risks crisis, it gambles on remanufacturing artificial, social, economic, political stakes" (1994, 44). In this context, whether the Canterbury earthquakes were attributed to the USA or bin Laden becomes irrelevant in relation to the implosion of sign value that both options indicate. Implosion, as Victoria Grace describes it, is a key feature of hyperreality characterized by the collapse of polarities: "signifier/signified become sign; reality/appearance become simulation; cause/effect become information, not in a revolutionary transformation, but through a collapse that goes unnoticed" (97). That recognition of implosion is endlessly "deterred" becomes a critical self-defense mechanism of the hyperreal order, accomplished through vehement reproductions of the real. Yet this reassertion of the real can only be accomplished through the proliferation of more signs, which by the same stroke corrodes their capital—just as capitalist economies must print more money to service their debts. The potential efficacy then of terrorism or disaster is that it provokes a spiraling of sign production with ends up revealing the abstractness of the hyperreal order leading to its exposure and collapse. According to Wilcox, "contemporary terrorism usurps the mechanisms of simulation in order to inhabit the system from within, pushing the very logic of the system to a point of extremity, inserting reversibility into the causal order, and bringing about a reversion of the system's own power" (Wilcox 2003, 9). This power of reversion was most immediately "materialized" after 9/11 (and again in 2007) in relation to the markets. "The Twin Towers collapsed (a stunning image of violent and catastrophic implosion), the regime of signification (floating currency, floating signifiers) was thrown into chaos, the market plunged, jobs were lost, corporations became insolvent" (10).

Klein, it could be argued, attempts to redirect the energies of symbolic challenge through a return to the proper use of resources and the real needs of communities and citizens. In this respect, she differs from Baudrillard in reading the neoliberal response to terror and disaster as an aberration rather than inevitable outgrowth of the logic of global capitalism. Accordingly, she expresses a desire to restore the meaning of disaster within the social welfare state.

> Not so long ago, disasters were periods of social leveling, rare moments when atomized communities put divisions aside and pulled together. Increasingly, however, disasters are the opposite: they provide windows into a cruel and ruthlessly divided future in which money and race buy survival (2007, 413).

The problem from a Baudrillardian perspective is that the seeds of hyperreality are already sewn irrevocably within both Marxist and capitalist variants of the pre-neoliberal, classic political economies for which she is nostalgic. Specifically, the "use value" of resources and "needs" of individuals/communities to which she appeals are, according to Baudrillard, the naturalized ideological products of economic exchange. As Grace describes: "The ideological form of economic exchange value (EV) is to assume that EV obtains its value from use value (UV), whereas in fact, Baudrillard has argued, UV is an artefact of the social institution of a codified system of EV" (Grace 2000, 13). Baudrillard's related insight was to observe the same structure of "precession" operating at the level of the sign, so that "rather than assuming that the meaning of the Sr [signifier] obtains in the Sd [signified], Baudrillard argues that the Sd is an artefact of the social institution of a codified system of representation" (13). Taken together, these integrated systems of economic exchange and representation constitute a "whole metaphysic" that Baudrillard (borrowing from Marx) describes as "production", and which anticipates the hyperreal. The key difference of the latter is its abandonment of utility and referentiality for unlimited consumption and the infinite free play of signs within the media explosion of late capitalism. It is this final development that makes economic exchange especially vulnerable to reversion through symbolic exchange. As Baudrillard observes: "A critique of general political economy (or a critical theory of value) and a theory of symbolic exchange are one and the same thing" (1972: 136). This is because what such a critique realizes is that economic exchange is always engaging in symbolic exchange, but under the alibis of an immanent world of objects defined by their use values and a theory of the subject defined by its needs.

The Seductions of Disaster

While disaster provides unique opportunities for the neoliberal corporate state, it also holds a particular seduction for its subjects to disrupt their immersion within hyperreality. For Baudrillard seduction relates to the pull of symbolic exchange: "Seduction is what tears you away from your own desire to return you to the sovereignty of the world" (Baudrillard 1983, 142). However, the sovereign world enacted through symbolic exchange is easily confused with the "real world," which is an artefact of economic exchange. This is why, paradoxically, "seduction lies in the transformation of things into *pure appearance,*" (Baudrillard 1990, 70) whereas economic exchange and hyperreality produce the illusion of an immanent world behind all appearances. Thus, rather than restoring illusion to reality, seduction undermines the illusion of objective reality. "For if production can only produce objects or real signs, and thereby obtain some power; seduction, by producing only illusions, obtains all powers, including the power to return production and reality to their fundamental illusion" (1990, 70). So symbolic challenge is less about the return of the real than about rival illusions coming into play. However, this does not exclude the illusion of production itself: a "cold seduction" which redirects symbolic challenge towards its own preservation.

I want to suggest that the film becomes ensnared in this conflicted dynamic of seduction. On one hand, the earthquakes present a symbolic challenge, but on the other, they appear to provide something undeniably *real,* which invokes a profound nostalgia for a form of

authentic community. In its rendering of the aftermaths of both the 4 September 2010 and 22 February 2011 quakes, the film moves through a series of suburbs, which it visually announces in subtitles, ranging from the wealthiest to the poorest. In these places the filmmaker encounters a seemingly random assortment of people who present a demographic sample of children, the elderly, mothers, fathers, Māori, Pākehā, Pacific people, and Chinese; yet who all go unnamed. The film's practice of not naming its subjects unless incidentally (not even the Prime Minister when he appears on the scene), is a curious one that recalls Baudrillard's assertion that production is what sustains not only the illusion of the world, but of a subject defined categorically by universal needs and desires. By contrast, symbolic exchange tends to restore anonymity. Insofar as what has happened to them has nothing to do with who they are, the withholding of names is part of the film's construction of the earthquake as new social common de-nominator: houses fractured, power and water cut in random fashion. In this respect the film's strategy also tends to reproduce the myth that "disasters do not discriminate" (Klein 2007, 406), especially when no reference is made to the unequal distribution of relief from portable toilets to tanked-in water.

Although initiated through symbolic exchange unleashed by the earthquakes, the seduction here is diverted by the film into nostalgia for a "real" world defined by the reassertion of the equivalence of exchange value and use value characteristic of classical economics. This takes shape through a re-materialization of the spirit of Kiwi ingenuity in the form of outdoor toilets: "it looks as though it shouldn't work but it does", makeshift accommodations, homemade public water dispensers, pot belly stoves: "they told us to get rid of 'em", free book dispensaries, etc. It is as if the earthquake opens a time travel portal to a pre-globalized New Zealand in which real people solved real problems with real objects, which fortunately have been lying around all the while waiting for us to rediscover them and thereby our true useful selves.

This apparent return to the order of symbolic exchange, which is a central seduction of the earthquakes, is no less a creature of hyperreality. That is, in order for this disaster to serve its ultimate purpose: to remind who we all are as "Kiwis", it must at the same time move through the circuits of simulation as image and be transubstantiated into what Baudrillard describes as the indifferent exchange value of code.

> While these images glorify the event, they also take it hostage. They can compound *ad infinitum* and simultaneously act as a diversion and neutralization. . . . The image consumes the event, in the sense that it absorbs it and prepares it for consumption. Indeed, it gives the event new vigour, but as an image-event (2002, 140).

Indeed, it is only on these terms that the film gets to have it both ways: to indulge its "unashamed parochialism" (Littlewood 2011) and also be consumed more broadly as a mirror of national culture. Perversely, this spirit of utility still proliferates through the contagiousness of sign values, and even promises to redeem global commodities from their shifting sign values through their reconstitution within simulated forms of symbolic exchange. Reversibly, even social networks magically shed their virtuality, as a Facebook group organized by University of Canterbury students materializes into a real community of helpers.

It is this utopian impulse that the film is caught up in, strives to preserve, and over which it seems so protective. Indeed, the film fosters an aura of sacrality around the symbolic exchange unleashed by the earthquakes which effectively seals it off, by the same stroke it's energies are redirected into a fantasy of return to an exchange economy based on natural utility and genuine human needs. This helps to explain the decidedly apolitical nature of the film. For while *When a City Falls* focuses in great detail on the nostalgic, community building version of disaster, it almost entirely overlooks the divisive aspects of the response that have prompted comparison with Klein's critique of disaster capitalism. A lengthy montage of building demolitions is prefaced by the director's comments that "we've got a problem with people collecting this stuff and putting it on Trade Me, and I think we've got to get this stuff secured." In the next shot Anna Crighton, Chairperson of Christchurch Heritage Buildings Fund states in voiceover: "there are historic buildings in this city that are being destroyed unnecessarily in my opinion". In the following shot she consults with polite and cooperative demolitions workers who appear to heed her concerns. In a later sequence the filmmaker arrives at a building just in time to halt its demolition and phone the owners who have not been notified. It turns out that while "all the paper work is in place" (according to the earthquake commission officer) they are about to demolish the wrong structure. The cumulative impression is of a situation plagued by personal greed (in the form of entrepreneurial salvaging), individual incompetence, unintentional errors of judgment, and fatigue. While this may be a fair characterization at one level, it also serves to provide cover for the intentional, systematic, and opportunistic acceleration of demolitions by CERA described above. A pattern becomes discernable similar to that which Klein identifies in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the Sri Lankan Tsunami in which "the extreme tactics on display . . . are often mistaken for . . . incompetence or cronyism" (19).

In refraining from interpreting, narrating, or editorializing, which has been counted among its virtues by a chorus of reviewers, *When a City Falls* also seems to inscribe an ethical prohibition against politicizing, as if to do so might adulterate the authenticity of the individual experiences and social responses it documents. The filmmaker's intent has been described as "not so much [to] document . . . as bear witness," (Littlewood 2011) and the immediacy and intimacy of the reportage style filmmaking generates a hallowed aura around its subject matter. The shot of a hand painted sign on a particularly devastated street near the epicenter reads: "rubberneckers fuck off", confronting spectators with their own motivations for viewing while expressing the film's conflicted attitude towards the spectator, as it strives to maximize proximity to events and yet preserve their exclusivity for those who have lived them directly.

Documentary realism and symbolic exchange
It is worth recalling that for Baudrillard, the catastrophe of 9/11 witnessed a return not of the real but of symbolic challenge. Similarly, in its representation of the Canterbury earthquakes and their aftermath, I would suggest that it is the eruption of symbolic exchange beyond any issues of documentary realism that defines the central problematic of *When a City Falls.* In fact, as I will argue shortly, the latter has an annulling effect on the proliferation of the former. This dynamic becomes evident in the most compressed way in the representations of the earthquakes themselves and the aftershocks. For Baudrillard, "the symbolic, whose virtuality of meaning is so subversive of the sign, cannot, for this reason, be named except by allusion, by infraction. For signification, which names everything in terms of itself, can only speak the language of values and of the positivity of the sign" (1972, 161). This raises correlative problems for any cinematic representation that attempts

to also preserve the symbolic challenge of an event; problems that are concealed behind the more practical challenges of documenting the occurrence of an earthquake.

Significantly, the treatment of the first September 2010 earthquake, which occurred in the early hours of the morning, uses the cover of darkness to amplify the power of sound and diminish the clarity and distinctness of the world. Rumbling is audible over a black screen as the telephonic voices of emergency workers register the shock. When images come, they are fleeting: the torch lit face of a child surrounded by darkness followed by shaking surveillance camera footage as the streetlights fail and the screen is plunged again into total darkness. Telephone voices return: "what the fuck was that"? Because, as Michel Chion explains, "there is no auditory container for film sounds, nothing analogous to this visual container of the images that is the frame" (1994, 68), sounds can become "acousmatic": divorced from any decisive visible source or referent. Christchurch Mayor Bob Parker remarks: "I've heard earthquakes—you can hear them coming. . . . It's spooky." Acousmatic sound acquires an especially promiscuous power relative to the earthquake, which seems to come from everywhere and out of nowhere at once. By utilizing sound to express the enveloping presence of a phenomena that defies visual containment, the film militates against what Chion describes as the persistent "audiovisual illusion of a redundancy that doesn't exist (for example, the sound seems to duplicate what the image already says)" (2009: 232). It is worth noting that this "coefficient of misapprehension" that informs the audiovisual illusion is structurally similar to Baudrillard's account of "precession". Sound disguises its constitutive power over the image behind qualities that seem to already belong to the image itself. The strategic use of acousmatic sound to trouble this illusion can thus be read as contributive to the symbolic value of the earthquake by disrupting the separation of subject and object, signifier and referent preserved and reified in clear and distinct visual representations.

If the prioritization of sound over image nurtures symbolic exchange, Baudrillard has accused surveillance footage of having the opposite effect: producing an illusion of access to the world in its pure objectivity prior to and beyond human perception. While the treatment of the first earthquake introduces the CCTV footage only long enough for it to be snuffed out by the disruptive force of the event, its deployment in the representation of the 22 February earthquake, which occurred in broad daylight, is much more sustained. What in the first instance defied representation is in the second transformed into visible spectacle. In the first shot a man walks in the frame as the shaking begins and a building topples directly behind him. In the lengthy montage that follows, CCTV footage is intercut with amateur video. In this way, arguably the most objectifying and subjectifying modes of video are correlated: the indifferent gaze associated with the surveillance of state, corporate, and institutional agencies and the imperiled embodied vision of individuals. This dual mode of representation works to deter the earthquake's symbolic challenge by reifying the polarized abstractions of object and subject, which it otherwise threatens to disrupt. Symbolic exchange is thus deterred and redirected by the same stroke that it is evoked.

The film's reluctance to politicize does not mean that it resists its own construction of events. The montage of CCTV and amateur footage, in alternating among a range of sources and locations, recapitulates fictional disaster films such as *Earthquake* (1974) and *Shortcuts* (1993), forging a sense of simultaneity and unity of experience among a collection of strangers unaware of the social fabric in which their lives are intertwined. In the Canterbury earthquakes, as in the aftermath of 9/11, this mediated simulation of the social is deployed

in the reimagining of national community. As John Key remarks in the opening of his speech to the Latimer Square Christchurch Earthquake Memorial Service: "we all remember where we were when we heard the news".

The representation of the second earthquake is also marked off from the rest of the film by its hyperbolic protraction within screen time. Thus, the montage not only multiplies types of footage and viewing positions but also extends the duration of the event. At no other moment in the film does editing work this way; the prevailing rule being the contraction of screen time relative to story time in the service of narrative progression. Such reversals are often associated with spectacle and subjective cinema, which are for this reason regarded as extra-narrative. Similarly, the temporal prolongation of the earthquake exerts a power of suspension over narrative, placing the event beyond the contrivances of story as it exposes the contingency of the stories by which people live. Repetition, multiplication, and protraction enact the compensatory spiraling of signs that swarm like antibodies from the hyperreal encounter with symbolic challenge. It is thus significant that the montage concludes with a lingering image of the city shot from the distance as if to capture that totality implied by, yet absent from, every suturing together of viewpoints.

In its representation of the earthquakes and their aftermaths, *When a City Falls* is symptomatic of what Baudrillard describes as "present day photographic, cinematic and television images . . . thought to bear witness to the world with a naïve resemblance and a touching fidelity" (1987, 14). Paradoxically, however, it is the film's adherence to unvarnished documentary immediacy, out of respect for the "reality" it "represents", that heightens its deceptiveness. As Baudrillard writes, "It is precisely when it appears most truthful, most faithful and most in conformity to reality that the image is most diabolical. . . . It is in its resemblance, not only analogical but technological, that the image is most immoral and most perverse" (1987, 13-14). This perversity lies in the fact that the documentary image strives for greater adherence to a world whose objective pre-signified existence it produces as its fundamental fiction.

> Cinema increasingly approaches, with ever increasing perfection, absolute reality: in its banality, in its veracity, in its starkness, in its tedium, and at the same time in its pretentiousness, in its pretention to be the real, the immediate, the unsignified, which is the maddest of enterprises (1987, 33).

It is in this way that the mechanical and now electronic mimetic image becomes integral to a system of production which "replaces all illusions with just one, its own, which becomes the reality principle" (Baudrillard 1990, 83). Hence Baudrillard's refusal of "any pedagogy of the image" (83), which is the core of every defense offered up on behalf of documentary. Ironically, it is in its very attempt to redeem cinema through strict adherence to physical and socio-historical reality that the documentary impulse perfects its fraudulence. "In this very way, we enter, beyond history, upon pure fiction, upon the illusion of the world. The illusion of our history opens on to *the greatly more radical illusion of the world"* (1992, 122).

For Baudrillard this "radical illusion of the world" offers no greater deterrent than the threat of its destruction, and for this reason has a special relationship to films about disaster and catastrophe. He argues that the fundamental wish that informs narratives about the destruction of civilization and extinction of human life is for a view of the world *as it really is,* without the de-realizing filter of simulation that human society imposes. "In a word, we

dream of our disappearance, and of seeing the world in its inhuman purity (which is precisely not the state of nature)" (1987: 26). Baudrillard observes that even a film in which there are survivors, such as *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004), "brings about a regression of the human race" to fulfill a similar wish (26). This second scenario is closer to that of *When a City Falls*, where the wish is not self-destruction but the destruction of false selves and a false image of the world. The repeated earthquakes work to hypostatize this image of the world as pure immanence by presuming to literally shake it loose from its moorings in hyperreality. But what "illusion of our history" opens onto this "illusion of the world"? The answer resonates the deepest aspirations of Kiwi nationalism: the return to a romanticized connection to place simultaneously at the center of international attention and interest.[3] Indeed the population has been primed for this by over a decade of location tourism (NZ as Middle Earth) and nation branding (100% Pure NZ) that has promoted the intranational and international consumption of New Zealand as simulacrum. As Brendan Hokowhitu intimates in his critique of *Whale Rider* as simulacrum*,* the (re)production of New Zealand land as "brute matter" and "terra nullis" also corroborates fantasies of its reclamation by an innocent and universalized Kiwi pragmatism that elides the problematics of colonization (2007: 24).

The symbolic challenge of death
The overriding difference with the second February earthquake was the irreversibility of death and destruction. The improbability of no fatalities in the first earthquake and the prevailing "feeling . . . that someone has been looking after us, that we are big time blessed," as one ambulance dispatcher puts it, transmuted into the improbability of a second earthquake of such destructive and deadly force. What then could this second event be but a curse, or else a retroactive sacrifice for the community magically conjured by the first quake? This is the unspeakable possibility opened by symbolic exchange, whose psychodynamics also inform the experience of survivor guilt associated with fatal disasters (Williams 1988) Within the community resuscitated by the first quake these events must mean something as they must also for the imagined nation that has come to identify itself metonymically with the community of victims.

Significantly, death is the one thing that has no material equivalent in terms of symbolic exchange, and yet must be reconciled to the ritualized cycles of giving and receiving which bind the social fabric. Hence, an exchange value for death is construed within a spiritual realm or afterlife, which constitutes a transcendental signifier for the entire system of symbolic exchange. As with martyrdom, sacrifice, and other modes of symbolic exchange, the quest for meaning in death from disasters proliferates into the transcendental realm. Curiously, although a dramatic increase in paranormal phenomena was supposedly reported even after the 4 September quake (Sachdeva 2011), it is only after the fatalities of the February 2011 event that the film becomes invested in such occurrences. In the first case, the film relates the story of a Lyttleton woman led mysteriously to her father's body by his familiar whistling after he had been crushed to death by falling rocks while walking in the Port Hills. In another instance, during video footage of a meeting of Māori kaumātua, a strong aftershock strikes immediately after a man begins to speak in Te Reo Māori. Another attendee remarks: "your words have great force", drawing laughter from the others. Yet the

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[3] See for example, Bell Avril Becoming Päkehä: Dominance and its Costs
http://sweetasconference.blogspot.co.nz/2007/05/becoming-pkeh-dominance-and-its-costs.html.

incident also recalls that most infamous historical coincidence of Maori ritual speech and trembling earth when the tohunga Tuhoto Ariki purportedly caused the 1886 Mt. Tarawera eruption with a makutu (curse), destroying the Pink and White Terraces. In another example, the statue of the Virgin Mary in the CCH Catholic church is found rotated around 180 degrees from its previous position in the window, from facing inwards towards the church to facing outwards upon the city, which in its entirety has become a sanctified zone.

It is worth noting that both the examples mentioned above involve a reversal of physical laws of cause and effect in conjunction with a form of precession, which Baudrillard associates with symbolic exchange (1983, 162). The whistle precedes the whistler, and in so doing indicates the location of its deceased causal source. Speech evokes the earthquake/eruption by virtue of its precession. We are even told that the vertical force of the earthquake negated that of gravity, momentarily suspending the fundamental laws thought to bind the physical world. Jonathan Smith points out, for Baudrillard, "two orders of metaphysical precession generate two forms of magic" (2007, 7). While hyperreality is associated with second order precession: "a mechanical form based on simulation, wherein before-the-fact models 'conjure up' referents," the examples mentioned above exemplify precession of what Baudrillard regards as "a more ancient form" in which "the world, its reality, is made up only of signs" which "do not refer to any sort of 'reality' or 'referent' or 'signifier' whatsoever" (cited Smith 2007, 7). By contrast, second order precession is defined by "the precession of simulacra to things themselves, whose apparition they conjure up in a different mode" (7). This "different mode" is that of the very model of physical reality in which simulation masquerades as referent—as "things themselves". This is the "radical illusion of the world" which the documentary reproduces. It is here that *When a City Falls* exhibits a fundamentally conflicted relationship between the forms of symbolic exchange it resuscitates and the mode of production it exemplifies.

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