

*How phony realism in film and literature is  
corrupting and confusing the American mind*

# IT'S UNREAL

BY GREGG EASTERBROOK

**I**N THIS SUMMER'S HIT MOVIE, *INDEPENDENCE Day*, the president oversees attacks against the aliens by watching fancy color monitors with live-action images of airplanes and spaceships. A Marine pilot brings down a trailing alien fighter by deliberately opening and releasing his F18's tail parachute in flight so that it flops on the alien's windshield and blinds the occupant. Amraam air-to-air missiles, fired at the alien starships, create tremendous explosions. Area 51, the ultra-secret desert location where the wreck of the Roswell UFO has been reconstructed, is shown in detail. A squadron of B2 bombers launches nuclear-tipped cruise missiles at an alien dreadnought.

OK, let's assume away the aliens and their 300-mile-wide mother ship as the premise of the flick. And let's accept the notion that you can destroy an entire space fleet with a bottle of Scotch and a laptop computer. After all, it's a movie. Otherwise, which of the above aspects of *Independence Day* are realistic?

The military does not have live-action view screens that show perfect representations of things thousands of miles away: Even the fanciest radars display information as cryptic data squiggles. Amraam missiles do not make tremendous explosions: They have small warheads designed to cripple the relatively thin skin of aircraft. Deploying the tail chute (used during carrier landings) of an F18 during flight would cause directional instability and an immediate crash. There is no Area 51. (Of course, agents of the cover-

up instructed me to write that.) The B2 does not carry nuclear-armed cruise missiles.

What about that heroic laptop? Suspend disbelief and assume a powerbook could somehow communicate with an alien computer system. But the idea of delivering a computer virus so potent it instantly disables an entire interstellar space fleet is, well, about as realistic as a light sabre. And just as *Stars Wars* boosted the prospects of SDI through its special-effects quality, suggesting to audiences that powerful lasers actually exist, *Independence Day* may aid the revived Ballistic Defense Initiative by suggesting that war in space is already technically feasible.

In the context of efforts such as *Independence Day*, the line between "realism" and "real" increasingly blurs. Ever-better special effects now leave audiences for film and television steadily less able to discriminate between a Hollywood premise and something real. Increasingly, the passing off of the invented as reality plagues not just the movies but journalism, nonfiction books, pop novels and even literary writing. By this I don't mean movies such as *Zelig*, in which the historical and imagined are swirled, but everybody knows this is happening. I mean books and films in which phony touches masquerade as true touches, usually under the banner of "realism."

Nearly everybody involved in creative pursuits agrees that realism is a virtue. But real realism—correspondence to actuality—is mostly Dullsville. So a new category, one which might be called synthesized realism, is emerging and gathering sway. Writers and directors pretend they are producing something "realistic," when the product is in truth as removed

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from reality as *Batman*. But at least in *Batman*, you're aware of the fantastic nature of what you are shown. In synthesized realism, the goal is to confuse you about the distinction.

For instance, the Tom Clancy genre is chock-full of real-sounding descriptions of fantastic technical devices that do not exist and with depictions of extremely complicated military operations carried out with split-second timing. Harmless diversion? Perhaps, but filling people's heads with the idea that "real" military strikes can proceed with intense technical precision across many continents may tempt pundits to demand, and political leaders to attempt, the sorts of operations that are likely to lead to ruin, as happened at Desert One.

Equally corrosive to the public mind, books and movies now regularly present as "realism" the notion

Hollywood and pop-novel "realism." But the degree depicted often exceeds that found in reality. Pop novels by John Grisham, Michael Crichton and Robin Cook—to name only respectable thriller authors—have in recent years depicted multiple gruesome murders in the Supreme Court, in corporate boardrooms, at top teaching hospitals. In fact such books, in the name of "realism," depict multiple murders in high places as everyday events. Actual murders happen in alleyways, tenements, homes. Thriller authors move the murders to glamorous venues for obvious reasons, but then add detached, gruesome details to create the facade of "realism" that's now selling.

Surely the worst synthesized realism touch common to contemporary mass culture is the obsession with serial murders and thrill killing. Dozens of contemporary movies and pop novels—Thomas Harris's

Hannibal Lecter books, *Seven*, *Natural Born Killers*, *Copycat*, and many similar works turn on the "realistic" notion that everywhere you look, depraved psychopaths are torturing people

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that vast, unstoppable conspiracies are behind public events. Not only the Freeman believe that a secret cabal is running the world; so, it seems, do all movie and television producers, with grimly "real" government conspirators behind the plot of most contemporary action films and books. Shows such as "The X-Files" are not the offender here, because they are exaggerated enough to merit the *Batman* exemption: You know what you're seeing is far-fetched. (Of course, agents of the cover-up instructed me to write that.) Now "realistic" government conspiracies turn up as the centerpiece of films like *JFK* or *Outbreak*. Often, the conspiracies entail the mysterious appearance of omnipotent operatives working for agencies far more secret than the CIA, agencies so powerful even the president fears them. Conspiracies, Ken Ringle has written, are handy for writers and directors because "they move the plot and tie up loose ends...but life itself is rarely that tidy." Movies and books with neat conspiracy theories at their cores may feel "realistic" in the wake of Watergate. Actually they are phony, given the paucity of true conspiracies in the actual world—phony in a way that promotes cynicism about citizenship.

Because we undeniably live in a world where violence is excessive, killings have become a token of

to death for kicks. This sort of brutality occurs far more often in books and movies than in real life. According to Peter Smerick, a crime consultant who is a retired agent for the FBI's behavioral sciences division—the very organization Harris romanticizes in the Lecter books—in the last 15 years there have been an estimated two "spree" or thrill killings per month nationwide in the United States. That is a horrible figure in every way, but it represents a mere 0.14 percent of American murders. Serial killings are exceptionally rare. Almost all murders occur in the context of robbery, or between acquaintances or family members. Today, on an annual basis, probably a greater number of serial killings are depicted on screen and on television than occur in real life. Yet gruesome thrill killings are presented as if "realistic," using the excuse of realism to advance a gratuitous profit pursuit while at the same time desensitizing readers' and viewers' perceptions of human life.

Depictions of Hollywood-style splatter-death have even begun to infect literature, under the guise of "realism." For instance, the new novel *Accordion Crimes*, by the serious writer E. Annie Proulx, offers a gory death on about every third page. The killings embody what Hollywood scriptwriters call "creative death"—something weird or graphic happens to each

victim, like a stake driven through the eye. Hollywood sell-outs sit around in the afternoon attempting to think of creative ways to depict killing because this satisfies the financial incentives of exploitation. To find the same mindset at work in literature is alarming. Proulx might justify it under the banner of "realism," but the real realistic mode of death for almost everybody who has ever died, except during warfare, is to slowly decline from a degenerative disease, or to topple over from a heart attack.

Random sadistic splatter is now a staple of serious books by such authors as Cormac McCarthy and Larry McMurtry, who combined have probably depicted more "creative" killings in the West than occurred in the entire 19th century. (As opposed to the surely plentiful, genuine Dullsville murders.) Thrill killings became a commonplace of minimalist writing when the late Raymond Carver ended his short story "Tell the Women We're Going" with two men suddenly slaughtering two women, solely for amusement. Since then many short stories in *The New Yorker* or *The Atlantic Monthly* have featured splatter. Because authors such as Carver made thrill-kill scenes respectable, it should come as no surprise that punk pretenders like Bret Easton Ellis fall back on them constantly.

Syntho-realism has crept into nonfiction as well. In a way, the progenitors of this effect were the New Journalists of the 1960s, who, while wonderful writers, at times carried narrative to the extreme of making events seem much more interesting than they actually were. New Journalism spawned the "nonfiction novel," which literary history is likely to see as a heinous development, blurring the lines of realism and the invented not so much in the pursuit of an otherwise unobtainable truth (as Truman Capote initially claimed about *In Cold Blood*) but in pursuit of an improved story that would call attention to the writer (as Capote later admitted was his real goal).

By the late 1960s, Norman Mailer would subtitle his *The Armies of the Night*, a book about the 1967 march on the Pentagon, "History as Novel, the Novel as History." A perfect slope of pretentiousness in this phrase helped make Mailer's book a big deal then, but the notion it embodied—that world events should be reconstrued into a "novel" with smoothed-out characters and flowing plotlines—has not worn well.

By the 1970s Tom Wolfe so stylized and smoothed out *The Right Stuff* that the lives of the original seven astronauts were made to seem nothing but kick-ass manly extravagance. That made the book a great read, but was it "realistic"? Yes, in the sense that

Wolfe did interviews and conducted research. No, in the sense of sketching the astronauts' lives.

The elegant narrative writing of the New Journalists had the unwelcome effect of granting respectability to composite characters, reconstructed dialogue, and other devices which repeal realism in the name of the syntho-real. Today this setback is best seen in the syntho-dialogue of Bob Woodward books. Within this realm are extended scenes of imaginary dialogue and streamlined story lines during which the reader has absolutely no clue as to what is known and what is conjecture. As good a reporter as Woodward is, it's sad to note that his recent books drop the concept of "true" altogether, placing into quotation marks lengthy sections of dialogue that Woodward has simply invented. The dialogue may be similar to words actually spoken but is not by any standard "true." Absurdly, writers employing this gimmick often cloak themselves in "realism." Transmogrified conversations or composite characters are glossed with minute but ultimately irrelevant details—the exact hour of a meeting, the color of a piece of clothing—to generate a patina of "realism," while the gist of episodes merrily turns on quotations whose actuality is at best speculative.

In recent years, this disease has spread beyond pop-serious writing like Woodward's into true seriousness. One of the best books published last year was *A Civil Action* by Jonathan Harr, an intelligent account of a tortuously complex lawsuit. But even this book, the product of a conscientious author, was based on recreated dialogue: There are extended sections where the reader is given no hint about whether what he or she is reading is genuine or made up. Finding this phony, Hollywood-serving touch (*A Civil Action* sold to the movies, something it probably would not have done had the author stuck to true realism) in a serious book was a deep letdown.

Capote, Mailer, and Woodward's ultimate legacy to nonfiction may be that, in the name of "realism," they rendered respectable the concept of "sorta true." Legions of novelists and screenwriters are now laboring to enshrine syntho-reality as better than real reality. With the special effects of movies and the novelistic detail of writing improving all the time, it grows ever harder for readers and viewers to determine whether they are beholding verity or imagination. Will all this end in a public so confused about the "real" context of books and films as to begin mistaking things like "The X-Files" for reality—or in a public so cynical that not even the most earnest author in pursuit of truth will be taken seriously? ●

## The Decline of Citizenship

*It's not just immigration that's dividing us*

By James Fallows

**G**EORGIE ANNE GEYER HAS for years practiced the best kind of foreign reportage, which involves spending enough time in some other society to sense what rings true and false in official pronouncements about the place. Instead of trying to persuade her editors, as so many of her colleagues did, that the most important foreign policy stories could be found in the restaurants and hotels of Geneva, London, Paris, and Rome, she endured the frequent hardship and occasional terror of going to the Kazakhstans and the Angolas. Though it has very serious flaws, her new book displays some of the familiar virtues of her reporting, this time about the United States.

The main point of the book is to ask what has become of the sense of "citizenship"—the connection between people and nation that is more than the mere convenience of carrying a passport or being eligible for public benefits. Citizenship, Geyer says, involves not just pride in or comfort with a certain culture but also a sense of shared obligation for its long-term survival and health. The obligation is what she says is withering away, in a "silent but real death of American citizenship."

There are three main villains in the story Geyer tells. The first and most heavily emphasized is immigration, which in its legal form is dramatically changing the ethnic makeup of the country (more than 80 percent of legal immigrants now come from Asia, Latin America, and Africa) and in its illegal form cre-

**AMERICANS NO MORE:  
The Death of Citizenship**

*By Georgie Anne Geyer*

Atlantic Monthly Press, \$23

ates a shadow-world of people living outside the law. The second is the American response to immigration, which Geyer sees as far too diffident. Rather than encouraging or requiring new arrivals to learn the language, adopt the culture, and in other ways

become fully engaged citizens, the U.S. has, in Geyer's view, fostered the idea that America is no more than one big job market and shopping mall, in which people from different cultures can improve their economic circumstances while otherwise living just as they would have back home. The third villain is a Balkanized, what's-in-it-for-me mentality among Americans in general. This was the spirit expressed most clearly through Proposition 13 in California. (Prop 13 was the ballot initiative in 1978 that put a cap on property tax payments for existing homeowners and touched off a series of similar moves in other states.) The real push behind Prop 13 came from homeowners whose own children were grown and gone and who were peeved by the idea that they should still pay for schools used by someone else's kids. Self-interest is a fundamental part of politics and of life, but Geyer contends that the balance has been skewed so that larger, citizen-style interests carry much less weight than earlier in this century.

On each of these issues, Geyer is obviously talking about something real. While economists have generally viewed immigration as an overall benefit to America, it is not an absolute benefit, nor a blessing for everyone involved. Recent evidence, some of which Geyer covers, suggests that the constant flow of low-wage immigrant labor is aggravating the polarization

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