

words:  
pi] and  
Callia Kollectiv  
image:  
Ari Marcopoulos

Many commentators have already dubbed the noughties, the “short decade”, lasting for only six or seven years, from September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 to the financial crisis of 2008 and the election of Barack Obama as president of the U.S. Many of the trends and events of this short decade - neo-conservatism and the booming markets (both financial and art), the emergence of web 2.0, the ceaseless ‘glocal’ war in the middle east, Georgia, Sri Lanka, Sudan etc., the emergence of ecology as a central political theme—deserve to be understood in their own terms and we can only now begin to measure their influence on the culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But one question, the question of belief, faith and religion, seems to have dominated the horizon of the last decade, in major philosophical works as much as in popular culture and political discourse. In the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the media announced ‘the death of irony’. The destruction and horror of the terrorist attack was taken to signal the ‘return of the real’, an end to the postmodern relativism of the 1990s. Thenceforth, lines would be drawn, and we would have to take things seriously again, defining our way of life in terms that required us to believe again in the political project of democracy.

Superficially, it is easy to follow the conservative line of argumentation and describe the noughties as the renewed arena of the infamous “clash of civilizations”, where two incompatible modes of being, finally battle it out, after years of liberal repressive tolerance in the form of identity politics and political correctness. This, mostly American, way of understanding the events of the decade focuses on questions of freedom: the western secular world enables liberties which cannot be contained within other systems of thought and therefore needs to defend these liberties with military and diplomatic force. The truth is of course very different. Islamic fundamentalism, as many writers from John Gray to Adam Curtis and Sven Lutticken have argued, is a thoroughly modern phenomenon that shares many of the assumptions of its secular western arch-rival. The deterritorialized, rhizomatic operations of Al Qaida mirrored the neo-conservative attack on the centralized structures of ‘big government’. Moreover, its ideology of addressing modernity as an illusionistic simulacrum devoid of authentic human relations, is in itself a strong modernist tradition, central to the thought of Sartre, the Situationists, Baudrillard and Virilio, to mention just a few.

By the same token, liberal capitalism shares a structure of belief with Islamic fundamentalism. It similarly eliminates the immediate material world in favour of an eternally deferred metaphysical liberation, in the shape of speculative, future oriented debt. If imperialism was founded on the looting of geographic space—the colonies—late capitalism sites its conquest in time, gambling on options and deals that may never materialize. Having successfully endeavored to dismantle the welfare state in the U.S. and Europe since the sixties, capitalism achieved this decade a freedom it did not possess for a century, by offering its worshipers an eternally deferred salvation by emptying out and colonizing the future. Walter Benjamin observed already in 1913 that capitalism is “an essentially religious phenomenon”.

And yet, despite these parallels, so many of the decade’s memorable political controversies seemed to revolve around religious controversies, from the assassination of Dutch journalist Theo Van Gogh in 2004, the Danish cartoons of Mohamed in 2005, the French hijab ban from 2004, to the recent surreal and disturbing

# BELIEF

Swiss ban on Minarets (a poster for which, featuring a woman in a niqab in front of a Swiss flag covered by minarets, has been culturejammed to read “Stopp Ninja” instead of “Stopp Ja”). At the same time, celebrities’ acts of faith merited the strongest public reaction, from Madonna’s relationship with the Americanized version of the Kabbalah to Tom Cruise’s support of Scientology. That these self-help religions emphasized the individual’s will to power over any collective political project, much like their 1970s new age predecessors, could only stave off censure until they reached critical mass. Though in principle totally commensurate with the demands of capitalist accumulation, as real forces to be reckoned with, they threatened to usurp its empire altogether.

New age cults and fundamentalist religion alike (Islamic, Jewish, Christian and Hindu fundamentalism all flourished in the last decade) became attractive alternatives because they seemed to evade the paradox that lies at the heart of post-modernism by offering forms of faith that promised to survive its destabilizations. Postmodernism successfully delegitimized the foundations of the modern and exposed universalism, the values of the enlightenment, rationalism and progress as untenable political goals, empty promises that force a

In music, nineties post rock and electronic music’s rejection of the myths of rock ‘n’ roll gave way to a sort of acting out of this myth without a shred of irony but also with no claims for newness by the likes of the White Stripes and the Strokes. Not quite retro, noughties bands were still heavily invested in an attempt to reconstruct an authentic sound. In art, similarly, the decade gave birth to a wave of re-enactments of historical performances, repeating, perhaps resurrecting and perhaps critiquing the allure of the original moment of creation. Painters like Nigel Cooke continued to both mock and believe in the untenable yet unavoidable myth of the artist as outsider. In sculpture, the grandiose gestures of minimal artists from the 60s and 70s were relocated to the domestic scale, transformed into carefully chaotic plank ‘n’ floss installations, displayed as tiny fragments of faith in the power of the reformability of art but also as self parody of this very notion. Most crucially, perhaps, in politics, nations followed their leaders into wars of ‘absolute necessity’ with a total lack of conviction in the reasoning behind this necessity. What the decade demanded from its musicians, artists and politicians was to declare their loyalty to a particular historical narrative without actually believing in its everlasting power.

Against this background, we can understand the temptation to follow the apparent conviction presented by such promoters of sexual chastity as the Jonas Brothers and the *Twilight* book and film series. The reassertion of orthodoxy offered the only opportunity for teenage kicks within an all too tolerant social sphere governed by relativism and ruled by the children of the sixties. However, as Slavoj Žižek rightly observed in his book *On Belief*, these manifestations of religiosity, cropping up alongside a host of moral majority campaigns including the passing of Proposition 8 banning gay marriage in California, undermined their own fundamentalism in their concern with external immorality: “The difference between the authentic fundamentalists and the perverted Moral Majority fundamentalists is that the first (like the Amish in the United States) get along very well with their American neighbors since they are simply centered on their own world and not bothered by what goes on out there among ‘them,’ while the Moral Majority fundamentalist is always haunted by the ambiguous attitude of horror/envy with regard to the unspeakable pleasures in which the sinners engage”. This plays out most clearly in the film *Twilight* in the contrast between the ridiculous campness of the production and the conservative message it is meant to convey. The sparkly, high-cheekboned vampire is contextualized by an all-American, baseball-playing, undead family, while his enemies are represented by a black man, a woman and a long-haired hippy. The protagonists’ sexual restraint is contrasted with the promiscuity of the surrounding teenage society. Only by constructing an artificial wall of supernatural prohibition can the teenager, like the vampires she consorts with, be resurrected as a cultural figure of rebellion, yet disco-glam permissiveness shines through the cracks, like diamond-dog skin on a sunny day.

The decade also provided us with another way of wrapping the confusing liberal relativism with a metaphysical layer. The resurgence of ecology as a mainstream political issue led many to replace irresolvable human truths with another kind of universal truth—that of the world of objects. All of humanity could thus be addressed as a single entity whose bio-politics, according to Giorgio Agamben, could be managed like any other resource by governments. But from this ultimate anti-positivist, anti-modern position that sees human capacity as equal to the creativity and agency of objects (à la Bruno Latour), a new universal faith, a new common good has perhaps been born, rerouting the slightly lost and battered ship of global Capitalism towards new horizons of an eternal tomorrow. New coasts need to be discovered in the fog of our battered future for new looters to colonize.



re-jection of complex immediate realities for deferred utopias. Instead of a unified model of social good, postmodernism presented a plurality of partial contentions. The problem was that while postmodernism aptly described the gaps, voids and uncertainties that emerged in the space between old convictions and the present, operating within these negative spaces turned out to be quite difficult.