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## The Persistence of the American Myth: (Re)visions in Art and Visual Culture

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## **The Persistence of the American Myth: (Re)visions in Art and Visual Culture**

### **Abstract**

The paper concerns the condition of selected aspects of American mythology in contemporary (from the 1960s till today) art and visual culture. Using specific examples and referring to theorists of American culture such as Sacvan Bercovitch, I argue that, despite varied strategies of appropriation and deconstructive critique of American ideals of freedom, equality and the country's special role in the world, epitomized in the notion of American exceptionalism, the basic structure of the myth, due to its inextricable connection with American history, still persists as an important platform of action and a frame of reference. I analyze a selection of works referring to the Stars and Stripes, the Western film genre as well as the architecture of the post-9/11 World Trade Center, which both reveal the underlying structure of the myth, denaturalizing it, and a strong, continued attachment to it in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century United States.

**Key words:** American myth, American art, visual culture, appropriation, ideology

The notion of the American myth and its cultural construction is familiar and blurry, so ubiquitous and disseminated in culture that it became difficult to grasp as an object of precise analysis. Its longevity, enduring relevance and the special kind of attachment to it among Americans of different political factions originated from the fact of being both the underpinning of the construction of American national identity, crucial in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the United States was forming its geopolitical shape, and of American global imperialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Founded on the notion of "American exceptionalism," introduced by Alexis de Tocqueville, with its defining democratic and egalitarian values, it received its diverse concretizations and iterations in the form of both specific economic and political policies and cultural production in literature, film and other visual arts. The last aspect will become of special interest here. If, as the American musician and song-writer Gill Scott-Heron sang "the revolution will not be televised," the American myth, in its diverse concretizations, has been, indeed, televised – not just appearing on TV but visualized at a distance, disseminated across the US borders, in the form of painting, prints, photographs and finally film and television to be accepted as an attractive narrative carrying certain values and history, gaining global prominence by fantasmatically colonializing minds of masses, including non-Americans. As a result, the American myth can be generally viewed as a kind of an

effective, “protective” screen which combines image and what is believed to be reality, unifies different cultural and political interests, neutralizes differential tensions, historical inconsistencies and failures, providing national unity. While Philip Rahv is generally right that “Myth is reassuring in its stability, whereas history is that powerhouse of change which destroys custom and tradition in producing the future” and “the craze for myth is a fear of history” (Rahv 6, 46), in America the relation between myth, history – and the resulting ideology – seems to be more complex: myth originated from the complex feeling of mission and imperialistic ambitions, but also fear of lack of history, it was built into the historical progressivism and the creation of the United States and thus it seems almost organically, more than anywhere else, bound to it. Hence, myth is not just grafted on history, neither does it feed on history nor “deprives the object of which it speaks of all History” as Barthes contends about “the myth on the right” (Barthes 152), but itself being historical effectively blurs the boundaries between itself and American history.<sup>1</sup> In consequence, the myth became the constitutive element of American history, as much as the Baudrillardian hyperreal constitutes the American reality. However, that does not mean that through the deconstructive uncovering of its mechanism, it cannot be neutralized or successfully discredited.

Perhaps the most important aspect of American mythology, especially since the development of technologies of reproduction in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and mass media in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was its visuality, easily feeding on the mixture of reality and fantasy, which constitute all myths. Originally, predominantly located in representations of American landscape as a natural resource and the source of dialectics of the sublime and progress, then in the modernity of American metropolis, and condensed in national symbols such as representations of Columbia or the Stars and Stripes, the American myth of exceptionalism has long grown with and overgrown historical reality at the same time. As a result, despite increased criticism of the United States’ politics, both by Americans and foreigners, the myth persists and there is a particularly strong attachment to the structural framework of its collective, formative aspects – clearly visible in visual arts. As a result an “imagined community” (cf. Anderson) is created – a community of individuals under the umbrella of one nation. This particular unity is, however, a semiotic construction, “imagined” but visually and discursively active to conceal the play of difference, otherness or social inequality.

The American myth as ideology in its diverse manifestations has been subject to a radical critique by the Left since the 1960s, concurrent with civil rights movements and postcolonial discourses re-evaluating the exclusionary, hegemonic system of power and exclusion. Numerous artists, especially representatives of the subaltern groups such as African Americans and Native Americans, in their practices did not try to erase or substitute for symbols of mythologized Americanism but started to work from within

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<sup>1</sup> Barthes regards mythology as a dialectical coordination of particular sciences: “a part both of semiology inasmuch as it is a formal science, and of ideology inasmuch as it is an historical science: it studies ideas-in-form” (111). Hence, myth can be seen from diverse perspectives and reveal itself in a variety of forms: as an element of ideology, its instrument and sometimes its symptom. I claim that its deprivation or “naturalization” of history, indicative of bourgeois ideology, in America is more historical than anywhere else – American history grows with its myths.

the already existing structural matrix in a gesture of critical quotation or appropriation. Here the gesture of appropriation does reveal the structure of history underlying the mythic simplification/naturalization, but it does not really allow for detachment from the dominant symbolic language of America (its imperial and pervasive character also fits in the conceptual framework of the Lacanian symbolic order or the Law). It may only revise it, introducing differential element of otherness, unacknowledged, but always already virtually being there. This working from within the structure was in fact a condition revealing the umbilical cord that connects Americans (but also non-Americans who live in the Americanized culture) to the myth and ideologies it supports: they are a part of it, both inside and outside – a situation which reminds one the structure of fantasmatic projection wherein one is both its object and subject. Due to the conditions mentioned above, the American myth as an element of ideology is perhaps the most resistant to complete deconstruction, erasure or even alternative, as it is able, as Sacvan Bercovitch claims, to embrace dissent. In his view, American “Ideology arises out of historical circumstances, and then re-presents these, rhetorically and conceptually, as though they were natural, universal, inevitable, and right.” “For all its manifold contradictions,” he argues, “it is an example par excellence of the successful interaction between restriction and release.” It “transmutes history into symbols that may deceive and entrap [...] but that also [...] may open new vistas of thought and action in history” (335–336). His view is contentious as it assumes no escape from the all-embracing ideology a symptom of which is the myth; my argument here is not so far-reaching but rather points to the continued interest and investment of many contemporary artists in the visual-discursive sphere of American reality woven of the mythic material of the imaginary and the symbolic. This is not to say that ideology as a more general term for the American myth has not undergone radical criticism and subversion: after Hiroshima, Vietnam, Watergate, global capitalism epitomized by the US politics, which then generated terrorist backlash, the attachment to the myth as a unifying structure of reference became less tenable, revealing America as a utopian construction, which is, nonetheless, still standing.

But the American myth does not only concern Americans. Due to global expansion of American culture as a result of its hegemonic role in what Henry Luce called in 1941 “the American century,” facilitated by technological developments, the resulting extension of individual and social body, announced by Marshall McLuhan, it touched upon and became a part of the global imagination (cf. McLuhan). As Rob Kroes notes, “America as a national entity may extend from sea to shining sea, yet as we also know it projects an image of itself far beyond its national borders. People anywhere in the world can meaningfully connect themselves to inner constructs of what America represents and means to them” (143). This generates the above-mentioned fantasmatic connection, an umbilical cord of fantasy, of being and acting out there and watching themselves from the distance – a solipsistic position of a collapse of object and subject.<sup>2</sup> Attempts at deconstructing the American myth coming from non-American artists, such as the German filmmaker Wim Wenders or video artist Julian Rosenfeldt, may be

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2 The idea of “umbilical cord of fantasy” is taken from Borch-Jacobsen (44–5).

more effective due to their resistance to identity-related issues, both their attachment to the “purely” symbolic construction of America and detachment of their own position.

Below I will not be able to exhaust the above-mentioned issues or give a full list of exemplary works. Instead, by selectively looking at diverse visual objects, from paintings, films and videos to an instance of an architectural project, I will try to offer a general framework for analyzing contemporary art and visual culture in terms of the American myth as a fertile ground for re-thinking the complexity of American history, issues of identity and democracy.<sup>3</sup>

The most potent symbol and condensation of the mythologized, only wished-for unity and equality of the multiple is the US flag, physically embodying “some kind of spiritual essence of the USA” (Kemp 235). The banner consists of 13 stripes signifying 13 initial colonies that became states, and ultimately 50 stars, added throughout more than 150 years to signify the number of states of the growing empire. Since the mid-1950s, it has been an object of numerous critical re-visions. Artists – in particular those belonging to racial and social minorities – took the structure of the flag as a field of differential, subversive actions. The reworking of the flag was started by Jasper Johns who, in his 1954–5 painting *Flag* and its later iterations, inquired into the semiotic status of Stars and Stripes as an image, and symbol.<sup>4</sup> Johns’ move, directly or not, triggered officially suppressed inscriptions or spectral appearances of darker sides and pitfalls of American democracy against the national banner. African American artist Faith Ringgold, inspired by the Black Arts Movement, in her *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* (1969) inscribed the phrase “Die Nigger” into the structure of the flag, revealing the historical spectres haunting it as a metonymy of the American Dream. In *Injustice Case* (1970), another African American artist David Hammons used the outer margin of the flag, looking as if someone cut out its interior, to frame a spectral imprint of himself, tied to a chair and gagged, which was in fact to vicariously represent one of the Black Panthers’ leader, Bobby Seale who was unjustly sentenced for his conspiracy in Chicago in 1970. The flag functions here both as literal frame and boundary and a frame of reference, implying limitation and oppression. In 1990, the same artist substituted white elements of the flag with black ones and the blue background of the canton with green colour – creating African American flag. Instead of undermining the overall structure, he revealed the suppressed racial – colour-founded, so to say – difference. A more explicit work – *We the People* – was made by 1971 Wayne Eagleboy a Native American, who constructed a flag painted on a buffalo skin, framed with fur, with two Indians in canton behind a barbed wire. For one thing, the material support of the flag epitomizes the bloody sacrifice of the buffalo and native tribes – a price, and a condition, for the American empire and the possibility of the American dream. Native Americans had to be overpowered and decimated but their colonized stereotype was indispensable for the romantic myth, voided of historical truth, serving with their otherness for the successful construction of the colonial master. They survived

3 The article outlines general premises of a larger, book-length study of contemporary “life” of the American myth in art and visual culture.

4 For a discussion of American flag in art see Rubin or Boime.

– but behind the rusty barbed wire of democracy, equality and self-reliance. Among numerous iterations of the banner for the past fifty years, a more contemporary issue was raised by Will Varner in his image *Surveillance* (2010): white stripes became blinds, behind which we notice a person observing, and stars turned into surveillance cameras. I interpret this image as a manifestation of invigilation and infringement of privacy in America but also of the fact that the flag is not only an object but also the subject of the gaze. It implies the American, national gaze, objectifying and defining the viewer, probing his/her “Americanness” or America-related attitude. The Americans keep on being defined by such active, visually powerful manifestations of a still active myth.

A discursive version of such an interpellation was created in 1991 by Barbara Kruger, who treated the flag similarly to Ringgold, as a field of inscription – a palimpsest which should be written over and over – with a statement questions addressing the viewer/reader, in the second person, bearing overtones which can be interpreted, knowing the artist’s preferred perspective, feminist but also more generally – revisionist: “Look for the moment when pride becomes contempt” in the canton and a series of unanswered questions, the answer to which undermines the tight structure of the myth, such as: “Who is free to choose?,” “Who is beyond the law?” “Who speaks?,” “Who is silenced?”

In all the above selected examples, the American flag undergoes the process of demythification, critical deconstruction; it is cracked open to discourses of the subaltern, officially quelled by the necessity of unified structure. However, if we follow Bercovitch, these are not the acts of destruction or erasure; they stay within a certain horizon of American ideology of democracy, which presupposes such subversions, keeps it alive as a frame of reference to be remodelled but not gotten rid of.

The sphere of constant reference as America-in-the-making, a space and instantly legible signifier of freedom, self-reliance and entrepreneurship has always been American nature, especially the landscape of the West with its western-genre protagonists and narratives. Western myth was lived and simultaneously constructed in 19<sup>th</sup>-century painting (by such artists as Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Moran and, at the turn of the century Frederic Remington), photography, prints, literature, and later in motion pictures. As Maurizia Natali notes, the diverse sceneries of western landscape appearing on screen have never been simply innocuous background for adventure or transcendental rumination, but they bear memory-traces of the ideology of Manifest Destiny, a conviction justifying western expansion that the American nation was destined to spread civilization and progress in the new continent (cf. Natali 91–124)<sup>5</sup>. This concerns not only the Western but also many road movies such as *Vanishing Point* or *Thelma and Louise*. The landscape and the iconology of the American West is a medium of cultural memory, spectrally present, suppressed history – landscape becomes a sphere of conflict on which one of the national myths are built. While the West, the frontier, and landscape remain a source of mythology, a fantasmatic escape, for instance famously used for commercial purposes by Philip Morris in Marlboro cigarettes and in

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5 I discuss this issue in more detail in “Re-emergencies of American Landscape in Art and Visual Culture of 20th and 21st Century” (2013).

the 1980s deconstructed in Richard Prince's re-photographs (*Untitled, Cowboy* series), the historical underbelly of the myth of the frontier is a history of imperial colonization, violence and homicide, which rears its ugly head in contemporary politics of the US, especially visible under George Bush administration.

An early radical re-vision of the Western genre, contemporaneous with Jasper Johns' flag paintings, was *Cowboy and 'Indian' Film* (1954) by American artist Raphael Montañez Ortiz. He used an Anthony Mann's *Winchester* (1950) film tape, which he chopped to fragments with a tomahawk and put into an Indian medicine bag so that all the fragments got mixed together. Afterwards he took them randomly out and re-edited the film. The whole process of the film is multidimensional. First, it relates to shamanic, Native American rituals, which can be interpreted as re-enchantment or exorcising the imagery and narrative appropriated and manipulated by mainstream American culture. However, because Ortiz's origins are mixed (Puerto Rican, Mexican, Spanish, and Portuguese), and he is not Native American, the ritual he performs is something he appropriates from indigenous people too. He acts for their sake, against the mainstream, mythologized understanding of American historical and social stratification, being in somehow similar, but not identical, situation. Nonetheless the message is broader than the difficult American past in the theatre of western plains. The result is not purification of the image of nature and history, getting to the rock bottom of the "truth," because he realizes this cannot be done and the past cannot be undone. Instead, in a double gesture, not only does he use the ritualistic aspect in the process, but he appropriates the appropriated (image of nature drenched with history), working on a material twice (or more) removed. What happens is a series of procedures from appropriation, destruction and ritual performance, to de-construction, understood as ideological critique. The final effect of the performed attempt at exorcising the Hollywood-ridden historical perception of the US history of the western conquest is rupture and fragmentation, disturbing the filmic narrative in terms of script and visuality. Moreover, some of the frames are literally edited upside down, which de-sutures the imaginary fusion between the film and the spectators, distancing them, disturbing the immersive power of cinema and revealing its constructedness. But this is not just an early take on a deconstructive analysis of Hollywood movies and their ideological function at the time of Cold War politics, through both leveling the rugged texture of history for Americans and exporting this image globally. The new film reflects on the fragmentariness of memory or even on the ruin of traumatic history, which is, anyway, always already mediated and impossible to be adequately and fully represented. The result is Benjaminian, melancholic ruin, twice removed, a ruin of representation, rather than an actual object, wherein the filmic fragments, liberated from the framework of coherent narrative, act as allegorical traces of the difficult past.

More recently, the genre of the Western, with American landscape as its fundamental element, was pointedly analyzed recently by Julian Rosenfeldt in his film *American Night* (2009). The German artist wanted "to make an analysis of the way the US political attitude today is still connected to the grounding myth of America." The work is a five-screen video installation which seamlessly combines the ideological tenets of the mythological West with contemporary US politics. Rosenfeldt notices the currency of

certain attitudes, rhetoric and values which were produced and coagulated in American society through the myth of the American West – a paragon of Americanness and – quite truly – a geopolitical sphere of the making of the United States. In one of the screens, we see an African American cowboy slowly traversing American land. His racial identity, even though historically not unusual, is the first mark of the differential character of the video, going against the grain of the typical Western movie, whose main cowboy protagonist is almost always a white man. A black cowboy can in fact be interpreted here as an indicative of the change resulting from the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama. The main American political protagonist took place of George W. Bush, whose rhetoric and attitude has often been compared to the “Western” type or cowboy. However, the politics has not changed its course too dramatically. At the end of the screen-episode, the cowboy unexpectedly (for the spectator) reaches the shore of the ocean – a motif which does not appear in Western movies because it was critical for what propelled life in the West – the frontier. The end of frontier, the liminal element of American nation in progress, means the end of conquest and of the process of crystallization of American identity, two elements combined by Frederick Jackson Turner in his famous 1893 frontier hypothesis. While the frontier, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, connoted the urgency of imperial intervention, reaching the shore of the ocean might mean the necessity of putting an end to it. However, it may also suggest the exact opposite: exterritorial extension of the frontier far beyond the administrative borders of the US into the Middle East and the revitalization of the Western mythology, in line with the current politics. If so, the frontier would no longer be a line or a band on the margin of a legal, physical territory, but a virtual, flexible rhizomatic structure of multi-sensory, global communication and distribution of power and capital. The most concrete effect of that situation are military interventions – somewhat less so global economy and entertainment business, the least so idiosyncratic, private fantasies of America. All these feed on the resurrected myths of special mission in the first case, land of opportunity and wealth in the second and paradise-like land of freedom in the latter. Thus the frontier did not close nor disappear – but it gradually changed its ontology and dynamics, making America much larger than itself.

Another screen represents the American, much criticized, military involvement in the Middle East. A modern, military troop resembling the ones which invaded Iraq lands their helicopter and attacks a desolate, 19<sup>th</sup>-century ghost-town. The attack is outside the United States but also *inside* America understood as a dense tissue of American myths crystallizing in images, narratives and iconic types of places. The Western scenario creates a channel for new conquests, internalizing them historically – in such a case it really is an intervention whose goal is to protect the ephemeral, larger than itself America. This seemingly simple strategy of pastiche used by Rosenfeldt does not only consist in juggling clichés: it also shows that the battles American soldiers fight are both real and imaginary (virtual) iterations of scenarios, often vicariously witnessed in the cinema, which actually happened in the past, and lie buried deep down, under thick discursive and visual layers of history.

The next part of *American Night* concentrates on the discursive and rhetorical continuity between the past and the present: we see a group of cowboys camping next to

a fire, conversing with one another. After a while their chatter becomes a patchwork of quotes, enounced – or sometimes rapped, from contemporary politicians and celebrities. After a while the discourse, in a circular manner, returns to a familiar Western-style chat. Such a looping reveals the continuity and collapse of historical difference in the underlying structure of the rhetoric. This discursive thread of this video-installation is continued on another, fourth screen, where we watch an interior of a saloon, with a travelling puppet show, featuring Obama and Bush-like characters driving a conestoga cart. Rosenfeldt ends this part of *American Night* with a meta-gesture of revealing the filmic infrastructure of the film: interior as a set, filled with a director, cameramen, actors and extras doing their job. Finally, the last (even though the sequence of reading is up to the individual spectator) screen is a close-up of a familiar type of a pioneer woman in front of a log cabin, looking out for her man. In the final take, the camera moves away and the wall of the cabin, which turns out to be only a wall set on dolly, moves away on tracks from the woman, revealing a vast panorama of American-type landscape.

This seemingly classic postmodern strategy is not just a game of quoting, and a worn-out platitude about the constructedness of reality and history, but it can be read as a demonstration of the currency of certain visual tropes deeply embedded in American mythology, re-emerging in contemporary situation, woven of the symbolic and the imaginary. Consequently, through his work, Rosenfeldt seems to argue that the threads of 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideology vested in myth can be anachronistically discovered in today's politics and its rhetoric – an attachment which should not be completely dismissed or destroyed but rather unpacked and dealt with.

Finally, I will briefly discuss the case of architectural discourse on the aftermath of 9/11, an event which Jean Baudrillard called “our primal scene” that “radicalized the relation of the image to reality” (26–27). This radicalization is founded on the fact that the physical attack and its consequences also hit the bedrock of the American imaginary, in an unprecedented way cutting open the tightly woven protective screen of fantasy and (hyper)reality, which had to be experienced as real.<sup>6</sup> The immediate consequence that cannot be described here in detail, was an outburst of visually manifested patriotism – an “imagined community” embodied: millions of flags and national symbols, in private and public spaces, on display and for sale, at least for a period of time united different factions regardless of politics, race and gender – a momentary reinforcement of the myth of social unity beyond usual divisions. A more lasting symptom of the attachment to American values structuring the imperial myth, though, was the discussion concerning the architectural project for Ground Zero and the new World Trade Center as a replacement for the Twin Towers – the American icon of global rapacious capitalism and since the early 1970s the most prominent element of the Manhattan skyline. The resulting project (first Libeskind's master plan, then delegated to different architects) revealed reluctance (a missed opportunity?) to change the course of ideological and imperial thinking. It was first demonstrated by the highly symbolic,

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6 I agree with Mieke Bal who considers “fantasy as a particular part of reality, not its counterpart, and similarly as attached to signs, not a flight from them.” In America, due to reasons I mentioned earlier, this connection of reality with fantasy is felt stronger than anywhere else. See Bal (75).

expressly resuscitating the American myth, Libeskind's project, including 1776-foot-high Freedom Tower, formally in dialogue with the nearby Statue of Liberty. The obvious reference to the Declaration of Independence combined with the welcoming symbol of American freedom were to symbolically strengthen the basic but never fully introduced in practice values underpinning the myth of America. Later, Libeskind's project was abandoned in favour of a design by David Childs, which seemed more practical and suiting the interests of the developer Larry Silvestrin. As a result, the reductive visually "heavy" architecture of the main WTC building, renamed One WTC, may resemble a stronghold-like tower. Despite the 9/11 memorial at the foot of the One WTC, which successfully activates the work of memory and feeling of loss for the on-site visitors, from a distance, as a part of the Lower Manhattan panorama, the Childs building, though not as iconic yet, seems to be a matching substitute for the Twin Towers as symbols of economic and political power.<sup>7</sup> Instead of a more deconstructive approach which would address the post-9/11 situation of America and replace the stern symbolic of the Twin Towers, so prominent in the New York skyline (a symbolic gate to America) – a position exemplified by Peter Eisenman's and to some extent, as Richard Meier's projects presented as alternatives – the rhetoric of the building testifies to the ongoing strong persistence of the imperial foundations of America, rather than the reflection on its possible reconfiguration.<sup>8</sup> It seems that the space for ideological critique, even in Bercovitch's terms, a critique internalized by ideology, would only be possible where it does not come into the global purview and does not disturb the basic structure of the myth and the *image* of America, on the one hand, seen from the outside by foreigners and on the other serving many Americans as a mirror of their own identity (in fact it seems impossible to be completely "outside" America, not being virtually enfolded by its suggestive visuality). The Manhattan skyline has functioned since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as an object of desire and, for many, the first image of the American dream becoming reality – or successfully merging it with what had always been a fantasy. Thus, like the rim of the flag, no matter what happens within its boundaries, its contour must remain strong.

In this paper, discussing selected works of art and issues in visual culture, but by no means exhausting the subject, I have attempted to demonstrate the complex status of the American myth and – rather than erasure or destruction as a result of being under a constant attack since the 1960s – its continued relevance – for better or for worse – in its relation to history and *as* history. The iconic imagery – the American flag as the metonymy of ideal America, the landscape and narratives of the West, or the image of Lower Manhattan, became a kind of material and conceptual support used by artists for, most often critical, transformation. Despite the profound cultural and political critique and deconstruction, being a target of diverse differential (or even

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7 For an exhaustive discussion of the World Trade Center and the construction in Ground Zero, see Smith. I discuss this issue in terms of transformations of Lower Manhattan panorama as an image in "Nowy Jork jako obraz. Wizualno-dyskursywne transformacje widoku Dolnego Manhattanu" (2014).

8 For a critique of One WTC and the advantage of other projects, see Lundborg.

violent) strategies and agendas de-mystifying and denaturalizing the American myth, its symbolic structure, persists as a framework for action, an inalienable point of reference and a language, used both when glorifying – and criticizing America.

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