

Introduction: New Zealand/Aotearoa 2011 – Politics, Disaster, Spectacle

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This special issue takes a snapshot of New Zealand in the year 2011. It engages with some significant events that are representative of the broader milieus clustered around the proper names “New Zealand” and “Aotearoa”. To be sure, this snapshot is incomplete. It would be impossible to capture this manifold in its totality. We thus take these events as particular instances of a more general, dynamic social and political terrain. This terrain emerges in the form of overlapping, but by no means congruent, instances across the articles presented here. The complex processes of neoliberalism are a case in point. The term emerges in several of the articles, understood as a complex and dynamic configuration of ideology, government policy, everyday practices, and mechanisms of policing and control.

2011 was a year in which New Zealand, broadly understood here as a signifier which designates particular social, economic, and cultural subjects, re-elected a National Party government, feverishly worked to utilize the Rugby World Cup to refine and strengthen its global image, and grappled with an on-going natural disaster. This special issue draws a range of articles together to situate these events in broader social and cultural contexts. The assembled articles engage with the epistemic power-politics of contemporary public life in 2011, and draw attention to the role of the media in articulating the events that produce our understanding of, and location, within this contemporary moment.

The articles address the following questions: How were these listed events constructed in the media? What does this construction tell us about the State and other institutions in relation to Aotearoa’s peoples? What do these events and their media constructions tell us about power, knowledge, subjugation, and subject formation? How do they relate to the biopolitical operations of the state? How do they engender or close down politics? What is the relationship between these events and their construction to the operations of global capital?

The special issue is divided into three clusters of articles, taking up politics, the Rugby World Cup, and the Christchurch earthquake respectively. The first two articles, by Sean Phelan, and then Vijay Devadas and Brett Nicholls, engage with the question of politics. Phelan’s timely article, “Neoliberalism, media and the return of Brash”, explores the news media’s construction of the politician, Don Brash, and his take over of New Zealand’s ACT party. He contends that this reporting obscures the processes of neoliberalization. Against a simplified view of neoliberalism, and the contrasting view that we now live in post-neoliberal, post-ideological times, he shows how the news media’s construction of Brash as a blatant and doctrinaire neoliberal, as the other of the so called balanced neoliberal view, obfuscates

actually existing politics. Apposite Phelan's critique, Devadas and Nicholls, in "The meaning of John Key", argue that Prime Minister Key's high profile media image straddles a productive contradiction. They contend that Key's image oscillates between the figure of the everyman and the figure of the financial elite, with each figure working as an alibi for the other. However, the upshot of this oscillation is that Key is able to function as a cipher for, what they see as, the one-dimensional code of hegemonic neoliberal capitalism.

The second cluster engages with the Rugby World Cup. Anne Begg's "Stadium of four million" uncovers the "neoliberal nation-branding" processes at work here. She contends that the event co-opts the affective good will of citizens and directs this toward a particular New Zealand national identity. This identity, she maintains, slavishly conforms to the profit-making machinery of global branding and media conglomerates. In a similar manner, Damion Sturm and Geoff Lealand, in "Evoking 'New Zealandness': representations of nationalism during the (New Zealand) 2011 Rugby World Cup", stage the Rugby World Cup event as a nation-building exercise. They contend that media reportage (re)produced myths of New Zealandness, and expressed nostalgia for a past 'Kiwī' culture. However, this nostalgia, they maintain, remains contradictory and empty. Rather than mark a collective desire for past traditions, which have been subject to the forces of global capital, nostalgia works to enable the smooth alliance of corporate capital with national culture.

The third cluster engages with the Christchurch earthquake. Kevin Fisher's provocative article, "The Canterbury Earthquakes and the Production of Reality in *When a City Falls*", takes issue with 'shock doctrine' responses to the rebuilding of post-earthquake Christchurch. He draws upon Baudrillard's controversial claim that the confrontation provoked by disasters is not between the hyperreal and the real, but between the hyperreal (characterized by the coded exchange of signs) and symbolic exchange. The upshot of this position is the view that the politics of any given situation is never understood until the construction of the situation itself, via the production of signs, is grappled with and challenged. For Fisher, Gerard Smyth's documentary film, *When a City Falls*, is just such a take on Christchurch that fails to see sign production itself as constituting the depiction of taken-for-granted social realities. In contrast, in "Upheaval: seismic, social and media mash-ups after the Christchurch earthquakes", Terry Austrin and John Farnsworth point to the complexities of understanding the disruptive impact of the quake upon city life. They contend that understanding the aftermath requires multiple perspectives and methods for mapping the numerous and intersecting lines of force and flight (to use the language of Deleuze and Guattari). As such their take on *When a City Falls* is at odds with Fisher's. They see the film as a contemporary form of city symphony, after Vertov, and maintain that the film occasions multiple responses. As such the film is partial and unfinished, and works, as they contend, in an oligoptic rather than panoptic form. Chris Russill's "Earth observing media and environmental crisis: New Zealand 2011" unpacks responses to the earthquake in terms of a broader logic of environmental crisis. He traces the connections between the development of solar radiation crisis, and subsequent sunsmart campaign, to the development of earth observing satellites that have been crucial for mapping the terrain in Christchurch. For Russill, this technological incursion, which shapes how the disaster is understood and responded to, raises the broader question of how political responses might take place. Technology is not innocent. To what extent does data generation override political processes? And Bronwyn Beatty's "The media event: the future of television in New

Zealand” underscores how an opportunistic news media incorporates the Christchurch disaster as a means for brand building and generating cultural authority.

The final article in this issue points back to the Queen Street riot of 1984. Tony Mitchell’s “One black Friday: another look at the Queen Street riot”, traces the cultural milieu in Auckland at the time – racial and social tensions, music and counter culture – and argues that the riot erupted, for the most part, in response to widespread aggressive policing. The article serves as a useful reminder of a past event around which a set of tensions emerge, and which remain very much entrenched within New Zealand society today.

Our reviews section includes reviews of Jim Marbrook’s documentary film, *Mental Notes*, Jan Bieringa’s documentary film, *Te Hono Ki Aotearoa*, Mathurin Molgat’s documentary film, *Song of the Kauri*, and the recently published book, *Scooped: the politics of journalism in Aotearoa New Zealand*, edited by Martin Hirst, Sean Phelan, and Verica Rupar.

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