

# From Shock and Awe to Aw Shucks

## On the Use and Abuse of Amazement

by Michael Larkin

WHEN

*U.S. missiles began hailing onto Iraq* in late March, and media “embeds” helpfully informed us that early barrages were designed to induce “shock and awe,” the phrase was repeated so often by lip-glossed and hair-dyed news anchors that its ho-hum delivery became an increasingly faint echo of the destruction actually being wrought by the weapons themselves. There was a kind of entropy at work: empty verbal dumb bombs employed as stand-ins for very real smart ones. For all the novelty of war as it played out in staccato, real-time video phone imagery on our TVs, I couldn’t help feeling that I’d heard this kind of disconnection from language before. Many times. It didn’t take long to place it.

Start with an actor appearing on a talk show. The actor, a hot new “it” person of the moment, is asked what it was like to work with this acclaimed director or that veteran actor. It doesn’t matter whether the actor is couch-sitting on *Oprah* or *Entertainment Tonight* or *Charlie Rose* or *Conan* or *Dave* or *Jay*: said acclaimed director or veteran actor was “amazing” and the experience of working with each was “unbelievable.” This interview, in only slightly altered form, repeats again and again in the mouths of different celebrities, following a rhythm we’ve come to recognize. Further along the cable continuum, a retired general, acting as a military analyst on FoxNews, calls the force of the American military brought to bear against the Iraqis “unbelievable”; he says this with some enthusiasm, acting like the color commentator the channel’s employed him to be, but one can assume that he believes in few things as wholeheartedly as he does our military’s might. On MTV, a sunglassed host interviewing Spring Breakers in Miami Beach discovers that all are in agreement: The assembled, contrived bacchanalia is “unbelievable,” it is “amazing,” it is “off the hook.” This despite the fact that everyone and his frat brother is getting exactly the thong-laced time he expected (or less) because he’s been seeing it on MTV for years.

We have, in short, ceased to be amazed at all, because we claim to be amazed all of the time. If you’re happy and you know it, you’re amazed. If you’re happy and you know it, you’re unbelievable. If you’re happy and you know it or you just don’t care to show it, if you’re happy and confused as hell, clap your hands. The sound it will make is shocking and off the hook.

The use of these terms has come to be as reflexive and absent of meaning as the polite call and response of “How are you?” and “Fine,” a construction that everyone but the most crotchety or overly honest among us uses almost every day. We don’t *really* want to know, most of us, but it’s polite to ask. Similarly, we’ve been deadened by our lifestyles, by TV, by press kit paeans and book jacket blurbs, by force of rote verbal imitation, to the point where we wouldn’t know amazement until it came up and bit us on the ass. Not wanting to be bitten on the ass, we continue to express our amazement at things we’d rather not define more carefully for fear of what adjectives might really apply.

“How is your Denver Omelette?”

“Unbelievable.”

“How are those nail clippers working out for you?”

“Amazing.”

“How’s your life?”

“—”

It’s not just the folks on TV who do it, though the klieg lights certainly help generate and amplify the impulse; it’s the everyday people—your friends and neighbors... and you. This is not merely some idiot other; this is idiot us. This is idiot me doing it, maybe in response to my dog choosing to drop and roll, for the umpteenth time, in some invisible poop scent left behind on the pavement.

Unbelievable.

Nothing new under the American colloquial sun? Perhaps. A large group within my generation, coming of age as we did in the 1970s and ’80s, tended towards the overuse of “awesome” and “rad” as our chosen superlatives. Rad(ical) we were not. (Jeff Spicoli’s “No way!” and Moon Unit Zappa’s “Omigod” were variants on the theme.) We trained in the employment of this argot as teens, and when it came to seem beneath our dignity for use in every other sentence—too many of us sounding like Valley girls and boys; at some point, we had to stop constantly referring to each other as “dude”—we largely left it behind. However, the damage was done: We were prepared to announce

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our amazement without being amazed in the least.

Where did this all begin? Perhaps we’ve always been this way, expressing some kind of sunny, facile, American brand of enthusiasm. Perhaps it’s the post-World War II American Century that has ushered in our unbridled, unqualified amazement at our country’s ascendancy, amazement perpetuated and spread en masse, first by radio, then by TV, then by the Internet, where every burp now merits mention. Maybe the hepcats had it right with their coinage of “cool”: *This thing you are expressing to us is something we like and approve of, but there’s no need to get too worked up about it.* The problem with this stance is that if cool becomes the *modus operandi* and one never heats up, then we have evolutions that lead us to awesome/rad and amazing/unbelievable, et al., being little more than the cool of the current day. It’s “whatever” as zeitgeist: I’m fine, you’re fine.

This isn’t a prescriptivist argument for the correct use of the English language as delivered by a curmudgeonly maven of proper usage, a la William Safire. (“Safire used to write speeches for Richard Nixon? Amazing.”) At least not entirely. The language evolves, even if it sometimes does so in ways that make our command of our native tongue less full than we would like. So be it. Viva la evolución. This argument is more about marking a laziness of mind, a *laissez faire* attitude toward really pinpointing how we feel about something, about what the implications of a word can signal to us or about us; it’s

an argument about when a word becomes more associated with its connotation than its denotation, and the connotation is apathy. Because if we’ve lost this capacity to care about the particularity of language—too bombarded by the banality or the frights of everyday life, the need to return to normal and get back to the mall for an upgrade to our PlayStations—then we’ve lost our capacity to recognize our language’s effects, and, ultimately, our affects on each other.

Whatever, dude.

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek addressed some of this phenomenon in his post-9-11 essay and his subsequent book of the same title, “Welcome to the Desert of the Real!” (Fans of *The Matrix* will recognize the title as a line of dialogue from Laurence Fishburne’s character, Morpheus. Remember when that movie’s special effects amazed us?) Žižek notes how we experienced a genuine moment of surprise and disbelief when the towers came crashing down in New York. We also experienced a degree of wish fulfillment at the spectacle, faced as we were with a more immediate and visceral example of the countless variants of *Armageddon* and *Towering Inferno* we’d entertained ourselves with on film for years. As Žižek puts it, “The unthinkable which happened was thus the object of fantasy: in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and this was the greatest surprise.” It was the word, and the image, made flesh. For a while, we were shaken out of our daze, our refusal to see the unbelievable and amazing atrocities endured by the world outside our own, atrocities sometimes fostered by our own absent-minded consumption. Our capacity for amazement, in one of its most horrible denotations (detonations?), was restored for awhile, particularly for New Yorkers. But that moment passed quickly for most of us, replaced by a background of further numbing tension, and with that moment’s passing our capacity for amazement and disbelief—in both its most wonderful and awful iterations—was replaced by our desire to have those terms mean nothing again.

Similarly, within only a couple of weeks after the main phase of Gulf War II ended, “shock and awe” became something other than a military wet dream. To name just two examples: Was it any surprise when a radio spot for SleepTrain asserted that shoppers would be in “shock and awe” at its low low prices on mattresses or when an article in *Sports Illustrated* used the same terms to characterize the power of modern major league hitters? Destruction and anxiety transformed into adjectives for consumption and entertainment: It was the American Way writ large... and deep. This was not the shock and awe of singed corpses locked in rigor mortis atop the sand; instead, it was the equivalent of a child’s vacant, hypnotized gaze

as she stares at a computer screen. Point and click, dear, and don't think about it too much.

There are genuine, and tragic, uses of such terms that still exist, occasions where we can see and feel their meanings played out in the real world. When the father of one of the first American servicemen to be killed in Iraq learned of his child's death, the cameras were there to capture the man's enraged disbelief as he yelled and waved a picture of his handsome son. *Look at what you've taken from me, Mr. Bush.* It made for compelling video. He was there the next morning on the *Today* show, subdued, sitting in a kind of blank shock as Katie Couric awkwardly and gently asked him what he was thinking, what he was feeling about his son's death. The contrast between the two images—the man's anger and disbelief one day followed by a zombie-like flatness the next—reminded us what “shock and awe” might really mean, what it might look like, what the blowback of the military's phraseology could be.

We could believe the reporters on the ground, perhaps, in Basra and Nasiriya and Baghdad, as they repeated the amazement of combat and shared a few Pentagon-approved images with the rest of us. They were, after all, in the thick of it, witnessing mass destruction, American-style, maybe blown away by the firepower and technology of weaponry, if not by the technology that was beaming the images back home. But by virtue of how the images got to us, by virtue of the fact that they were *images*—whether of a mourning man or a bleeding soldier—we could separate the real amazement we were being told about from the unreal amazement we'd more typically come to embrace, largely nullifying whatever freight the reporting carried.

It seems we have taken Coleridge's willing suspension of disbelief and turned it into a nearly perpetual state of being, rather than a frame of mind to take into a Shakespearean comedy. Somewhere along the line, we pulled up the curtain and forgot to put it down once in a while, forgot to return to the natural world we all inhabit; the vocabulary merely followed as a reflection of our jaded, desensitized selves. Or, if you like, the phone was taken off the hook and too rarely put back into its cradle to await the next call. In the meantime, we're content to anticipate the next personal tragedy, the next terrorist act, perhaps looking forward to seeing them as thrillers at the cineplex, where actors can overpraise each other's work in polite terms and we can forget what horrors inspired the films in the first place.

Has the whole world become so unbearably believable, so unamazing, that we have to use those words constantly to convince ourselves otherwise? Maybe when you're faced with needing to keep up with the Botoxers, the fake boobs, the prettier-than-you, burlier-than-you, bigger-dicked-than-you types out there who will

go on to successes you're sure you'll never achieve; maybe when you're faced with movie reviewers for whom superlatives are a guarantee of future employ and free movie screenings; maybe when you're faced with the reportage of ugliness the world over while you're free to walk the streets, curse, shop and shake your ass at will, the world is amazing and unbelievable, and telling yourself anything different would just be too much to take.

The “shock and awe,” though surely meant in earnest by the military minds who first dreamt it, became something else once their media syringe plunged it into the mainstream, embedding the phrase within the lexicon. The words lost their context. We had other, more immediate things, real and unreal, to deal with: a traffic jam caused by bicycling protesters, maybe, or the new 50 Cent video featuring the rapper's hard body softened by some pre-fame bullet holes. Maybe a few of us spotted the unbelievable gold of a newly bloomed daisy in a junk yard and stood for a brief moment in genuine amazement at the natural world's resilience in the midst of garbage. If we were lucky, someone was with us, maybe a child for whom every discovery is filled with pleased surprises (a reminder of where we've come from), and we could use “amazing” in one way that it should be used: as an immediacy of wonder. More likely, the military media's tag line hit our veins and we felt its jolt for a few microseconds—the blip of recognition that each word was a death sentence for someone else—before the repetition of “shock and awe” became part of the unbelievable rush of blood, the amazing words ultimately failing to jar us at all. ●●●

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