



Images in the aftermath of trauma: Responding to September 11th

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Abstract

An event such as the attack on Manhattan on September 11th 2001 is socially, culturally and politically traumatizing. Those who saw the attack (in person or through media coverage) emphasized its visual impact. Faced with such visual trauma, it is unsurprising that the aftermath of the attacks had a *representational* dimension, as individuals and institutions strove to suture the resulting wound through image making. This article investigates the legacy of visual trauma *after* September 11th in the difficult interim years when disaster is no longer part of the immediate past. I focus on two texts (the Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, or *9/11 Report*, and a short film by the Mexican director, Alejandro González Iñárritu), each of which displays in different ways the effects of the trauma of witnessing disaster. The aim is to raise questions about the legacy of traumatic events for the legal and cultural responses which follow in their wake, and to that extent the article thinks through the demands of witnessing trauma, the ethical challenges for the cinematic documentation of a traumatic event, and the limits upon judgment in the aftermath of disaster.

Key words

disaster; image; ethics; judgment; trauma

INTRODUCTION

New York has always imagined itself, has always made itself into an image, and in the aftermath of September 11th the city continued this practice, with memorial images immediately flooding the city: messages on walls, stencils on sidewalks, the 'Portraits in Grief' printed each day in the *New York Times* – thumbnail sketches of the missing and the dead.¹ Such a drive to *imagine* loss is consonant with a crucial aspect of the event: that those who saw the attack (in person or through media coverage) emphasized its visual

impact (the *sight* of the planes' collision with the towers, the towers' devastating collapse, and the later sense of a hole or wound in the skyline of the city) (see Young, 2005). Faced with such visual trauma, it is unsurprising that the aftermath of the attacks had a representational dimension, as individuals and institutions strove to suture the resulting wound through image making. That cultural and political responses to September 11th were immediately characterized by a drive to *memorialize* has been noted by others (Edkins, 2003; Young, 2005; see also Figures 1 and 2). But less remarked is a different type of response: representations produced not in the immediate pain of loss but in the difficult interim space of the succeeding years – a time of 'present pasts' (Huysen, 2003), whose imagery is the product of a struggle between memory and amnesia, between trauma and its resolution.

Trauma (from Greek) means wound; its connection with sudden physical injury derives from medicine, but has been extended by psychoanalysis and psychiatry to cover

[A] blow to the tissues of the body – or more frequently now, to the tissues of the mind – that results in injury or some other disturbance. Something alien breaks in on you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defense. It invades you, takes you over, becomes a dominating feature of your interior landscape ... and in the process threatens to drain you and leave you empty ... Above all, trauma involves a continual reliving of some wounding experience in daydreams and nightmares, flashbacks and hallucinations, and in a compulsive seeking out of similar circumstances ... (Erikson, 1996: 183–4)

One year after the event, 20 per cent of those living within a 2-km radius of the World Trade Center were said to be suffering Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a 200 per cent increase, affecting around 422,000 individuals. As Young-Bruehl (2003) comments: '[On September 11th] many thousands of people were traumatized, at all degrees of intensity, and to degrees of transience or permanence that we will not know about for a long time' (p. 9). Since September 11th, PTSD has manifested sometimes in acute and dramatic form: one journalist had reported from Ground Zero in the immediate aftermath and then volunteered at the site. Months after returning to work, 'she simply fell apart', and committed suicide (Franklin, 2002). For others, trauma has been experienced in simple, unavoidable bodily acts. For many months, the dust of pulverized buildings, jet fuel, asbestos, and body parts caused the air in the city to smell appalling: thus the very act of breathing became a source of anxiety and stress for thousands (Bird, 2003). Looking at the irrevocably altered New York skyline produced for one writer a pain that was a 'gnawing thing that brings you to tears at unexpected times' (McCourt, 2002: 2). Others claimed that they had managed to overcome the trauma of the event, but would experience revisitations of distress many months afterwards:

For many, it happens on the nicest sort of days, those mornings when the sky is clear and a bold sun defies the season. On days like that, you'll step outside and the radiant blue dome above becomes a torment. It was that way on September 11, you recall, and there is no way to stop the images and the anger flooding back. (Thomson, 2002: 4)



FIGURE 1 Memorial messages and photographs on hoardings erected at Ground Zero

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FIGURE 2 Memorial, Union Square subway station, New York City

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The individual experiences trauma as drowning in the liquid force of representation: having 'seen too much' on September 11, a series of commonplace images (a clear sky, a bold sun) acts as triggers for the resurgence of psychic pain. In seeking to think through the ways in which trauma reverberates through legal and cultural responses to September 11th, my reading of the interim space of trauma's 'present past' draws from trauma theory generally (LaCapra, 1994, 2000; Erikson, 1996; Van Alphen, 1997; Farrell, 1998; Edkins, 2003) but is particularly indebted to the work of Caruth (1995, 1996), Felman (2002) and Bennett (2005). Cathy Caruth's (1995) work has shown how 'to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event' (pp. 4–5). She further states that the 'insistent reenactments' associated with

this singular possession by the past ... does not simply serve as testimony to an event but may also, paradoxically enough, bear witness to a past that was never fully experienced as it occurred. Trauma, that is, does not simply serve as a record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned. (p. 151, emphasis in original)

Yet, as Felman (2002) notes, the traumatic event 'registers a belated impact: it becomes precisely *haunting*, tends to historically return and to repeat itself in practice and in act,

to the precise extent that it remains *un-owned* and unavailable to knowledge and to consciousness' (p. 174, emphasis in original). Just as Farrell (1998) posits that late 20th-century culture can only be understood through the prism of traumatic affect, so Felman (2002) argues that 'trauma – individual as well as social – is the basic underlying reality of the law' (p. 172) and 'an essential dimension of historical experience' (p. 173), with an implicit human and ethical dimension 'tightly related to the question of justice' (p. 174). Jill Bennett (2005) takes up these insights in the realm of visual art, arguing that

An imagery of trauma or loss registers something of the dynamic – or 'grammar' – of pain itself. Such imagery might thereby be understood as putting us in touch ... with the force of trauma as this inhabits space, both external and internal to the body. This is not to suggest that the trauma of loss can be disembodied and given over to those who are not its primary subjects but rather that its embodiment in art orchestrates a set of transactions between bodies. (pp. 49–50)

This article takes up those insights in order to trace the effects of September 11th as a traumatic event now playing out in law and culture. It takes up two textual examples in which are inscribed the effects and affect of loss. Each of these texts displays in different ways the effects of the trauma of witnessing disaster, of looking and living on, and of making representations in the wake of an unimaginable event. My aim is both to analyse the contours and consequences of these two texts and also to raise questions about the legacy of traumatic events for the legal and cultural responses which follow in their wake. To that extent, then, this article seeks to raise questions about the demands of witnessing trauma, the ethical challenges for the cinematic documentation of a traumatic event, and the limits upon judgment in the aftermath of disaster.

The first text is the *9/11 Report*, the Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (also known as the 9/11 Commission) (2004), a massive document arising out of a public inquiry whose terms of reference were to review the effectiveness of all agencies which had been required to respond to the attacks of September 11th. My second example is a short film by Alejandro González Iñárritu, which formed part of the portmanteau collection, *11'09"01*, produced by Alain Brigand.² Both attempt to document the attacks; both attempt to 'work through' the suffering caused by the events. Both rest upon a singular authenticity: they each draw upon the recorded sounds and images of the attacks. And both reveal the difficulties and implications of making images in the aftermath of trauma, as they continue to oscillate between overwhelming loss (and the consequent need to represent absence) and the impact of what was seen and heard (and the compulsion to show, over and over, the nature of that experience).

'A DAY OF UNPRECEDENTED SHOCK AND SUFFERING'

Fourteen months after the attacks of September 11th, the United States Congress established the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, also known as the 9/11 Commission. Its remit was

to investigate facts and circumstances relating to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, including those relating to intelligence agencies, law enforcement agencies, diplomacy, immigration issues and border control, the flow of assets to terrorist organizations, commercial aviation, the role of congressional oversight and resource allocation, and other areas deemed relevant by the Commission. (National Commission, 2004: xv)

The Commission's resulting *9/11 Report* (2004) was designed to determine the location of 'fault lines within our government' (p. xvi). To this extent, the *9/11 Report* arises out of the process of judgment, a juridical interrogation of facts, the hearing of testimony, and the determination of fault. Where legal judgment depends primarily upon notions of precedent and analogy, the Report, however, is constructed on the edge of an abyss: the narration of an event beyond experience and analogy. As the Commission states in its preface, 'September 11, 2001, was a day of *unprecedented* shock and suffering in the history of the United States' (p. xv, emphasis added), a traumatic event, therefore, giving rise to great anxiety about judgment and the assignation of blame.

Its ambivalence about judgment is so pronounced that the *Report* retreats from the assignment of responsibility at almost every point where it might arise. The Commission (2004) presages this at the outset, stating that 'our aim has not been to assign individual blame' (p. xvi). Actual criticisms are few, even at points where there would seem to be a clear connection between first responders' actions and the deaths of individuals in the towers and on the planes. Direct criticism is made of the Federal Aviation Authority (FAA), whose staff had told the Commission that it was not their responsibility to tell airlines what to tell pilots regarding security crises on the planes. To that, the *Report* retorts, 'We believe such statements do not reflect an adequate appreciation of the FAA's responsibility for the safety and security of civil aviation' (p. 11), but this is a comment which still fails to *directly* castigate any party for its actions during the attacks. The Commission sought to justify its reluctance to assign blame by explicitly evoking hindsight: 'we write with the benefit and the handicap of hindsight' (p. 339). Hindsight, the acuity gained through retrospection, is an essential part of the process of judgment, but here is viewed as a dangerous facility to be used with caution lest it distort the narration of the event. Hindsight is in fact a *limit upon judgment*: 'we asked ourselves, before we judged others, whether the insights that seem apparent now really would have been meaningful at the time' (p. 339). At the same time, however, the Commission deploys hindsight in the form of an unblinking retrospective gaze which seeks to detail the unfolding of the attacks: in beginning its account of the events in New York, the *Report* states, 'we are mindful of the unfair perspective afforded by hindsight. *Nevertheless, we will try to describe what happened* in the following 102 minutes' (p. 285, emphasis added).

In further demonstration of its refusal to lay blame, these attacks are even at one point characterized by the *Report* as a lightning strike: 'no analytical work foresaw the lightning that could connect the thundercloud to the ground' (p. 277), thus constructing the attacks as an act of God which comes out of the blue with devastating effects. In such a metaphor, the attacks are a weather event, a cataclysmic force of nature. And although it is a commonplace that thunderclouds can lead to lightning, the thundercloud that was

the Al-Qaeda plot is somehow different, resistant to any analysis, unable to have been predicted or prevented: *unprecedented*.

In my reading of the *Report*, I want here to analyse not so much its substantive findings, but rather its struggle to represent the traumatic event of September 11th itself. What is striking about the *Report* is the way in which it engages in a paradox: the trauma of September 11th is held at bay for the Commission by its detailed recounting of the event, just as the response to a wound can be the desire to probe it, to pick at its scab, to reopen it. The *9/11 Report* does not just return to the wound that is September 11, it *inhabits* that wound, oscillating between judgment and narration, prescription and description.

In its narration, the genre of the *Report* is that of the thriller or mystery. Chapter 1 is a fiercely immediate account of the hijacks with a strong emphasis on the experiences of the passengers on the planes. The *Report* includes many quotations from transcribed phone calls. The names of passengers and flight attendants are given, as are the names of relatives that they had called. The passengers are characters, with identities, families, emotions, rather than statistics in a tally of loss. Every factual detail known about the planes is given in the *Report*, and given with a precise clock time for its occurrence. Thus, the chapter begins by locating the event in calendar time and in meteorological detail:

Tuesday, September 11, 2001, dawned temperate and nearly cloudless in the eastern United States. Millions of men and women readied themselves for work. Some made their way to the Twin Towers, the signature structures of the World Trade Center complex in New York City. Others went to Arlington, Virginia, to the Pentagon. Across the Potomac River, the United States Congress was back in session. At the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, people began to line up for a White House tour. In Sarasota, Florida, President George W. Bush went for an early morning run.

For those heading to an airport, weather conditions could not have been better for a safe and pleasant journey. Among the travelers were Mohammed Atta and Abdul Aziz al Omari, who arrived at the airport in Portland, Maine. (National Commission, 2004: 1)

This opening is both folkloric and cinematic, giving the now notorious date both specificity and fabled timelessness. It deploys a convention well known in the establishment of a cinematic narrative – that of showing key protagonists going about their usual activities or locations in a state of equilibrium or tranquility (with such normality or tranquility poised on the verge of disruption).

Having created a sense of ordinary life about to meet with disaster, the *Report* goes on to detail the seemingly insignificant but retrospectively crucial moments in which disaster was almost averted. For example, with the hijackers Atta and Omari about to board planes in Portland, the *Report* then relates how Atta was selected for extra screening by a computer program, the first of several of the hijackers to be singled out in this way. The text suggests that a security measure might actually ensure security, only to confound that possibility in its next sentence: 'the only consequence of Atta's selection ... was that his checked bags were held off the plane until it was confirmed that he had boarded the aircraft. This did not hinder Atta's plans' (p. 1). From the very first page, then, the *Report* sets up the attacks as both inevitable and as always already subject to human intervention.

Security checks become 'turning points', moments when the narration could have moved in a different direction. Disaster ultimately arises because the *potential* of these turning points was not realized.

The opening chapter constitutes a meticulous reconstruction of the events on each plane, derived from aircraft radio messages, mobile phone calls from passengers, and communications between air traffic controllers and other agents. After this intensely detailed narration of the entire event as it unfolded within the hijacked planes, the *Report* then swerves backwards in time with five chapters detailing the history both of the role of Osama Bin Laden and counter-terrorism measures in the West. These five chapters constitute a prolonged anachronic deviation in the narrative sequence, which both suspends the suspensefulness of Chapter 1 and also intensifies it, by withholding the details of the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. After this lengthy hiatus, Chapters 7 and 8's narration of the recent prehistory accelerates the story, as it rushes towards its apex, an acceleration denoted by the chapters' titles: 'The Attack Looms' and 'The System Was Blinking Red' (taken from a comment made by the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency), evocative both of B-movies and pulp crime fiction.

At this point, the *Report* reverts to the dual tone which characterized Chapter 1, that of dreadful longing for a different outcome. Just as the *Report* commenced its narration of the hijacks with the recounting of successive missed opportunities to stop the hijackers boarding (through ineffective screening procedures), so the narration of the collision of the planes with their targets is preceded by a statement which sets up the sense of yet another turning-point whose potential was never realized:

'The system was blinking red' during the summer of 2001. Officials were alerted around the world. Many were doing everything they possibly could to respond to the threats.

Yet no-one working on these late leads ... connected the case in his or her in-box to the threat reports agitating senior officials and being briefed to the President. Thus ... no one looked at the bigger picture; no analytical work foresaw the lightning that could connect the thundercloud to the ground.

We see little evidence that the progress of the plot was disturbed by any government action ... Time ran out. (National Commission, 2004: 277)

The *Report* then returns to the present tense of the attacks, and a lengthy detailing, as close to minute-by-minute as it can manage, of their unfolding in New York and Washington, DC. Entitled 'Heroism and Honor', it is imbued with melancholy. Where the opening chapter commanded the affect of the thriller and its concomitant sense of emergency, Chapter 9 pretends no urgency. The planes are in the air, their destinations are now a *fait accompli*. And a dread suspense is sustained throughout the chapter by means of the detailing of the experiences of individuals within the Towers: for example, we hear of individuals who had continued to work at their desks and whose evacuation was thus substantially delayed; the reader is not told whether these people escaped before the building's collapse: 'Most civilians ... began evacuating without waiting for instructions over the intercom system. Some remained to wait for help, as advised by 911 operators. Others simply continued to work ...' (National Commission, 2004: 287).

Throughout the *Report*, the notion of the unprecedented nature of the attack is mirrored by repeated statements as to its utter *unimaginability*. In fact, a whole section of Chapter 11 ('Foresight – and Hindsight') is devoted to what the National Commission (2004) identifies as one of four key failures in relation to the attacks: a failure 'in imagination' (p. 339). In this section, the *Report* sketches governmental security policy which might have approached awareness – but did not – of the type of attack that would eventuate. In one example, Richard Clarke, of the National Security Council, gave testimony to the Commission that he had been concerned about the security danger posed by aircraft in the context of the Olympic Games in Atlanta in 1996; however, he 'attributed this awareness more to Tom Clancy novels than to warnings from the intelligence community' (p. 347). And it is notable that, consistent with the Commission's refusal to assign blame, it withholds any agentic subject from the listed failures ('we believe the 9/11 attacks revealed four kinds of failure: in imagination, policy, capabilities and management' (p. 339)), that is, they are failures *which simply exist*; they are not failures *by* any particular individual, agency or government.

Comments as to the unimaginability of the event feature prominently in Chapter 9, when the Commission finds itself assessing the actions of the emergency service providers after the planes struck the towers. Edkins (2004) notes that 'it is already hard to remember how unimaginable [the manner of] the attack was before it happened' (p. 250). And the lapse of some few years has not reduced the scale of the leap required to encompass the event's occurrence – although it is hard to recall how unimaginable the attacks were, we have not forgotten the fact of their unimaginability. Indeed, for the 9/11 Commission, the reiteration of that fact causes profound tension in the *Report's* desire to narrate without judgment; first, because that unimaginability means that the *Report* is continually telling the story of something outside invention and narration; second, because that unimaginability functions as an important alibi in the investigation of fault (if it was unimaginable, the attacks could not have been planned for, predicted or prevented).

This quality of the event's utter unimaginability hangs over much of the *Report's* narrative. While emergency services personnel were in some ways able to grasp the *nature* of the disaster (assessing rapidly, for example, that it would be impossible to put out the fire and deciding instead that a rescue mission for civilians was the only option), its scale turned out to be beyond their ready reckoning. As the *Report* relates:

In the 17-minute period between 8:46 and 9:03 a.m. on September 11, New York City and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey had mobilized the largest rescue operation in the city's history. Well over a thousand first responders had been deployed, an evacuation had begun, and the critical decision that the fire could not be fought had been made.

Then the second plane hit. (National Commission, 2004: 293)

Again, the Commission refuses any possibility of assigning fault in relation to operational decisions at the World Trade Center on the day, evoking the unimaginability of the disaster as rationale for all actions undertaken. For example, in one of the most striking instances of bad advice provided during the disaster, after the first plane had hit the North Tower and before the second plane's collision with the South Tower, an announcement was

made over the public-address system in the South Tower, telling individuals that the problem was confined to the other building and that they should return to or remain in their offices. Upon hearing the announcement, many individuals remained in place on higher floors, and others who had begun to descend the stairs 'reversed their evacuation and went back up' (p. 289).

Unable to question the person who made the announcement (he died in the South Tower's collapse), the Commission comments that 'clearly ... the prospect of another plane hitting the second building was beyond the contemplation of anyone giving advice' (p. 288), a view endorsed by one of the fire chiefs who stated that such an eventuality was 'beyond our consciousness' (p. 289). And later, although such consciousness had already been ripped through by not one but two planes flying into the World Trade Center, the idea that the towers might not withstand the impact of a jet airliner was also outside conscious thought; in the *Report's* words, 'No one anticipated the possibility of a total collapse' (p. 291).

Thus not only were the attacks events which in their execution transcended the ability of existing security procedures to detect and prevent them, they were also events which existed outside of consciousness even as they occurred, their unimaginability rendering them wholly surreal at every moment of their unfolding. The attacks are related as both inevitable and preventable; capable now of being known in all their substance (hence the painstaking recounting of all details) and yet still 'beyond consciousness' – a move which underscores the *Report's* uneasiness about judgment in the wake of trauma.

The *9/11 Report*, then, is both constituted and structured throughout by means of a series of ambivalences. It is an inquiry designed to assess 'fault lines', yet it refuses the assignation of responsibility, characterizing the attacks as akin to an 'act of God', and as beyond imagination. It seeks to limit hindsight, yet is driven to look backwards, fascinated by the sight of the unimaginable event inching ever closer into actuality. It must recount an event already completed, yet cannot shake the conviction that the ending might still be otherwise. It foregrounds its dual dependency upon judgment and narration, and shows the unbearable consequences of both in the representation of unresolved trauma. And, within its hundreds of pages, it is possible to trace the trauma which in fact animates the text: the very notion of unimaginability brings home the idea that the United States government and security services were not, in fact, secure. The trauma of September 11, for the 9/11 Commission, is located not just on the calendar date, but in those months preceding it, in which 'no analytical work foresaw the lightning'. The recognition that governance was not under control, that the United States were not secure, that forthcoming events were 'beyond imagination' demarcates a primal scene in which foresight is lacking and all that will remain in the future are the melancholic judgments of hindsight.

BLINDED BY THE LIGHT

Where an absence of vision constitutes the paralysing primal scene of the *9/11 Report*, a different crisis animates a cinematic response to the events of September 11. The Mexican filmmaker Alejandro González Iñárritu (Figure 3) had made a series of still photographs

in the days after September 11, which he called 'Blinded By The Light'. The series was refused publication, for being out of step with the spirit of the times. Iñárritu describes these as photographs

*that were banned by an American magazine because they were too politically incorrect for that moment. I felt angry, frustrated, disappointed. I was only trying to point out the dangers, injustices and tragic consequences of what was going on in Afghanistan because of the strange nationalism that has been reborn in this country.*³

The experience of these photographs being withheld from publication informs the short film that Iñárritu went on to make for the French film producer, Alain Brigand, who in 2002 commissioned 11 filmmakers, each from a different country, to direct a short film in response to the events of September 11.

Iñárritu's film in part develops and derives from a *criminology of the image*, in which legitimacy can be both awarded to and withheld from an image. However, what interests me here is not a question of censorship; rather, Iñárritu's vanished photographs constitute an image of absence underlying the ways in which the relations between sound, image and editing (which usually work seamlessly together as the *kinesis* of cinema) will foreground the possibility of an ethical response to the demands of witnessing catastrophe.



FIGURE 3 Alejandro González Iñárritu

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The films, and the project as a whole, were imagined as a cinematic 'reflection ... responding to images with other images'.⁴ The project has met with some fierce criticism, and, to date, it has not been released for distribution in the United States – the source of the most vehement condemnations of it. The film magazine *Variety*, for instance, called it 'stridently anti-American' (quoted in Dixon, 2004: 118). For many, the very notion of the project seemed objectionable; for others, it was Iñárritu's contribution which was singled out for criticism. One critic commented that 'the callowness of youth doesn't excuse (though it probably explains) [the] unremitting monstrosity' and 'hideous self-conceit' of Iñárritu's film (Matthews, 2003). And I recall watching *The Movie Show*, on SBS television in Australia, when its presenters described Iñárritu's film as 'indefensible'. They gave no details as to its format or content, instead simply shaking their heads with pursed lips, as though words failed them. It left me with the impression that Iñárritu's film was somehow 'beyond the pale'; a sense which was, as I was to discover when I saw *11'09"01* in the cinema shortly afterwards, strangely appropriate.⁵

Iñárritu's film begins with a darkened screen. There is no moving image, just a black screen against which is overlaid the sound of voices speaking indistinctly, repetitively. For a time it might almost seem as though something has broken down – cinema is the art of the moving image in light, and a film whose image is dark and unchanging seems to be a failure of cinema, evidence only of the disappearance of the image. This image of absence is accompanied by the sound of voices belonging to the Chamulas Indians of Chiapas, Mexico; they are chanting a prayer for the dead. Faint musical sounds underscore their voices, the jittering notes create an atmosphere of anxiety against the dark screen. Suddenly, the viewer's suspension before the darkened screen is interrupted by the flash of an image, which is on screen for the briefest of instants. It is a shot that cuts through the darkness, returns an image to the dark screen and just as quickly removes it again. The viewer registers more the flash of its presence and a sense of motion than any content. The flashes increase in duration; the content becomes discernible: they are images of people falling or jumping from the towers of the World Trade Center.

Paralleling the duration of the flashes is the soundscape. Iñárritu used 'found sound', segments from recordings and media broadcasts on the day (in Vietnam, South Africa, Poland, Portugal, Italy, France, Germany, and Canada), incorporating hundreds of them into the film, to aurally regenerate the event and compress it into only a few minutes of cinematic time. For the audience, this soundscape repeats and accelerates the experience of those at the time who watched, looked, witnessed. Such accelerated repetitions have the character of trauma, dwelling on and in a memory without resolution or respite.

The event is primarily narrated through these found sound segments. We hear a radio announcer read the weather forecast, whose 'really a splendid September day' is repeated several times, just before the roar of the first plane comes in overhead. From that point, the soundtrack jostles with exclamations of shock and utter dismay, as screams compete with journalists' attempts to describe the sight of the World Trade Center. The falling bodies return, now no longer flashes but shown for an increasing duration until the announcement of the towers' collapse is related against a black screen, whereupon five different consecutive shots of the falling are shown with great deliberation, and the sound increases in volume until it is a massive rumble – chaotic, impenetrable, deafening. Silence

suddenly cuts into the noise, punctured by two visual sequences. First one tower falls; then the next. The bright sunlit daylight is shocking after the black screen. The towers' descent seems both astonishingly fast yet at the same time in slow motion, in contrast to the preceding flashes. The chanting voices of the Indians return against a black screen, but the black slowly dissolves into the palest green which in turn becomes white, and the Indians' voices merge with orchestral string music. Written text emerges out of this white screen, in Arabic and then in English, asking, 'Does God's light guide us or blind us?' (the question obviously recalling the title of the series of photographs taken by Iñárritu and refused publication). Two dazzling white lines of light eclipse the screen; the music swells to a climax, and leaves only the voices in prayer, which are cut as the screen returns to black with the end of the film.

Iñárritu's film constitutes a deeply disturbing viewing experience. My experience of watching the film in a cinema is as memorable to me as the film itself; I can well recall the sensations of physical stress that I felt while watching it. With the screen an enormous darkened rectangle, my eyes felt under huge strain, longing for something to look at, but each lighting flash of image produced a painful visual jolt. And the film's alternating blackness of screen and shocking images of the moments just before death heightened the film's sounds. To the extent that cinematic spectatorship involves an entire phenomenological raft of effects, for me, Iñárritu's film is a sensorium of sonic and visual trauma.

Its impact arises out of a tension between two opposing structural tropes within it: on the one hand, the cohesion derived from its compression and acceleration of the narration of the event, and, on the other hand, the effects of its dislocation of the traditional cinematic unity of sound and image. First of all, although deeply unconventional in many ways, Iñárritu's film retains a strong narrative structure, progressing through the before-during-and-after of the event, and deploying the Indians' prayer, the orchestral music and the progression from black screen to white as a means of generating a redemptive narrative for the viewer. Iñárritu has stated that his intention was to allow people 'to experience catharsis', and his desire for it to constitute a 'tribute' implies that he anticipated the film would provide some kind of memorial or solace after trauma.

Certainly, the film builds up an extraordinary amount of tension, which is somewhat dissipated by the end of the 11 minutes. But as a viewing experience it remains an unsettling one, thanks to its other structural trope, which pulls against the cohesiveness generated by the film's retelling of the attacks, that is, its reconfiguration of sound, image and editing. For many viewers, undoubtedly the flashing images will be what they remember most vividly. That was certainly my memory of first viewing the film. However, when I saw it again, I realized that I had made myself forget the film's sounds, and their overwhelming affective impact. And the images of the falling were *still* dreadful to me. So perhaps it is better to state that Iñárritu's film foregrounds the dual dependency of the viewer upon cinema as a sound-image and excises the one from the other so that each runs riot within the cinematic text. And it is no coincidence that the images used by Iñárritu are the ones which were, like Iñárritu's own, quickly withheld from circulation in the media.

Iñárritu's film takes some of these repressed images and uses them to respond to the viewer's desire for something to look at, when faced with the darkness. It is as if he is saying, 'You want to see? See this'. And these repressed images flash onto the screen disarticulated from the event's soundscape. For example, the falling images start to appear before the planes hit the towers, and to that extent constitute visual premonitions of aural experiences yet to come. Further, we hear the roar of the towers' collapse before they are shown falling as images, thus returning as traumatic visual repetitions of what has already occurred. Sounds occur within the film detached from any image at all. The images of the towers falling play out in silence.

Such a dislocation of sound and image results in a destabilized viewing position. The viewer is located at the moment of the disaster and experiences it as trauma. As Iñárritu stated, his intention was 'to put myself and the audience in the shoes of those who were inside those buildings, waiting for the unpredictable'. Located *within* the crime scene, *within* the buildings, the images of the falling address the spectator as the one who waits (*to see what happens*), and as the one who falls. Iñárritu's primal scene, in which his photographs disappeared from the public sphere, returns as cinematic lacerations which draw blood in the eye of the spectator, and crack the screen separating her from the disaster and from the pain of the suffering other.

AFTERMATH IMAGES

The experiences of reading the *9/11 Report* and of watching Iñárritu's film are profoundly unsettling ones. And yet, perhaps this is the result of more than the effects of the textual mechanisms structuring these images – perhaps it is the effect of the catastrophic event that is being represented. The spectators to that event found it to be relentlessly destabilizing: witnesses reported being unable to believe that what they saw was actually happening, or finding that the only way to make sense of what was happening was to compare the real horror of what they saw to the manufactured cinematic horrors they had consumed as entertainment (in movies such as *Godzilla*, *Independence Day*, *Die Hard* and *The Towering Inferno*). One eyewitness said of her reactions to the first tower's collapse, 'King Kong could swing from the remaining tower and I wouldn't be surprised. It's like a bad movie, I keep repeating. I struggle with this cliché but can draw on nothing else in my experience to define what is happening' (Walker, 2002: 6–7). One film critic wrote of the event:

The fireball of impact was so precisely as it should be, and the breaking waves of dust that barrelled down the avenues were so absurdly recognizable – we have tasted them so frequently in other forms, such as water, flame, and Godzilla's foot – that only those close enough to breathe the foulness into their lungs could truly measure the darkening day for what it was. (Lane, 2001: 79)

As Žižek (2002) comments on the recourse to cinematic referents, 'this is what the captivating effect of the collapse of the WTC was: an image, a semblance, an "effect", which, at the same time, delivered "the thing itself"' (p. 19). This notion should not be understood as an endorsement of the oft-repeated claim that September 11 saw the

intrusion of reality into the culturally shuttered lives of Americans. Such a claim appears in statements such as 'last Tuesday's monstrous dose of reality' (Sontag, 2001: 32). Rather, the imaginary burst through the screen of reality. Žižek (2002) puts it thus:

We should therefore invert the standard reading according to which the WTC explosions were the intrusion of the Real which shattered our illusory Sphere: quite the reverse – it was before the WTC collapse that we lived in our reality, perceiving Third World horrors as something which was not actually part of our social reality, as something which existed (for us) as a spectral apparition on the (TV) screen – and what happened on September 11 was that this fantasmatic screen apparition entered our reality. (p. 16)

Ironically, saying that it was 'just like a movie' (that is, like the product of someone's imagination) functioned as an effective way of indicating the phenomenal incredibility of the event. Many claimed that the event had a special status because it could not be contained within the conventional categories of representation. While that claim is unsustainable, what drives it is a desire to register the event as *trauma*. Certainly the notion that it was now possible to be injured by *watching* had passed into public discourse without much query – as had the sense that the world had irrevocably changed, that a momentous historical event had occurred before our very eyes, that we had all been eyewitnesses to history. There is of course a sense of ethical demand involved in witnessing – the demand that the witness interpret what she sees. Such an interpretation makes history, faces up to the question of what sense history will make of what has been seen and of what actions have been taken by the witness, the one who has seen.

The trauma of witnessing the attacks of September 11th and its resulting ethical demand has produced two very different responses in the *9/11 Report* and Iñárritu's film. For the *Report*, trauma subsists in the awful realization that national security had become insecure, and that a plot exceeding the imagination of an American government had spiralled towards catastrophe. Such a trauma focuses upon the loss of control; the *Report* seizes the opportunity to assert retrospective representational control over the event by constructing an integrated narrative, a recounting which allocates place, time and consequence to all its component elements.

In pursuit of this end, the *Report* makes use of two interconnected devices. One is the trope of *metaphysical reconstruction*, which compels it not just to come up with an account of the event but to narrate its infinite minutiae, thereby offering an authentic fullness of experience in its representation of the attacks. The other device can be called the *retrospective immediate*, and it governs the narrative tense of the account. In the time of an aftermath, trauma subsists not just in the experience of the attacks in all their scope, but also in the replacement of the immediacy of suffering with an interim period which presages a later future. Confronted with the finality of the rupture which separates the 'now' (post-9/11) from the past (pre-9/11), the retrospective immediate tense seeks to undo the post-9/11 present in order to return to the pre-9/11 past, at the same time as it asserts the need to remember 9/11 in order to hold at bay any future which might not apprehend the depth of the event's trauma. Thus, although the *Report* acknowledges the existence of the event in past time, its recounting is driven by a desire to be in the past moment, to make the past congruent with the here and now. As such, the text is driven

to live on in the event, so that its present tense occupies the space both of the past and of the future.

In contrast, Iñárritu's film responds to the trauma of the event by remembering the pain of witnessing it and creating a film which embodies the suffering such witnessing entails. The entire film performs the experience of trauma: through its insistent jolting images, its discordant sounds, its disintegrated narrative, and its dislocation of the catastrophe from an explanatory frame. There is certainly an overarching redemptive purpose to Iñárritu's film. But the film does not seek to efface the politics which led to the attack, to soothe the anxieties about America's international relations, or to bolster our conceptions of community, as the *9/11 Report* does. This difference is manifested most clearly in the way that each text deals with an apparently minor issue: the phone calls made from the towers and the planes. The telephone call is, of course, emblematic of communication and its potential (Ronell, 1989), the call made by one individual to another and the conversation that should result, a metaphor for community in the age of technology.

To a certain extent, the *Report* conforms to this notion: it certainly parlays dozens of phone calls into its text, as experiential flesh on the bones of its imaginings. However, both Iñárritu's film and the *9/11 Report* contain phone calls whose communicative potential is utterly thwarted. As the *Report* relates, in the Towers, some callers could only receive 'engaged' signals; some were prematurely disconnected; still other callers were placed on hold: one individual in the South Tower, who, as he was descending the stairs, called 911 to report an injured person requiring medical attention, described being put on hold three times by operators who insisted they needed to check with their supervisors before they could give advice or take the call (National Commission, 2004: 295). And in the North Tower, 'one group trapped on the 83rd floor pleaded repeatedly to know whether the fire was above or below them, specifically asking if 911 operators had any information from the outside or from the news. The callers were transferred back and forth several times and advised to stay put. Evidence suggests that these callers died' (p. 296).

For the *9/11 Report*, these calls signify mainly as mistakes that occur in an otherwise perfectible system: communication has failed due to a circuit overload or to mechanical problems. Iñárritu's film, however, moves away from communicative failure and towards a moment whereby the film simply witnesses the *possibility* of communication. The soundscape includes three voices, all of them belonging to people who are making phone calls (and apparently leaving messages on answering machines) from the towers or from the planes. One of them belongs to a man who simply says, twice over, 'Michelle?' No one answers him. There is a sound in the background, an inarticulate voice, and he hangs up. It was hearing this man's voice, speaking only this one name, which made me realize that all of these are *unanswered calls*. Michelle – this man's wife, lover, daughter, friend, or sister – is not there to answer or even to hear his call. When she does receive it, when she hears his voice, it will be the voice of someone now dead. Whatever story is contained in those two times he says her name, it is now buried. Watching the film, we share her position. We hear this man's call, but we cannot answer; we hear him too late.

It might seem that these unanswered calls bespeak a far greater absence than the mechanical problems enumerated by the *9/11 Report*. And yet: we hear this man's call

too late in one sense, too late to answer. But does the fact that no one was there to hear his call erase his having made it? His story may now be buried, his voice now halted at the repetition of that one name, but his speaking of those words cannot be undone. To that extent, his call did not fail, and Iñárritu's film places us in the position of coming too late to answer but not too late to *witness* his voice. This, then, is the restorative possibility that recognizes Iñárritu's text as one which moves from the trauma of the event to the pains and potential of response. As Agamben (1995) puts it,

In the withdrawal of the Forgotten from the language of signs and from memory, justice, in fact, is born for man and only for him. It is born, not as a discourse to be passed over in silence or made widespread, but as a voice; not as a testament in one's own hand, but like a heralding gesture or a vocation ... Believing that they are handing on a language, men actually give each other voice; and in speaking, they deliver themselves over without remission to justice. (pp. 79–80)

This article has been about images made in the interim – not in the raw suffering of a recent disaster, but images made later, when trauma has had time to concretize and to settle into its symptoms. These interim images have sought to reimagine the disaster, to record its substance and its affects. And yet, this disaster, which was always a disaster in and of the image, has had the effect of destabilizing the imagination. In attempting to represent the attacks of September 11th, we have made images which rehearse and repeat our fall into the abyss of trauma, and the dislocation of self from image, and the hollow reverberations that continue to be felt. It seems appropriate, then, that the possibility of moving beyond the interim towards a time less haunted by the after-images of disaster is contained in a cinematic moment achieved through the radical dislocation of image from sound, event from narrative, and voice from respondent. Most voices meet with silence, with no respondent or audience. Does that mean their call was not made? Does that mean their words were not given voice? The relation between voice and respondent (between call and answer) is a secondary one, to be struggled over as a question of politics and interpretation. *Giving voice* is the prior question – the ethical condition of the subject in the moment of disaster and the silence which haunts witnesses in disaster's aftermath.

Notes

- 1 These can be seen in photographs taken by on and after September 11 by hundreds of individuals, exhibited in a storefront in SoHo and later published as *here is new york: a democracy of photographs* (George et al., 2002). See my discussion of these and other examples, such as the debates over the redevelopment of Ground Zero and the need for a memorial at the site (Young, 2005).
- 2 *Artificial Eye* (2002). Note that in the United States, where it did not receive a cinematic release, the collection is known as *11'09"01 – September 11*.
- 3 In 'Interview with Director', included in the DVD release of *11'09"01* (*Artificial Eye*, 2002). All subsequent quotations from Iñárritu are taken from this interview.
- 4 Alain Brigand, in the 'Interview with Artistic Producer', included in the DVD release of *11'09"01* (*Artificial Eye*, 2002).

- 5 Note that over the four years since the film's release, audience reactions to Iñárritu's contribution have become more positive. A survey of 'user comments' on the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) shows that Iñárritu's film is frequently mentioned by these non-professional reviewers as the most powerful and affecting segment. One online reviewer, on a different website, categorized Iñárritu's film as one of his favourites and describes its impact on him thus: '[It] hit me like a ton of bricks; I was hardly able to breathe by the end of the segment' (from http://www.moviepie.com/filmfests/11_09_01.htm).

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