

Re-Membering the Terrorist Spectacle: Medial Discourses, the Shaping of History and Collective Cultural Memory in the Wake of 9/11

(near-final version)

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Introduction: The Spectacle of Terrorism

When faced with the unimaginable tragedy of the 9/11 attack and its aftermath, many United States Americans felt vulnerable and unable to process “[t]he terror of this disaster, which literally came bursting out of the blue, the horrible convictions behind this treacherous assault, as well as the stifling depression that set over [New York City]” (Habermas 26). As a result, the United States – and New York City in particular – desperately needed to come to terms with the event and its seemingly inconceivable magnitude.

Processes such as these have long been discussed by psychoanalytic theory and have been described in terms of a progression which has been well explained by theorist Gene Ray. He explains that, the act or event itself is often referred to as the ‘hit’, whereas “the movement after the hit is what psychoanalytic theory calls mourning. Trauma is a category of damage. It marks the limit of conventionalized, assimilable experience” (Ray 1). From the onset, 9/11 was designated as unique and beyond compare, as “the most deadly and destructive terrorist attack *in history*” (*Terrorism 2000/2001*, emphasis added). When the hit becomes too traumatic, or exceeds the individual’s or (in the case of mass disasters) society’s capacity of comprehension, only a break remains. It follows that “the missed encounter and its meanings can only be reconstructed in retrospect” (Ray 1). Although traditional theories of mourning maintain that “what is assimilated is the miss itself” or the break with reality occurring directly after a traumatic incident, this process becomes indelibly confounded in the intertextual context of media and social interconnectedness: a moving from individual grief to “cosmopoliticized mourning” (Ray 132). Ray discusses this transformation under the heading of “politicized mourning”. During this “collective processing of catastrophic history”, the reconstruction of events are shaped by ideology (political or otherwise) and exceed the original break, moving beyond the initial hit to reexamine and, in so doing, rework the underlying processes which make “such history possible” (cf. 132).

Though several thousand New Yorkers experienced the events of 9/11 first hand, the majority of the United States and the world had no direct access to the attack. Instead, they ‘witnessed’ the event through diverse channels: newspaper and magazine articles, and televised images and news broadcasts, which “present[ed] their product as live, local, and up-to-the-minute: part of [the viewer’s] world rather

than an exception to it" (Pinck 55). The tragedy of 9/11 was also marked by a decisive shift in that, perhaps more than any prior attack of its kind, amateurs were able to contribute to the vast corpus of media, with photographic, cell-phone messages and pictures, interviews and other recordings all of which could be published and circulated (via the internet or other means) to an extent greater than ever before (cf. Sturken *Tourists* passim.). These various channels worked together to form a collective construction of the event, making it perhaps the most medialized¹ attack in United States American [USAm] history. Paralleling Ray's conceptions of collective mourning, scholars contend that "since terrorism is not privately experienced by most Americans, public understanding must come from mass-mediated representations of terrorism and institutional reactions to it" (Dobkin 2). In other words, it is these intertwined, mediated and medialized representations which become critical to the collective mourning process, and the understanding, or reworking of the tragedy.

Although the initial attack was devastating, from its onset, the calamity was quickly contained, rewritten, and refigured—in short, 're-membered'²—by various social and cultural coping mechanisms, employed to soften the trauma of the attack. Various scholars have worked to establish the links between cultural memory and media. However of all events considered, the immediate power of the terrorist attack cannot be contested in its ability to capture and foster media attention, dominate the public fear sphere and imagination, and affect public, foreign and national policies. Even so, 9/11 became an exemplary case, a critical turning point for the terrorist discourse. The resulting mediated discourses surrounding the event are tangled and confusing and the task remains to deconstruct these responses and, most especially, to follow the courses of these reactions and discourses as evidenced by the media

¹ In the context of Ray and other theorists of representation (Baudrillard, Eco, etc.), the dissemination of images, discourse, or other loaded content is an incredibly complex process. 'Original' information (accounts, images, reports, broadcasts, or otherwise) obtain new semantic significances as a result of both their conversion into representation by the media (mediation), as well as through their subsequent proliferation and distribution, during which the original information stands to be appended, expanded, modified, and otherwise altered. These complex interactions by which meaning is either retained or refitted will be blanketed under the term 'medialization.'

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In keeping with the process of medialization, which in itself is dynamic and describes a progression of meaning changes, 'original' information itself will not be stable, but will always be subject to reinscription. Therefore, any attempt to form a collective truth or memory from these discourses will face a parallel lack of fixity. In short, events cannot be 'remembered' or exactly or truthfully recalled from artifacts or information, but only be recreated at every instance of scrutiny. In other words, upon examination, the tragedy is 're-membered' or reassembled and reassociated; reimbued with a meaning which is intertextual and thus always open to renegotiation. For an interesting discussion, please see Deutscher.

coverage of the event as they permeated their ways through USAm society. The first part of this work deals with the media response which directly followed the 9/11 attack and the resulting construction of frames through which to understand the event. The ensuing discussion follows the long-term repercussions of the event and how it became firmly embedded in USAm cultural memory.

Representation and Medialization

As this work will deal with media extensively, a general definition of the term and its functioning is in order. Simply speaking, media are a particular means of communication via different codes such as images and/or language (cf. Sottong and Müller 158; translation ours), proliferated by channels such as television or newspapers. Ideally, everyone has potential access to the codes and messages distributed through and by media – which also explains the frequently used label, mass-media (cf. *ibid* 162). As it reaches wide audiences and maintains a faith-inspiring aura (cf. Herman, *passim*.) of truth through its genre-specific portrayals of events (e.g. the generic evening news broadcast or the ‘Sunday’ edition of the newspaper), “[t]his mass mediated communication is thus in our culture the form of communication which contributes the most to the constitution of reality” (*ibid* 155).

Furthermore, although manifested through concrete relics, media functions as an intertextual discursive agent, as much shaped by its social and political environment as vice versa. Rather than acting as an (impossibly) objective purveyor of historical truths, media itself functions within highly politicized contexts that restrict, shape, and work to disseminate a particular socially acceptable or politically favorable version of the events, stories and happenings which it reports. In these ways, medialized portrayals of factual events are more or less consciously represented in a manner which makes events either: more understandable, as discussed with trauma, or ultimately more marketable (cf. Herman *passim*).³ In the case of terrorism, it follows then that “the forms on which our understanding of terrorism are based are constructed by both mass media and official discourse, or governmental rhetoric” (Dobkin 2). The situation is rendered even more complicated when the crisis of a trauma is handled by these already semantically laden medial discourses. It has been argued that media “in the face of a crisis, obtain almost

³ The processes and structures underlying medial communication are very complex—whether passive, active, unilateral, bilateral, malicious, or otherwise—and are highly debated. Unfortunately, a detailed discussion of such themes is beyond the scope of this paper. However, we direct you to Fiske (1988), Eco (1998), Tudor (1974) and Andrew (1984) for further reading.

unlimited power to simultaneously charge and geographically disseminate the content that they depict” (Sturken *Tourists* 29-30). In this way, the medialized events of 9/11 (i.e. events reshaped through the media) become particularly relevant loci of study, both in terms of representation and, then, the subsequent processes of collective/cultural memory formation, which are strongly linked to representation.

Media and Terrorism

Older studies generally focus on a terrorist group’s own use of media in order to forward its own ends: common explorations include media-fostered awareness of terrorist events and complaints, exportation of these events to far-reaching global geographies and possible complications arising when the media (hypothetically) makes heroes out of terrorists and the unintentional inspiration for sympathy with terrorist causes—in short, the ‘contagion effect’ of terrorist reporting (e.g. Alexander et al., Dobkin, Norris et al.). In these accounts, “terrorism is, essentially, theatre, an act played before an audience, designed to call the attention of millions [...] to an often unrelated situation through shock [...] doing the unthinkable” (Dobkin 10). In other words, immediacy and performativity are central to the terrorist act. Here, the terrorist event itself is most important and therefore media is necessarily designated as the tool of the terrorist’s need for instant exposure. More contemporary conceptions have reexamined this position. These discourses could be considered to privilege a psychoanalytic approach; here the terrorist event functions as a hit and, as such, remains impossible to comprehend. Therefore, it is the process of collective mourning, or the collaborative rewriting of history, which becomes the focus of study. It follows that media is not so much the tool of the terrorist as the terrorist attack itself is a product of the posthumous reworking of the initial tragedy. Rather than being theatrical, the new terrorist attack is spectacular (cf. Baudrillard “Spirit” 30). The question becomes not how terrorist events are carried out or reported, but rather how the media actually contributes to the collective understanding of such events.

Framing

The academics of medialization contend that one way in which this hegemonic replacement occurs is via framing, or the “selection to prioritize some facts, images, or developments over others, thereby unconsciously promoting one particular interpretation of events” (Norris et al. 11; cf. Lakoff *passim*). When centering around

terrorist incidents, these frames serve to simplify violent events, to resolve trauma into recognizable structures and to contain them by means of semi-predictable narrative structures (cf. Norris et al. 5); in short, they act to represent the trauma by partially fixing the meanings of the events and perpetrators into reliable and understandable symbols (cf. Hall 240). Ultimately, mass-media such as news broadcasts, newspapers and television work to portray reality in a conveniently marketable manner; laboring to describe the details of reality within tropes which resonate favorably with the largest population segment possible, often at the expense of 'actual' truth and exhaustive detail. The danger occurs when the news frame becomes conventionalized and "so strong and all pervasive that politicians, journalists, and the public within the community will probably be unaware of this process" (Norris et al. 12). Finally, these representations may become indistinguishable from the events themselves and come to embody the reality which they report (cf. Weber 81).

These fetishizing (i.e. reductive) discourses can take many forms; stereotypes, ideographs, spectacles, etc. At the same time, the constitutive force of mass media in social reality cannot be overlooked. In short, media can now be considered as more of a re-membering force than a re-telling entity; working to reconstruct socio-political space, shaping reality both visually and consciously by refiguring the tangible products of memory that it produces. Nevertheless, this definition still does not capture the extent of media's protean power in its dealings with terrorism. As Sturken suggests, media not only reenacts these events, using "compulsive repetition [as] a response to a trauma" (*Tourists* 26), but concludes that in certain cases, such as 9/11, these reshaped representations are critical to the U.S. citizens' perception of reality as "most Americans' experience of the key events of history are mediated ones [witnessing these events] through media images" (ibid. 29). After the event, reports were circulated and re-circulated, but far from neutrally. . As the once-neutral accounts of the event were medialized, both television and newspaper became strong proponents of a pro-war, 9/11 'inspired' propaganda campaign.

The Speech to End All Speeches

Immediately after the first plane hit the World Trade Center (WTC), television news broadcasts around the world repeated the images of the events in near unison, at first without commentary, but soon working towards a polarized frame suggesting

that the “United States was subject to unprovoked attack and taken unaware, as if these events were unanticipated and unforeseen” (Sturken *Tourists* 16). While the repetitive broadcasting and viewing of video clips of 9/11 already supplied the foundation for a standardized interpretation.

The utterance of President Bush on September 11, 2001, initiated the militaristic discourse which would come to shape 9/11:

The attack took place on American soil, but it was an attack on the heart and soul of the civilized world. And the world has come together to fight a new and different war, the first, and we hope the only one, of the 21st century. A war against all those who seek to export terror, and a war against those governments that support or shelter them (Coalition Information Center).

This common source for vocabulary (3x *war*, 2x *attack*, 1x *terror*) played a decisive role in framing the 'global War on Terror.' From this announcement onward, the basic vocabulary for the language of the mass media was set. Through vastly analogous and increasingly repetitive statements by the media, the public was presented with a ready-made response to the traumatic events (cf. *Sturken Tourists* 26), and the representation of 'the attack on America' planted by the U.S. government grew and was fostered in no small way by the contributions of newspapers, an influential sector of mass media.

Furthermore, Hall claims that “one of the 'privileged' media through which memory is produced and circulated is language” (Hall 4), awarding texts the ability to convey highly charged information; messages whose content and influence equal the strength of images and/or pictures. An analysis of first-page headlines of local, national, and global newspapers helps to demonstrate the critical influence of newspapers on the reshaping and re-membling of the 'history' of the 9/11 episode via “compulsive repetition [as] a response to trauma” (*Sturken Tourists* 26). Thus, the way in which the events of 9/11 were perceived by the consumers of media, and how the immediate connection to terrorism was created and strengthened could have certainly been (highly) influenced by the front-page headlines succeeding the events (cf. Dobkin 2). Therefore, an examination of such headlines is in order.

Newspapers: Printing the Semantics of Terrorism

Front page headlines from the *New York Times*' (NYT) of September 12, 2001 (the NYT being the closest to the events), 63 major USAm newspapers as published online by Hoffman et al. and 53 international publications (Müller) have been

collected. After having entered them into a spreadsheet application, word frequencies of all lemmas were elicited and sorted according to their belonging with the vocabulary of the narrative surrounding the events. Instances of these keywords include: *attack*, *terrorism*, *defense/vengeance*, *religion*, *trauma*, but also *innocence*, *victim*. The results have been compared within and across the categories of local (New York City), national (the U.S.) and global publications in order to detect possible variation on how Americans are regarded as “innocent and passive victims, rather than aggressors, in relation to world politics” (Sturken *Tourists* 7) within and outside U.S. borders. In addition to this, “[...] these days, [...] the modern mass media, the means of global communication, by complex technologies, [...] circulate meanings between different cultures on a scale and with a speed hitherto unknown in history” (Hall 3). When taken as valid, Hall’s sentiments would suggest that the circulated narrative dealing with the events of 9/11 should be strikingly similar around the globe and that its contents should vastly overlap with regard to the representation of the WTC incident. Furthermore, the assembled headlines were checked for connections to other traumatic events in U.S. history, such as Pearl Harbor. Based on the most frequent words in each category, a cross-comparison was conducted manually. The results, progressing from a local towards a global perspective, are presented in the following.

The NYT presents the reader with five headlines on the front page of September 12, 2001 (clock-wise, with sub-headings): “U.S. ATTACKED-HIJACKED JETS DESTROY TWIN TOWERS AND HIT PENTAGON IN DAY OF TERROR”, “President Vows to Exact Punishment for ‘Evil’”, “Awaiting the Aftershocks—Washington and Nation Plunge Into Fight With Enemy Hard to Identify and Punish”, “A Somber Bush Says Terrorism Cannot Prevail”, “A CREEPING HORROR—Buildings Burn and Fall as Onlooker Search for Elusive Safety”. Sturken attests that in its direct aftermath and “[i]n the post-9/11 context as well, grief and loss over the tragedy of lives lost was often transposed in patriotic messages of revenge [demonstrating] the central role that innocence plays in U.S. culture” (*Tourists* 15).

On the NYT front page, those words standing in relation to a ‘War on Terror’, i.e. fitting into a militaristic discourse in the defense of American innocence are: *U.S.*, *attacked*, *hijacked*, *destroy*, *terror*, *punishment*, *‘evil’*, *aftershocks*, *Washington*, *nation*, *plunge*, *fight*, *enemy*, *punish*, *somber*, *terrorism*, *prevail*, *creeping*, *horror*,

elusive, safety. Twenty-one distinct words out of fifty-one (41.17%) can be linked to a 'War on Terror' paradigm, whereas the rest are mostly function⁴ words.

On a national level, the 63 banner headlines, as selected by the 9/11 Research Consortium, consists of 161 words in total. For instance, the *Boston Globe* declares a "NEW DAY OF INFAMY - Thousands feared dead after planes hit towers, Pentagon -" (*Globe*); and *The Dallas Morning News* with its declaration of "WAR AT HOME" on the front page (Müller 27). "Five referred to Pearl Harbor. [O]ne provides the objective characterization of the event as 'MASS MURDER'. [O]ne ran an image of [...] the collapses of the Twin Towers" (Hoffman et al.). Out of the 161 words, the most frequent⁵ which can be deemed propagandistic (cf. Sturken *Practices* 131) of the above mentioned narrative are: *terror* (21), *U.S.* (19), *attack* (14), *war* (4), *evil* (3), *counteraction* (3). Accordingly, 64 out of 161 (39.75%) of all vocabulary used in the present selection of U.S. national banner headlines on the day after 9/11, again disregarding function words, evoke a militaristic discourse.

International (excluding those from the United States) newspapers including samples from all continents and a mixture of Eastern and Western hemispheric nations provided 53 front page headlines, consisting of 289 words, for this study. Indicative are the German tabloid *BILD* stating "Großer Gott steh uns bei" ("Great God be with us"⁶) (Müller 29); the Moroccan *Aujourd'hui* proclaiming "LE MONDE A PEUR" ("THE WORLD IN FEAR") (Müller 89); the Dutch *de Volkskrant* with the banner "Bush zweert wraak voor aanval" ("Bush vows revenge for attack") (Müller 75). Within a total of 289 words (an average of 5.45 words per headline),⁷ those relating to the 'War on Terror' frame were: *U.S.* (19), *terror* (17), *war* (14), *world* (13), *attack* (12), *heart* (3), *fear* (3), *Pearl Harbor* (2), *vengeance* (2), *apocalypse/Armageddon* (2), *hate* (1), *Bin Laden* (1). All in all, 30.79% of the words in international headlines convey connotations and sentiments of violation and/or retribution, while in the United States, the charged words exceeded 39.75%, headed by the NYT with 41.17%.

A very high percentage of the lexical words from the collected headlines consist of keywords promoting the 'War on Terror'. This "rhetoric of vengeance" (Sturken *Tourists* 31) is equally represented on the national and global scale, often even portraying the plane crashes into the WTC as an attack on the world (Greek *Ta*

⁴ Such as conjunctions, prepositions, determiners, and words that are non-laden by definition.

⁵ Including synonyms

⁶ All translations are ours, unless stated otherwise.

⁷ Again, including synonyms.

Nea: “War over the World”): A promise of retribution, (and not only by the United States) (Müller 87). Interestingly, among all the examined USAm front pages, only one describes the events as *mass murder* instead of an act of terrorism (cf. Hoffman et al.). Through the accordance of all the different publications, a “compulsive repetition [as] a response to [the] trauma” is given not in a consecutive but in an cumulative fashion, imprinting the politicized interpretation of what happened into the public's minds right away and thus dissuading them from alternative interpretations.

In a further turn, the written headlines direct focus to specific aspects of the images (cf. Sturken *Practices* 133), thus disrupting the ‘neutrality’ of the images themselves. By textually suggesting a context of terror and war, the pictures of the two towers (in the majority still standing but burning) become laden with a political maxim; becoming figureheads for the ‘War on Terror’ narrative, rather than technological, architectural or human disasters (i.e. planes ‘simply’ crashing into buildings).

The oft-used analogies to Pearl Harbor, or “remaking of iconic images” (Sturken *Tourists* 28), provide a further illustration of how the events of 9/11 were re-established into existing cultural patterns and thus made recognizable. Throughout the reporting, direct references to *Pearl Harbor* appear both internationally (twice) and domestically, as the *Boston Globe* declares a “NEW DAY OF INFAMY”.⁸

These blendings served a dual function: first, they served to make the tragedy easily identifiable, and thus understandable and more tangible, which was highly conducive to the memorability of the event. Secondly, these representations formed a means of re-instating the innocence of America, i.e. “connecting a previous narrative of innocence in which the United States was subject to unprovoked attack and taken unaware, as if these events were unanticipated and unforeseen” (Sturken *Tourists* 16).

The militaristic discourse and the narrative on the innocence of a country make for a politicized medialization of the events of 9/11 propagating the ‘War on Terror’ in the following days, months, and even years. The de novo creation of American innocence after a traumatic event prepares a justification of its military actions. Even if Bin Laden is only mentioned once on the front page of September 12th in the present sampling and there is no mentioning of Afghanistan, the Taliban, or Iraq in the immediate aftermath of the WTC tragedy, the foundations for what

⁸ President Roosevelt spoke to Congress, ‘December 7th 1941 – a date which will live in infamy’ (Freeman et al. n.p.).

today is the narrative that formed a world-wide collective frame of September 11, 2001, were paved from day one by the mass media, including newspapers around the globe.

The narrative discourse of USAm innocence produced by the mass media around 9/11 embedded the events in already processed history, e.g. Pearl Harbor, supporting the creation of a collective mediated experience and facilitating a development into a collective memory. As Sturken asserts, "it is narrative integration that produces the memory of the traumatic event" (*Tourists* 29), in combination with seemingly automatized repetition as a response to the trauma (cf. *ibid.*26). Language was certainly one of the key elements forming the initial frames, which would eventually help to shape cultural memories. However, in terms of actual souvenir-potential, the actually physical incorporation into cultural memory, the power of images remains unrivaled.

'United We Stand': Patriotism and the Role of Television in Shaping Discourses after 9/11

In his influential essay, "Wartime", Samuel Weber continues on this track when he claims that a particular media form, specifically television, is a particularly powerful framing instrument: "what we 'see,' perhaps even more significantly, the way in which we see it, is today more than ever dependent upon the media, in particular on television" (81). One could surmise that constant exposure to televised media could most certainly manifest itself in the form of both increased reception of the images presented as well as a dangerous process of narrative-formation; the representations provided by media supplant the rational observations of the viewing public. Or in other words, "[t]his medialization in the form of substitution seems to lead, inexorably, to a situation in which the medium of power's message becomes virtually irrelevant" (Morris 166). Certainly, the media contributed to instill and maintain a state of fear within the society in the aftermath of 9/11.⁹ Additionally, various TV channels were in line with the printers and featured headlines such as "America Under Attack" (CNN) or "Attack On America" (MSNBC) and repeatedly reran footage of the two planes crashing into the World Trade Center. In so doing, television networks also helped to

⁹ It would be too simplistic to solely hold the media responsible for inducing anxiety within the public. For instance, Habermas reflects on the function of the US government concerning the spread of fear: "[T]he repeated and utterly nonspecific announcements of possible new terror attacks and the senseless calls to 'be alert' further stirred a vague feeling of angst along with uncertain readiness – precisely the intention of the terrorists (26)."

sell the idea (as promoted by the U.S. government) that a martial response was legitimate and the right strategy to stave off future assaults as well as to avenge those who died in the attack. Or as Jacques Derrida puts it, “we must recall that the maximum media coverage was in [...] the interest of [...] those, who in the name of the victims, wanted to declare ‘war on terrorism’” (108). The strong support for the so-called ‘War on Terror’ through the media lead Carol Thompson to conclude “[t]he White House is demanding blood and the television is preparing us for war, but no one is considering alternatives” (in Jacobs n.p.). Correspondingly, CNN and FOX, for instance, displayed their approval and featured the subheading “America Strikes Back” during their programming. This demonstrates that the media (TV in particular) did not scrutinize or at least objectively report on the White House’s plans for war, but instead functioned as unreflective conduits for the government.¹⁰ Accordingly, the media encouraged and influenced the subsequent discourse of revenge which swept through the U.S. after 9/11.

As a result of the printed and televised reports, 9/11 was understood by many Americans as a blatant act of war (cf. Margolis 2) and, in turn, many USAm citizens subscribed to the idea that the calamity justified any kind of retribution. In fact, shortly after the attack polls suggested that a vast majority (about ninety percent) was in favor of military actions (cf. Jacobs n.p.).¹¹ As time passed and passes, however, the pro-military sentiments changed and waned (as evidenced by subsequent congressional and presidential elections (2008)). Yet, certain attitudes and preferences were retained, as will be discussed. Through the continuing medialization of the events, a collective memory was formed that persisted longer than the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

Fixation and Cultural Memory Formation

As the date of 9/11 attack grows more distant,, it becomes clear that the media contributed in various ways to *existing* and also created *new* frames of understanding with which to process and mourn the collective attack. All the same, without some more protracted processes, such as cultural memory formation, these events would

¹⁰ Again, it is worth mentioning that there were critical voices expressed in and through the media. *The New York Times*, for example, published fairly objective as well as critical articles.

¹¹ It is necessary to mention and highlight the fact that there were also many U.S. Americans opposed to military actions ensuing 9/11. For instance, many USAm students initiated and organized anti-war rallies on college campuses. Moreover, in response to the first military strikes in Kabul, thousands of people gathered in the streets of New York and protested against the war in Afghanistan (cf. Worth).

be quickly forgotten and or replaced by more pressing and current news topics. As time reveals, the contribution of 9/11 to cultural discourses long surpassed the actual attack.

After the attack on 9/11 occurred, the repetitive frame that media employed undoubtedly provided an alluring containment and recovery strategy for many of those affected as images and phrases could be safely re-witnessed, reabsorbed, and reconsidered. The trauma could be ‘fixed’ by a photograph, film clip, or headline. However, this process of reducing the events to symbols, the security created by an instinctual turn to the in-group solidarity and defiance of patriotism and impulsive selection of familiar cultural heroes, whose stark images could combat the uncertainty after the collapse, would prove to be more than a passing stage of mourning. When representations are repeated, one runs the risk of turning these representations into narratives — or stories with their own independent history and truth (cf. Hall 242).

In terms of national discourses, after the attack and in the spectacle that followed, patriotism pervaded society as a way of coping with the traumatic experience of 9/11. For instance, shortly afterwards in New York City, inhabitants hung the American flag from numerous window sills and billboards advertising the slogan “United We Stand.”¹² It shows that for many U.S. Americans, the event was a bonding experience as in ‘We are all in this together!’ Furthermore, patriotism was also one manner of overtly demonstrating support and identification with USAm values. Putting it differently, many people embraced this patriotic movement as a means of reassurance as it could provide some common ground and thereby much needed communal support and stability in a time of doubt. In short, in the time of mourning a



Figure 1: A New York City street shortly after the attack.

¹² The slogan “United We Stand” experienced a renaissance after 9/11 and was already utilized for patriotic campaigns during World War II. The line originates from the patriotic “Liberty Song” (1768) by John Dickinson.

national collective emerged. Numerous people in the U.S. thus supported their government and its course of action (i.e. the so-called 'War on Terror') while, at the same time, considering any form of anti-aggression protest as un-American. Jürgen Habermas notes, "[E]ven those who hold an unquestionable *record*, as I do among my American friends, needed to be cautious with regard to criticism" (26; italics in original). Hence, the post-9/11 patriotic wave was accompanied by undercurrents of an uncompromising pro-American attitude alongside a discourse of revenge.

In summary, it can be said that patriotism along with various discourses, which gained importance in the immediate aftermath of the attack, emerged as sources of reassurance and national identification: the foundations of collectivization. In short, to quote Baudrillard, "[a]ll the energy of mourning the dead object [was] transferred to a simulated resurrection in the activities of the living" (*Seduction* 152). At this point it becomes clear that tragedy is certainly powerful enough to unite a diverse community. 9/11 arguably drew the United States together, if only briefly, to a greater extent than any moment in contemporary history. Although later diffused by the deconstructive processes of contemplation, some traces of these communal and national sentiments proved resistant to the ravages of renegotiation. These elements became embedded in the national/cultural consciousness and in short became part of the USAm collective memory.

Gymnich et al. have described this space of collective/cultural memory as "a virtual space which is organized by rituals, semiotic objects and systems, and processes of oral, written, and visual communication. Thus, processes of collective remembering and forgetting can be studied through representations which not only store but also interpret and rearrange cultural memories" (3). The catastrophe acted as the catalytic ritual which inspired these processes of collectivization. The media provided a repetitive and standardized semiotic framing system with which to channel and direct discourses into one unifying and nationally understandable narrative, formed by the ideologically loaded representations which they constructed and proliferated. Those figures which remained the most re-printable or photogenic became iconic and memorable as their presence was reestablished and ensured by near constant and consistent repetition and representation. A particularly salient example of these processes remains the firefighters; the renascent heroes of the 9/11 event.

‘In Firemen We Trust’: Post-9/11 Heroes and the Power of a Photograph

Immediately after the event, when doubt and anxiety were strongest, firefighters became the discursive subjects of heroism, which surfaced as one source of reassurance.¹³ Sturken draws attention to the fact that “the firefighters emerged as the iconic figures of 9/11, and their deaths were the focus of enormous public grieving” (*Tourists* 188). The choice was certainly not arbitrary. At the most basic level, the firefighters put their own lives in jeopardy while venturing into the burning World Trade Center in order to rescue as many people as possible—thus acting selflessly and heroically. Furthermore, the element of the tragedy created a distinctly hero-favorable sentiment within the public (cf. Johnson 11). However, there were many rescue individuals on scene and thus the choice proves more complex. Weiten et al. comment that “reminders of mortality increase the tendency to admire those who uphold cultural standards. [In times of chaos] people need heroes who personify cultural values [...]” (60). Popular demand had singled out the firefighters as post-9/11 heroes not only because they exuded reassurance and selflessness, but because they had always done so—they were unwavering icons of stability retained in the collective consciousness of the public. In other words, the firefighters were already integral parts of cultural memories of heroism, which were reestablished during 9/11 as “firefighters had a long history of heroic behavior that largely went unrecognized until a massive increase in mortality salience created an urgent need for uplifting heroes” (ibid. 60). However, again there were many other champions present in the days and weeks that followed who largely disappeared from history.

Sturken points out the unfortunate truth that, “[t]he sanctification of the firefighters had the effect of erasing the selfless and heroic acts by many people that day, including minimum-wage security guards and civilians” (*Tourists* 188). This exclusionary act appears to be paradigmatic of how processes of cultural memory work. It proved difficult for others, whose generous actions were not as readily recognizable as pre-established modes of ‘heroism’, to enter into or become accepted members of the circulating discourses and thereby receive commendation or recognition for their deeds and actions. These individuals were the unsung or excluded heroes. Clearly, something more than notable deeds was required in order

¹³ As the US and its allies commenced their military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, respectively, the heroism was expanded to the soldiers who were considered to be fighting for the American as well as the entire world’s freedom.

to become a WTC hero; this one-sided discourse of heroism that revolved around the firemen was not triggered by their history and actions alone. The firefighters were not only easily recognizable, but also highly visible and consequently often recorded in various portraits. A photograph taken by Thomas E. Franklin proved especially important and became an image which vastly contributed to and elevated the heroic status of the firefighters. The popular picture, which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 2002, captures three firemen surrounded by rubble as they



Figure 2: A rendition of the postage stamp inspired by the Franklin Image

hoist an American flag at Ground Zero. Broadly speaking, the raising of the flag amid the debris was understood to exemplify the firemen's sacrifices and widely considered to be a gesture of hope. In connection to this, it is crucial to mention that photographers generally seek to capture scenes that can be easily incorporated into discourses of sacrifice, loss and heroism because those pictures are more likely to become iconic, and therefore more successful (cf. Sturken *Tourists* 190). In this regard, Franklin palpably succeeded in shooting an iconic image, as his picture eventually proliferated and appeared in various forms (it could be seen on mugs, postcards, and inspired a stamp) throughout the United States.¹⁴ Taking this further, Ground Zero served as a perfect *mise-en-scène* for molding the firemen into memorable figures. In summary, the picture clearly helped to shape the one-sided discourse of heroism attributed to the firefighters.

Eventually, however, the Franklin photograph turned out to be more than an emblem of hope and a catalyst for heroism. By means of the picture, the actions of a selected group (i.e. the firefighters) that found itself confronted with an extreme situation subsequently became part of the dynamics of reaffirming national identity.

¹⁴ Thomas E. Franklin's photo is reminiscent of the famous image of American soldiers planting a flag at Iwo Jima in World War II. The latter picture is well-known within the United States and is still an integral part of American discourses about triumph; sacrifice, freedom, and heroism (cf. Sturken *Tourists* 189). Therefore, Franklin's picture fit perfectly into already established parameters, which certainly was a contributing factor as to why the photograph was well received in the U.S.

This can be inferred from the fact that the image was increasingly used within and as a frame for patriotic discourses – the aforementioned stamp was officially unveiled at the White House, for example. Consequently, the image was effectively correlated to the semantics of reasserting USAm identity, which took center stage as the nation recovered after 9/11. Franklin himself explains, “the hook with this picture is the symbolism, bravery, and valor. They (the three firefighters) are saying ‘screw you’ to whoever did this” (in Sturken *Tourists* 192). Franklin’s statement bears testimony to the USAm preoccupation with demonstrating collective resolve after 9/11. The picture was therefore perceived to carry the meaning of American resilience as well as providing a sense of national stature. As a corollary, it could be argued that the picture not only catered to the need for reestablishing national character but also illustrated “how images themselves help to facilitate particular ideological responses to loss [and unfathomable situations]” (Ibid. 193).

This image in its various incarnations and its continuing recirculation exemplifies the importance of recognizable representations as artifacts of cultural memory. The semantics and significances surrounding the actual 9/11 attack continue to be debated, however, the iconic image of the three heroic firefighters reappears in constant testimony to the publicly acknowledged and lauded hero of the day. Immortalized on stamps, suggested for monuments and memorials, this image remains the face given to a tragedy too devastating to have one of its own. The collective hero replaces the void created by 9/11.

Conclusion: Memory and Remembering

Cultural producers, such as media, themselves become products and artifacts of the memorial discourses that they produce and shape. In this way, media (printed and imaginary) serve to re-member history in that they become the tangible memorabilia of events which otherwise would be lost or remain inaccessible. At the same time, these artifacts are imprinted, retained within the framework of collective memorial discourses, and therefore in the history of a given culture or society, and are thereby remembered. They are continuously reshaped within both private and public discourse; media serves to bring the macroscopic public discourses of history (in conjunction with the hegemonic frames of comprehending them) into the private spheres of individual experience and, eventually, memory.

As happened during the events of 9/11, through the omnipresence of the media everybody was confronted with the 'reality' of the attacks as presented to them. To this end, Baudrillard maintains that "[t]he image consumes the event, in the sense that it absorbs it and offers it for consumption. Admittedly it gives an unprecedented impact, but impact as image-event" ("Spirit" 27). This seems plausible in the context of 9/11; however, this account falls short. First, it neglects the still-important effects or influences of other forms of representation other than the image. When examining, for instance, the news reports and newspaper headlines in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the frame of the terrorist attack was equally subscribed to and enhanced by the more linguistic media. The headlines advocating and further emphasizing the political matrix surrounding the attacks channeled the public consciousness into a frame of understanding that suggested attack and aggression against the United States and a call for vengeance, which then spread throughout the world. Moreover, Baudrillard's account does not extend to the long-term consequences of such representations.

This 'regurgitation' might also apply to longer processes of representation that extend beyond those artifacts employed to represent the initial trauma. While the impact remains strong in the direct aftermath, it is inarguable that discourses surrounding such events change with time. However, certain sequences still prove able to resonate in public discourses over longer periods of time. These artifacts or remnants contribute to and become embedded in cultural memory and thereby survive trauma and forgetting. Images indisputably have the power to transcend the image-event, as can be exemplified by the Franklin photograph. On the one hand, the photograph reinforced the already established heroic discourses surrounding the firefighters, while on the other hand contributing to the creation of a new cultural memory by molding the firefighters into post-9/11 icons. In this way, the image and figures transcend the actual event and are indelibly linked, captured in a new discourse that imparts new semio-semantics, which can continue to influence further collective retrospective analyses of the initial events and discourses. In short, while 'we' will always resort to the same artifacts, 'we' can never re-member it in the same way.

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