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kitsch politics

MARITA STURKEN

Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007

ISBN: 9780822341031 (hb)
9780822341222 (pb)

RRP: US \$89.95 (hb), US \$24.95 (pb)

In the wake of 9/11 a number of opinion pieces and editorials in the United States media called for 'an end to irony'. They meant something like: 'this wound to national pride forbids us to tolerate criticism or dissent; we must display solidarity in the face of the enemy'. Of course, these calls were moves in the culture wars, directed specifically at the intelligentsia. The point was to control the meanings with which the event could be invested, and specifically to foster those 'patriotic' meanings which were to be harnessed to the prosecution of military adventures in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. It's of the nature of such complexly traumatic events, however, that no such restriction of meaning is ever possible. The event itself was too shocking, too extraordinary to be controlled in this way. Concentrated in the physical site that quickly came to be called Ground Zero, it generated a symbolic politics which Marita Sturken traces through a detailed analysis of the discourse of sacredness that quickly enveloped Ground Zero and which both supported and came into conflict with the tourism industry that grew up around it; and of the struggles over the reconstruction of the site. This analysis is preceded, however, by two chapters reading an earlier site, the Oklahoma City National Memorial, which marks the federal building destroyed in the April 1995 bombing that killed 168 people. The counterpointing of the two sites allows Sturken to draw both positive and negative comparisons between the ways they dealt with difficult issues of memorialisation and representation, and then to extrapolate to a more general account of 'dark' tourism and of

the role of kitsch in giving shape to a self-absolving expression of national grief.

That general account sets up a relation between cultural practices of memory, tourism, and kitsch, and what Sturken calls 'the deep investment in the concept of innocence in American culture' (4) which is, in turn, bound up with a systematic disavowal of the exceptionalist underpinnings of America's role in the world: the 'why do they hate us?' syndrome (to which the implied and often explicit response is: 'because they hate the freedom we embody; they hate us because we are virtuous'). That self-representation as innocent is bound up with certain kinds of kitsch sentimentality—the teddy bears that swamped the Oklahoma site, icons of firefighters in New York—which are at once comforting and infantilising, and which allow its proponents to understand themselves as victims of an incomprehensible evil. Kitsch is defined by way of Milan Kundera's linking of it to the pseudo-universalities of totalitarianism:

Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: how nice to see children running on the grass!

The second tear says: how nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!

It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.

The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch.¹

Sturken's argument is 'that kitsch is the primary aesthetic style of patriotic American culture, indeed that American political culture can be

defined by and thrives on a kind of kitsch aesthetic' which is integral to what she calls 'banal nationalism'. (25) Bad aesthetics makes for bad politics: I'll come back to the questions that this equation raises.

Part of the story Sturken tells about the Oklahoma City site, then, has to do with the culture of kitsch that informs it, and of which we might take as exemplary the image of a firefighter cradling a dead child in his arms that was widely reproduced, often in religious versions (the firefighter passes the child to a sombre Jesus, or raises it to the hands of God descending from a cloud). Such images, and the forms taken by a memorialising tourism, generate 'a simplified and prepackaged set of emotions' (130) (this is the 'stock response' of the New Criticism) and, in the case of the tourism that accompanied the execution of the lead bomber, Timothy McVeigh, a culture at once of victimhood and of vengeance. Yet this is only part of the story. The other has to do with what turns out to be the surprisingly successful way in which the Oklahoma City National Memorial negotiates the contradictory demands and constituencies with which it had to deal. By foregrounding ordinary lives and democratic citizenship, and by developing a pedagogy of experiential involvement, it managed to become a central part of the local community 'in complex ways that are about integrating a difficult past into the everyday'. (118) That success, Sturken argues, is necessarily limited:

The sense that the memorial itself is the site where the dead are honoured and

mourned produces a discourse of sacredness that cannot allow any discussion about why the bombing took place, what motivated it, and what it says about American society. This is precisely the limitation of memorial pedagogy. (126)

Yet to a significant extent the memorial manages to overcome these limitations:

With its spare narrative and elegant design, the memorial is a kind of modernist anti-kitsch. It aims, as its designers have said, to allow the narrative of remembrance to be open. It stands in contrast to the Memorial Center and the gift shop, which participate in forms of remembrance that fall easily into prepackaged sentiment and kitsch. Yet what shines through in both contexts is an earnest belief in and ethos about the primacy of community engagement and consensus, one that allows these different elements and approaches to coexist. At times, the earnestness seems to spill over into a production of innocence; at others, it produces an honesty about irresolution. (137)

That kind of honesty was never going to be possible at the much more ideologically invested site in New York. Here, the counterpart to the Oklahoma City image of the firefighter cradling a dead child was the image of three firefighters raising a flag over the rubble of Ground Zero, an image which repeats an earlier photograph of three soldiers raising a United States flag at Iwo Jima and which then

formed the basis for a further series of reproductions in the form of a medallion, a frieze, a postage stamp, a number of cartoons, postcards, and a movie. That instant iconography was part of a concerted effort of myth-making, with both political and religious dimensions.

From the blessing of the dust taken from Ground Zero to be presented in urns to the families of the dead, to the spontaneous appearance of shrines at the site and around the city, it has been clear that Ground Zero was very quickly constructed in the popular, commercial, and administrative imaginations as a sacred site. The tourism that grew up around it took the form of a pilgrimage in which prayers were said, votive offerings (photographs, messages or gifts) left on fences, and relics in the form of commercial souvenirs taken away (Sturken begins the book by talking about a snow globe showing the intact towers together with the emergency vehicles that attended their destruction, and she concludes it with a discussion of Afghan 'war rugs' representing both the blazing towers and the planes approaching them). And much of the controversy over the site had to do with the question of the appropriate disposal of the remains of the dead: dispersed, of course, in the dust and rubble at Ground Zero and in part, presumably, shifted to a landfill site at the wonderfully named Fresh Kills on Staten Island. All of this constitutes a massive discourse of sacredness which, swathing Ground Zero in a protective aura, generates a series of conflicts between the everyday life of the city (or rather, the desire on the part of many local people and of businesses of every size to return to something like normality) and the insistence

of key stakeholders—bereaved families, firefighters and police, many politicians—that the footprint of the two World Trade Center buildings be left undisturbed forever, and that the dust removed to Fresh Kills be returned. Tourism partakes of this religiosity, but it is also deeply imbricated with commerce; Sturken cites a Doonesbury strip from 2001 which speaks of Ground Zero as being ‘like a long-running Broadway show. First the locals see it, now it’s out-of-towners’. (212)

The larger controversies over the site grow out of these conflicts between the sacred and the profane and extend them into the realm of real estate. The World Trade Center site is owned by the Port Authority, leased by a developer, Larry Silverstein, and regulated by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (which has its own commercial agenda); the byzantine politics of real and symbolic ownership, with layer upon layer of stakeholders, allowed little room for the determinedly consultative but never simply populist process that gave rise to the Oklahoma City National Memorial. The tendering for the reconstruction of Ground Zero was torn between a vision of renewal of lower Manhattan and the sense of it as ‘a sacred site of loss’ (233), a space of absence and mourning. The majority of designs submitted reenacted the destruction of the twin towers in a compulsive repetition that speaks to an unresolved mourning mediated through the most banal figuring of loss. Daniel Libeskind’s winning design—now hopelessly compromised as Silverstein brought in his own preferred architect to rework it—incorporated elements of kitsch patriotism, like its height of 1776 feet

and its conscious echoing of the Statue of Liberty. Hal Foster described it as a ‘trauma theme park in the making’ (250), and in its redesigned form the Freedom Tower is likely to emerge ‘as an icon of a defended, security-obsessed, barricaded urban space’ (255) in which memorialisation and redemption win out over urban renewal. Similarly, the compromise design finally agreed for a memorial at Ground Zero settles for a patriotic pedagogy with kitsch overtones. As Sturken sums it up:

The huge voids of the design, encompassing the two footprints as well as the space around them, blandly listing names alongside the pools, and the increased security context of the site dictate that it will be a place ruled by memory, in which design innovation is absent. This triumph of explanatory exhibition over contemplative spaces that are potentially open for interpretation represents a particular kind of narrowing of the meaning at Ground Zero. (273)

Last time I looked on Google Earth there seemed to be little activity at the site, as though construction had been paralysed by the combination of conflicted semiosis and conflicted claims and desires exercised across it.

Libeskind describes himself as an opponent of ‘fashionable irony’, and the thematic structure of this book resolves itself centrally into an opposition between irony and kitsch, in which irony—exemplified by Art Spiegelman’s cartoon-narratives about 9/11—is seen as providing the possibility of an alternative framework for

representing that event in ways which are politically reflexive. But Spigelman's art—which does that job superbly—is not public art and doesn't have to satisfy the imperatives of commerce and mourning (indeed, his *In the Shadow of No Towers* was initially rejected—presumably as unbecoming the gravity of the event—by the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and the *New York Review of Books*). I'm uneasy about putting as much political weight on kitsch as Sturken does. In moments of collective grief, ordinary citizens don't want or need political critique; they want an authentic experience of the meaning of disaster, a connection to the dead, and reassurance that the world still makes sense. That these needs take the form of bad commercial art says merely that these are the forms that are familiar to American citizens (and, *mutatis mutandis*, to Australians) as a way of making sense of the world. Of course there can be ironic uses of kitsch, as in a camp aesthetic; but these are no longer kitsch (they're something more complicated, neither simply kitsch nor simply not-kitsch). The argument that 'American cultural responses to traumatic historical events enable naive political responses to those events' (12) begs the question, I think, of where and under what conditions a better set of responses might come from (given that Spigelman's work is too complex ever to be widely popular), and indeed of whether bad art contributes substantially to bad politics. It's arguable that the corrupted political culture of the United States is a matter for political reform, and that heroic images of firefighters don't, ultimately, have much to do with it. This book works hard on a rich set of cultural materials

to pose, but not definitively to answer, these questions.

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1. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim. Harper and Row, New York, pp. 248–51. Cited in Sturken, *Tourists of History*, p. 22.