

ANNEKE SMELIK

Mediating Memories

The Ethics of Post-9/11 Spectatorship¹

What is the notion of 'mediated memory' in relation to films and other media about 9/11. Media technologies invariably shape our memories of past and present life. Rather than simply representing the past, even the recent past of an event like the attack on the Twin Towers, television, computers, cinema and other media enable and produce particular memories with the use of specific techniques. Representations of 9/11 constituted a case of 'real virtuality' that turned the disaster into a media spectacle. The question then becomes how later films can avoid spectacularization, how they can visualize a disaster that is already settled in cultural memory. How can spectators assume an ethical position in a global media culture that promotes a theme park of disaster?

*Bigger, grosser next time. Please don't let it happen.
But let me see it all the same,
as it's happening and from every angle,
and let me be among the first to know.*
Ian McEwan²

Apocalypse is the non-event of the millennium
Brian Massumi³

The Unimaginable

It is by now a cliché that the attack on the World Trade Centre of September 11, 2001 was experienced by television or internet viewers all around the world as if it were a Hollywood movie. Sometimes a specific film would emerge as a point of reference, such as the iconic images of *The Towering Inferno* (1974). Mostly, the referential images related more generally to the genre of Hollywood disaster movies: from *Earthquake* (1975) and *Escape from New York* (1981), through the

¹ I thank Robert Doran for his comments and suggestions. – An earlier and much shorter version of this essay was published in Dutch under the title: “Het themapark van een ramp op televisie en in film” (“The Theme Park of a Disaster on Television and in Film”) in: Plate/Smelik, *Stofen as* 20–35.

² McEwan, *Saturday* 176.

³ Massumi, *Everyday Fear* 31.

Die Hard series to *Independence Day* (1991). Many commentators have mentioned the difficulty spectators have in seeing the viewing experience as “real” rather than a Hollywood fantasy, because, as Kathy Smith writes, their horizon of expectations had been cruelly shifted: “This was not fantasy. These were real events, happening to real people, affecting real lives” (Smith, “Reframing Fantasy” 60). A bit more cynical is Jean Baudrillard who provocatively suggested that the very reality of the images satisfies a deeper, darker, longing for the sheer horror of it: “In this case, then, the real is superadded to the image like a bonus of terror, like an additional *frisson*: not only is it terrifying, but, what is more, it is real.” (Baudrillard, *Spirit of Terrorism* 29). Spectators had become habituated to consuming such images within the fictional framework of the Hollywood spectacle (King, “Like a Movie”), but “the occurrence of these events in reality was beyond imagination” (Smith, “Reframing Fantasy” 60) and thus – paradoxically – “unimaginable” (Baudrillard, *Spirit of Terrorism* 28).

Slavoj Žižek argues that it was not the attack itself that was unthinkable, but the fact that the “libidinally invested” fantasy of American disaster movies had become reality (Žižek, *Desert of the Real* 15–6). He points to the distorted logic of the dream in his rather perverse and perhaps wilful misunderstanding of Freud’s wish-fulfilment: whereas elsewhere in the world poor people dream of becoming a rich American, rich Americans have nightmares about a catastrophe that will destroy them (17). This is the fantasy that Hollywood caters to and literally cashes in on, but, of course, it was never meant to actually happen. Both Baudrillard and Žižek argue that the overwhelming images of the disaster fulfilled the fantasy that is offered to us by American popular culture, as if the event had been literally *prefigured*. The television images presented themselves as it were as a *performance* of disaster rather than ‘the real thing’.

In this article I want to argue that 9/11 can be understood as a “performance of memory”. By performance of memory I refer to two structural elements that come together here: first, that anything on television acquires the quality of an event as a staged spectacle, because images of the real are taken up in a visual culture of repetition, pastiche, and performativity; and second, that images seem to run ahead of reality as they are framed in a fictional story of something that has already happened in the past. In the first part of this essay I expand on the role of media in the performance of memory by discussing films about ‘nine-eleven’. In the second part of the essay I address the ethical issues of a culture of performativity in relation to trauma.

Real Virtuality of the Spectacle

Visual culture is to a large extent informed by what Walter Benjamin has called “mechanical reproduction”, the technological possibility of infinite reproduction of images. Visual media tap relentlessly into this feature; repetition is the name of the game (Benjamin, “Work of Art”). Any image that is shown frequently enough will become part of cultural memory. In a globalized media dominated by Western visual culture, these images are more and more the same for every citizen of the world. Cultural memory thus consists of a repertoire of iconic television images: the crowning of Elisabeth II, the assassination of President Kennedy, the lunar landing, the fall of the Berlin wall, a man stopping a tank in Tiananmen Square, the burial of Princess Diana, the tsunami in Asia, and so on. Within that repertoire, the attack on the World Trade Center became, in the words of W. J. T. Mitchell “[...] an icon in its own right, an image of horror that has imprinted itself in the memory of the entire world.” (Mitchell, *Pictures* 14).

Few images, however, have been repeated as often as the attack on the World Trade Center. A paradoxical effect of frequent repetitions is that they actually make the image unreal and present it as performed. This is one of the reasons why it was sometimes hard for viewers all over the world to experience the images of September 11 as real. As Geoff King has pointed out in his careful analysis, in the days that followed September 11, the images were increasingly edited in repeated sequences and organized according to story-telling conventions of temporal continuity that are filled with heroes and villains (King, “Like a Movie”). Such assemblages of images enhanced the fictionalization of what was essentially amateur or documentary coverage. The real thus further receded, or, as Dean Lockwood puts it: “At the moment we cut through reality to the Real, the Real appears at its most staged [...] In effect, the intruding Real is always already plastinated” (Lockwood, “Teratology” 78). Thus, the images are perceived as a *performance* of the real.

The rather uncanny perception of the television images of September 11 is inextricably bound up with the confusion of the real and the unreal. Both in postmodern theory and in media studies, the idea of a “society of the spectacle” has become widely accepted. As Douglas Kellner writes: “During the past decades, the culture industries have multiplied media spectacles in novel spaces and sites, and spectacle itself is becoming one of the organizing principles of the economy, polity, society, and everyday life” (Kellner, “Media Culture” 23). The phrase “society of spectacle” was coined by Guy Debord in the 1960s as a neo-Marxist analysis of a specific stage of capitalism. Kellner extends the notion to what he calls “technocapitalism,” a stage at which developing countries and the globalized world are emerging into a culture of media spectacle that combines technological developments with a global restructuring of capital (Kellner,

“Media Culture” 34–5). Spectacle and reality seem somewhat contradictory terms: a spectacle is by definition not exactly realistic because it exceeds the real in some way. Yet, King introduces the notion of the “spectacle of the real” as an inclination in contemporary media culture to conjoin both spectacle and the real in representations of “incredible-seeming reality” (King, “Like a Movie” 13).

Developments in digital technology have further increased the fundamental fusion and confusion of the factual with the virtual. Manuel Castells calls this phenomenon “real virtuality” (Castells, *Network Society*). With this contradictory slogan he points to a digital media culture in which reality has become thoroughly virtualized. Reality or performance, fact or fiction, true or untrue, original or copy: the different strands have become entangled in a Gordian knot. When modern mass media produce copies of copies of copies (films that resemble disasters that in turn resemble films) and reality recedes into a simulacrum, viewers yearn for what is lost: the real. When “the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning,” as Baudrillard writes (Baudrillard, *Spirit of Terrorism* 12). In a culture of real virtuality, the real and the authentic become desirable as lost objects. As Joseph Pine and James Gilmore have argued, people want real experiences – for which they are willing to pay a lot of money (Pine/Gilmore, *Experience Economy*). In *Authenticity* (2007), Gilmore and Pine sketch the paradox of the experience economy: in an increasingly unreal world, consumers desire something real, original, genuine, sincere; in a word, authentic (1) – and this is as true for political candidates as it is for the entertainment industry. In a world of performances, the public seeks the “really real.” The real and authentic have become the holy grail of the society of the spectacle.

The passion for the real and the authentic in media culture can be understood as a resistance to regimes of representation that turn each image or act into a performance. Although they are not synonyms, I propose here to understand the notion of spectacle as a form of performance, because in my view digital media push viewers to not only accept media images as a spectacle, but to become users who can adapt the images. Thus, they become part of the performativity of media culture.

The performance of memory

The development of new media and electronic technologies has also left its impact on the way in which a culture deals with its collective memory. Memory studies have therefore pointed to the pivotal role of media in keeping certain memories alive, and more specifically, to the promise of media to present memory as fresh, untainted, and even unmediated. The notion of memory as unmediated experience has haunted media studies of memory. According to Susannah Radstone, the memory crisis in the late twentieth century is informed

by the development of digital technologies that seek an experience of ‘immediacy, instantaneity and simultaneity’ (Radstone, *Memory and Methodology* 7). It is as if the media have taken over the promise of immediacy and authenticity from memory. Ever since McLuhan argued that media are an extension of the human senses, and also an extension of consciousness, it is impossible within contemporary multimedia culture to maintain a view of memory as unmediated (McLuhan, *Understanding Media*).

As Vivian Sobchack explains, audiovisual technologies of the twentieth century collapse the temporal distance between present, past, and future. There is no longer a history that happened ‘before’ and a representation that came ‘after’ the event, but we are moving towards simultaneity (Sobchack, *Persistence* 5). Sobchack refers to the O.J. Simpson case, but 9/11 is of course another example of history happening right here and now; it “is transmitted, reflected upon, shown play-by-play, taken up as the stuff of multiple stories and significance, given all sorts of “coverage” in the temporal dimension of the present as we live it” (5). For Andreas Huyssen the collapse of the boundaries between past and present in contemporary fast-speed media pertains to the very crisis of memory, while Radstone claims that in the contemporary remembrance boom, memory is aligned with issues of performativity and representation, privileging invention and fabrication over authenticity and lived experience (Radstone, *Memory and Methodology* 9). Although it is an important step to understand memory as ‘always already’ mediated, we can push the argument even further. Memory is not only shaped by media, but media are also shaped by memory. Thus José van Dijck argues, ‘media and memory transform each other’ (Dijck, *Mediated Memories* 21). Media technologies structure our process of remembering, just as remembrance affects the way we make use of media devices.

If we understand a medium as a process, and not as a thing, we can also argue that it not only re-mediate, but that the medium itself also remembers. That is why media usually mediate each other, as McLuhan already indicated in his seminal *Understanding Media*: “the “content” of any medium is always another medium.” he famously stated (McLuhan, *Understanding Media* 8). Or, to put it differently, if the past is always already mediated, then media have by necessity to re-mediate. Mediated memory products can thus be understood as having a double mnemonic layer; that is, as being both the cultural and the medial remembrance of something. This may also hint at an explanation of why cultural memory seems to be shrouded in clichés and stereotypes.

The point here is that the media package the real, offering it in the form of spectacular performance. Every “authentic” viewing experience, as offered to us by the “live” coverage of September 11, for example, is framed and formatted by the media. What seems authentic, therefore, is inevitably transformed into a staged performance. News broadcasts, current affairs programs and reality shows are as subject to performativity as Hollywood action or fantasy movies. Put a

camera on it and the real will be literally transformed into a performance. Amateur footage is now “professionalized” to the point that any qualitative distinction between the two is lost. Moreover, as Geoff King argues, techniques such as “shaky camerawork, dodgy focus, or awkward zooms” signify that events have not been staged (King, “Like a Movie” 50). Often, such techniques are used in fictional movies to produce a *reality effect*. This works the other way around, so when the coverage of September 11 contained “numerous such signifiers of actuality” (ibid.) or authenticity, it comes across as something performed.

The Trauma of the Real

There is no doubt that the attacks of September 11 were a traumatic event. Trauma can be defined as an excess of reality, an overwhelming event that cannot be assimilated and defies comprehension (Caruth, *Trauma* 4). When events reach a certain magnitude we naturally doubt their existence. Just as a disaster is an excess of reality for those involved, the images of the disaster are similarly an excess of reality for the television viewer. The horror of the real needs to be domesticated, softened, or “plastinated” as Lockwood puts it (Lockwood, “Teratology”). We could also say that for the viewer it is less traumatic to view the images as performed.

The dramatic documentary *9/11* (2002) by the two brothers Gédéon and Jules Naudet is instructive of the ways in which shocking images require mediation and containment. While making a film about firemen, the two French filmmakers were coincidentally present near the World Trade Centre at the time of the attacks. They were the only ones who filmed the first plane entering the tower and were in the lobby of one tower when the other one collapsed. The most gripping moments in *9/11* are the regular thumping sounds, which are in fact the sounds of bodies falling to the ground, the bodies of those who jumped out of the towers. The documentary filmmakers decided on the spot that this was just too gruesome to film, so the viewer does not get to see images of burning or dead bodies or body parts.⁴ But the sounds that punctuate the story are gruesome enough in themselves – so gruesome that CBS requested that the filmmakers edit the soundtrack so as to cut out most of the macabre thuds because that would have been too traumatic for the viewer (Craps, “Tussen trauma en verbeelding”).

The visual footage shot by the Naudet brothers on that fatal day is awesome in its overwhelming immediacy. The gripping images testify to the traumatic impact of events that were literally beyond words, beyond the power of imagination, “existing in a visceral realm of shock and pain” (Smith, “Reframing

⁴ This raises the question of the ethics of documentary or news reporting itself, but a discussion of this issue lies beyond the scope of this essay.

Fantasy” 60). The camera not only registers the events from within, literally catching the dust and debris on its lens, but also captures the bewilderment, disbelief, fear, and powerlessness of the people caught in the midst of the disaster. The commentary and the interviews that crosscut with the images of the events confirm the shocked responses of all.

The Naudet brothers tried to mitigate the traumatic impact of their unique footage by integrating it with the image of a young fireman in training, in typical Hollywood narrative style. The plot follows his development from innocence to experience and tells his heroic story of initiation. Stef Craps argues that the focus thus shifts from a disorienting and shocking terrorist mass murder to comforting notions of heroism and community, understood in a specifically American sense (Craps, “Tussen trauma en verbeelding”). He criticizes the filmmakers for negating the “murdering nightmare of terrorism” by superimposing a moralistic story of redemptive virtue. In his view, the documentary confirms an idealized notion of the national self-image of the United States and even functions as a moral justification for revenge. Indeed *9/11* continues and inscribes itself in a long cinematic tradition that honors firemen: from *Life of an American Fireman* (1903) to *The Towering Inferno* (1974), and from *Backdraft* (1991) to *The Guys* (2002) and *Ladder 49* (2004).

While I agree with Craps that the documentary filmmakers have tried to make the trauma of September 11 more palatable for the viewer by framing it within the cultural codes of American cinema and television, I disagree with his rather harsh critique that such a “hollywoodization” is necessarily harmful due to its ideological subterfuge. The documentary *9/11* makes the trauma into a “comprehensible story,” which is exactly what the specialists say should happen with a trauma (Caruth, *Trauma* 154). The images thus become a performance of memory, of something we have seen before and can thus comprehend better. Craps seems not only to underestimate the force of the Real when it is unleashed in its full-blown rawness and directness, but also, and more importantly, the de-realizing effect of the media images *per se*. As Lockwood argues, the “radical, deconstructive potential seems to be immediately short-circuited wherever it appears.” (Lockwood, “Teratology” 79). He continues: “We are tormented with both the desire to see everything, to have the world on hand, ‘live and raw,’ and the suspicion, ultimately reassuring, that there really is ‘nothing to see.’” (ibid.). The media play an important role in getting a grip on the trauma of September 11 and thus “make trauma liveable, bearable” (Zylinska, “Mediating murder” 240). In spite of its reassuring narrative framework, the sound and images of *9/11* will always remain shockingly real. It is precisely because of their traumatic impact that the viewer needs a “comprehensible story” as a vehicle of understanding.

“Osama, Osama, please come back”

While there was an avalanche of poetry, novels, comic books, pop songs, video clips (and even tattoos) that provided a more or less immediate artistic response to the 9/11 disaster, the film industry remained silent for some years after the initial documentaries such as *9/11*. It was not until 2005 that feature films were produced, the first being *September 12th* by director John Touhey. This reticence to build fictional narratives around 9/11 was due to a certain amount of self-censorship and, frankly, embarrassment: to make a spectacular movie about a recent disaster that in itself resembled a disaster movie seemed inappropriate. Accordingly, some action movies were shelved or their release postponed. The release of *V for Vendetta* was delayed because some scenes were reminiscent of the recent terrorist attack of July 7 on the London transport system. It was not until 2006 that the first big budget films arrived, such as *United 93* by director Paul Greengrass and *World Trade Center* by Oliver Stone. Both films struggle with the genre of the “spectacle movie”: *United 93* is careful to avoid spectacularization by minutely detailing the flight of the airplane that crashed in Pennsylvania; while *World Trade Center* takes the safe road by focusing on the last two men that were pulled from the rubble alive – the story of “true heroes.”⁵

To date, then, films about the terrorist attacks of September 11 are relatively rare. One of the few exceptions was an extraordinary film made in 2002, just a year after the attacks, which consisted of eleven shorts by famous directors from all over the world. Every film lasts exactly eleven minutes, nine seconds, and one frame, yielding the title of the film: *11'09"01*. The film received the “Special Prize” at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival. Because the eleven short films produce an interesting kaleidoscopic vision of the September events, and resist spectacularization, I will discuss them in more detail.

⁵ A couple of films use Ground Zero as a backdrop, without giving it any particular function in the story, such as Spike Lee's *25th Hour* (2002). In contrast, *Munich* (2005), Steven Spielberg's film about an Israeli death squad determined to eliminate the Palestinian terrorists who killed Israeli athletes during the 1972 Olympics in Munich, ends with a minute-long shot of Manhattan with the Twin Towers still in place. The message is that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is, on a symbolic level, connected to the attack of September 11. Some European films took 9/11 as a backdrop to investigate complex interethnic relations between Arabic immigrants and white Europeans, such as the German films *September* and *Fremder Freund* (Foreign Friend), both from 2003. *September* used the images of the attack on television as a background for complicated love relations tells loosely connected love stories, one of which involves a Pakistani and a German struggling over the interpretation of the terrorist assault: the woman feels that her Muslim husband does not take enough critical distance from the attack. *Fremder Freund* focuses on a close friendship between Chris, a Berliner, and Yunus, a Yemeni who disappears after 9/11, suggesting that he was in some way involved in the attack. In the Dutch comedy *Shouf Shouf Habibi* (Albert ter Heerdt, 2004) Dutch Moroccan Muslims make passing remarks about 9/11 as if it were an event they had already forgotten.

A major problem that a filmmaker has to solve is how to offer a visual answer to the well-known television images of the disaster. This causes a dilemma: how to visualize a disaster that is already settled in our memory? One solution is not show it at all. Thus one of the most moving short films of *11'09'01*, by director Gonzáles Iòarritu, presents a virtually black screen for eleven minutes, nine seconds and one frame, now and then interrupted by an image of a man falling from the tower.⁶ The complex sound track consists of ritual prayers in a foreign language and sound footage from the disaster: sirens, the collapsing building, bystanders screaming. The spectator watches minutes of blackness while the murmuring voices and the ambient noise increase, then there is silence, a flash of a falling man, and so on. Likewise, filmmaker Michael Moore does not show the attack on the Twin Towers in his documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004): in the beginning of the film, he presents the spectator with a black image accompanied by the ethereal music of Arvo Pärt and the sounds of the disaster and startled reactions of witnesses.

In both cases, the black screen is quite terrifying, even when viewed years later. This is probably due to two effects: first, since the images of 9/11 have become part of our cultural and visual memory, the performance of memory can thus be easily evoked. While we watch the black screen hearing familiar sounds (in both films, the well-known sounds of someone saying “oh my God”), almost anybody can immediately visualize the familiar images of the disaster. This points to a paradox in the culture of the spectacle: an impressive image only has impact when we no longer see it, because the repetition of these images has a dulling or numbing effect. It also shows that the effect of the sound track is particularly powerful in a culture that privileges images over sound. Sound still has a more direct and affective power – show a film without the sound, and its effect is dramatically weakened. Both *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *11'09'01* make use of the emotional effects of sound.⁷ With sound there is no corresponding confusion about fact and fiction, while, as I have argued above, the image prompts the spectator to constantly evaluate the relationship between reality, image, and imagination. As King argues, sound establishes the modality of the real and the

⁶ The image of the falling man has become one of the iconic images of September 11; e.g. the British documentary by Hamisch Mykura, *9/11: The Falling Man* (2002); the pictures at the end of Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005); or the recent book by postmodernist author Don DeLillo: *Falling Man* (2007).

⁷ National Public Radio (USA) has created a lasting memorial Website of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center. It is quite unique and moving to listen to the array of ambient noise, personal voices, and music; again the sounds seem to have a stronger affective impact than the by now all-too-familiar images. Cohen and Willis (“One Nation”) claim that the aural memorial “commemorate[s] and sustain[s] an imagined aural community through the creation of a digital soundscape” (593). See: www.sonicmemorial.com.

authentic (King, "Like a Movie" 53).⁸ In 2002, relatively soon after the attack, these films had to look for ways of reasserting the real over the performance.

Another way of addressing the overwhelming visual spectacle of September 11 is by putting the terrorist attack in a broader political and social context – for example, by focusing on different historical or political conflicts in other parts of the world. Of the eleven short films in *11'09"01*, eight are about such political struggles or economic problems: Afghani refugees in Iran; a bombing of Beirut in the 1980 s; the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina; the assassination of Salvador Allende in Chili on September 11 1973; a bomb attack in Tel Aviv; the Second World War in Japan; and the AIDS crisis in Africa. In these cases, the attacks in New York and Washington function as a trigger for personal memories of traumatic experiences elsewhere in the world. This puts the American response to the attack on September 11, as singular as that attack was, into some perspective. Without trivializing the horrors of September 11, the short films indicate that there are many "small histories" of violent conflicts in the world with large numbers of victims that are just as innocent, and in which, more often than not, the United States played a role. In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore questions the international role of the United States by filming the suffering of both wounded Iraqi citizens and American soldiers, images that are usually censored on American television. In his usual loud and provocative style, Moore also reveals the huge economic stakes of American companies, including the oil industry, in the Iraq war.

Only two of the eleven films of *11'09"01* are actually set on the location and day of the attack. Interestingly enough, both short films feature a character who does not know what is happening, although their apartments are located near the Twin Towers. In the film by Claude Lelouch, a French deaf woman has her television turned on, but is not watching because she is arguing with her lover online. In the film by Sean Penn, the only American film in the collection, a demented widower living in Manhattan is mourning the death of his wife. When the towers collapse, their dark shadows disappear from the walls of his apartment and a beam of sunlight can enter the room. The old man is literally glowing while he looks ecstatically up at the sky. Does he perhaps think he died and is now in heaven? The images of shadow and light are a simple, but effective way to shift the perspective from mass murder to a possible spiritual redemption.

One would normally find humour incongruous with the horrors of a terrorist attack of the scale of September 11. However, one of the shorts does make use of humour in a rather disarming way. In Idrissa Ouedraogo's film, people in the streets and on the markets of Burkina Faso are gathered around transistor radios

⁸ Of course, even sound has now become conventionalized, particularly in action films, with fight sequences punctuated with the obligatory thuds and crashing sounds bearing little or no resemblance to the sounds one would hear "in reality."

listening to the news on September 11. As in many so-called underdeveloped countries, radio is still the predominant technology of communication. A few street urchins hear the news, but it does not mean much to them in the context of their poverty and illnesses. One of the boys has a mother who is ill with AIDS and is unable to afford the necessary medication. As a consequence, he has to leave school in order to earn money. A few days after the attacks, the boys hear on the radio that the United States is offering a 25 million dollar reward for capturing Osama Bin Laden. They fantasize what they could do with such a huge amount of money: heal the sick of Burkina Faso and allow all children to go to school. When they think that they see Bin Laden in the marketplace (a rather comical look-alike – a lean and bearded Arabic man in a crowd of black Africans), they get very excited and try to catch him in the next few days. But the man escapes in a car and the children have to run after him barefoot. They realize he has gone to the airport and as he flies away, the children cry out: “Osama, Osama, please come back. We need you here.” Disillusioned, they return to their poor lives while dreaming of those 25 million dollars. Obviously, the sentence “Osama, please come back, we need you” can be rather shocking to a Western audience when taken out of context, but within the story it makes perfect sense and elicits a sympathetic smile.

In most of the shorts, the director shows the impact of the terrorist attacks of September 11 on people elsewhere. More often than not these people cannot even imagine the extent or significance of the attack, because within their local context it just makes no sense at all. Moreover, they are overwhelmed by their own problems and suffering: the widows of Srebrenica where 8000 unarmed Muslim men were killed under the eyes of UN forces; starving Afghani and African children; victims of terrorism, war, torture or dictatorship. By focusing on the many problems and conflicts in a globalized world, the eleven short films implicitly critique the dominance and arrogance of the United States for its lack of compassion and understanding of disenfranchised “others,” an arrogance “based on its crushing technical superiority rather than its elevated morality,” as Paul Virilio writes (Virilio, *Ground Zero* 36).

The Act of Witnessing

Film produces a different viewing experience than television, because it is watched in public, on a large screen, in a dark room, and without any distractions. *11'09"01* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* do not confuse the viewer about the ontological status of what is represented. Through aesthetic form and rhetorical persuasion, the films try to engage the spectator. The point here is not whether they are successful films in themselves (the quality of the eleven short films is uneven, and Michael Moore received substantial criticism for his bombastic use

of rhetoric), but rather whether they foster critical engagement on the part of the film spectator, allowing him or her to achieve greater insight and understanding. Such an engaged subject position is, in many ways, much more difficult to achieve for the television viewer: the context is missing in a live broadcast; there is the inevitable performance of the real; and the television viewer is put in a complicated ethical position. In the last part of this article I will discuss the possibility of an ethical response for television viewers in an era of global media.

As I have argued throughout this essay, the television viewer has a hard time experiencing the traumatic images of the 9/11 attacks as real rather than performed. The very moment the viewer realizes that the images are the horrible, naked truth, the act of looking becomes less innocent. The viewer is then thrust into the position of a witness: "Live footage is the genre of the witness, par excellence" (Chouliaraki, *Spectatorship* 159). Of course, the image is mediated through the camera, the network, and the television box, and the act of viewing takes place elsewhere and perhaps at another time. Nevertheless, the realization of the immediacy of the images, that "this was not fantasy. These were real events, happening to real people, affecting real lives" (to repeat the words of Kathy Smith), produces another way of looking. Viewers all over the world watched the unfolding of a disaster in the safety of their homes or pubs and they did so from every possible camera angle, and in slow motion. The television viewer of live disasters is in this sense an omniscient witness. Such omniscience used to be reserved for God. The power of modern media is the power to put the viewer in the god-like position of the all-seeing spectator.

What does it mean for the television viewer to witness a catastrophe without actually being present at the actual time and place? Theme parks such as Walt Disney World or Six Flags offer amusement and spectacle where the visitor can enjoy horror in safety. Similarly, viewers of a disaster on television are witnesses without being in danger themselves. To be a witness of a disaster "in real life" can be a traumatic event (although, as in the case of the roadside accident, we are nevertheless drawn to it). As we have seen, trauma is defined as an experience that one cannot comprehend or master, nor fully remember. Most people encounter trauma through the media these days, which is why Ann Kaplan argues it is paramount to carefully analyze mediatised trauma as different from experienced trauma (Kaplan, *Trauma Culture* 2).

While personal memory is always caught up in a process of forgetting, change, and repression, the situation is quite different for the television or internet viewer, for whom the camera has recorded durable images, from certain angles, with ambient sounds, and in a certain order. The many recorded images of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre do not allow the television viewer to *ever* forget or repress it. Moreover, the images are by now ubiquitous in our culture: regularly repeated on television; reprinted in many photo books (Bullaty et al., *World Trade Center*; Feldschuh, *September 11*; Peress, *New York*;

Vergara, *Twin Towers*); portraits of the deceased from the *New York Times* were published in a book (Raines, *Portraits*); CBS broadcasts came out on DVD with a book of photographs (Rather, *What we Saw*); there are round-the-clock cameras installed at Ground Zero yielding more images than anyone can process in a life time; documentaries and fiction features were produced; the proposals for rebuilding the site of the WTC were hotly debated (Stephens et al., *Imagining*; Weijers, "Minimalism"); and there was even a comic strip made of the Report by National Commission on Terrorist Attacks (Jacobson and Colon, *9/11 Report*). Yet, the omnipresence of the images and the omniscience of the viewer do not necessarily lead to comprehension or to constructive action. We may *see* it all, but we understand little, and can *do* nothing. In other words, the position of the viewer is also one of powerlessness or even passivity. Many television viewers thus struggle with a complicated viewing position that wavers between impotence and omnipotence.

This sense of helplessness is exacerbated by a culture of fear and anxiety. For Brian Massumi fear, in late capitalism, is no longer an emotion but an objective mode of being (Massumi, *Everyday Fear*). While he has a tendency to blame the media for creating a "landscape of fear" (24), he quite rightly points to capitalism's interest in "eternalizing crisis without sacrificing profits" (19). The psychological effect of wealth and well-being is the fear of losing it: the safer, richer and healthier people are, the more they dread that it will all be taken away from them. The sociologist Ulrich Beck has explained that modern culture has given rise to a society organized around responding to risks (Beck, *Risk Society*). The notion of risk is generated by a preoccupation with safety, hence citizens try to cover and secure themselves against any imaginable danger – insurance policies being the most obvious expression of this. With its modern technology modernity has produced a "society of risk" in the sense that accidents and disasters are mostly man-made, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Madrid 2002, and London 2005.

Paul Virilio already observed in the 1980s that accidents are connected to modern technology. The "accident is diagnostic of technology": the invention of the train implies the event of derailment (in Der Derian, *Virilio Reader* 20). To adjust the example of Virilio, the invention of the airplane implies the airplane crash, and the invention of the skyscraper implies its possible collapse. Virilio argues that a highly developed society dependent on its technology finds itself in a constant state of fear of the accident. Or, as Massumi put it: "It is our culture: the perpetual imminence of the accident. Better, the immanence of the accident." (Massumi, *Everyday Fear* 10). Television feeds this anxiety because the constant flow of information offers the spectacle of permanent crises. The terror of real-time television broadcast is, for Virilio, connected to the fear that technology evokes in making the accident absolute. As he wrote prophetically in

1995: “we will soon see the emergence of the accident to end all accidents” (in Der Derian, *Virilio Reader* 183).

The live aspect of television lends itself perfectly to natural or man-made disasters. An interesting sequence from Moore’s inflammatory documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* shows how politicians deliberately play on fear and anxiety in order to justify an unlawful war for their political and economical purposes. In a media society, fear can take on immense proportions, because the viewers experience the disaster as if it happened just around the corner. Viewers may “witness” a disaster on their television sets almost every day, but when they look out of the window of their homes, the street appears calm and quiet. Such mixed emotions result in an indefinable sense of insecurity. As W. J. T. Mitchell puts it: “We live in a time that is best described as a limbo of continually deferred expectations and anxieties.” (Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want* 321–2).

Citizens are thus trapped in a spiral of anxiety. Afraid of the disaster that is waiting for them, viewers glue themselves to the television that offers even more misfortune. Watching such images of doom and disaster confirms the fear that a calamity may strike at any moment. More perversely, fear and anxiety make the television viewer long for more and for worse. In his novel *Saturday*, Ian McEwan writes: “Everyone fears it, but there’s also a darker longing in the collective mind, a sickening for self-punishment and a blasphemous curiosity.” (McEwan, *Saturday* 176). In our media culture such dark desires are intimately bound up with a libidinal investment in Hollywood’s fantasy world.

Towards an Ethics of Spectatorship

The question as to what kind of ethical position is available for the television viewer in a culture of “real virtuality,” is a question that has, surprisingly, not been addressed much in media studies. Susan Sontag resists the postmodern analysis of media culture as a real virtuality because she thinks that the disappearance of the dividing line between the real and the unreal undermines an ethical position (Sontag, *Pain of Others*). I disagree with this view. First, as I have shown in this essay, we cannot easily disregard or undo the fundamental confusion between the real and the performed, actual and virtual, in a globalized (and increasingly digitized) media culture. Second, I believe an ethical position can be only coherent with, but also necessarily part of the critical stance I take in this essay. We require an understanding of the performative aspect of media culture in order to counteract its perverse effects. As Morley and Robins argue, an analysis of the relation to the “mediated” and the “real” may be complex, but is necessary for an understanding of the psychic investment of the viewer in the images of suffering (Morley/Robins, “Western Eyes” 141). Media culture may be complex and full

of contradictions and paradoxes, but it can nonetheless be analyzed, criticized, and accounted for.

Lilie Chouliaraki contends that media theory has only recently addressed the issue of a possible ethical sensibility for the viewer when watching violence and suffering on television (Chouliaraki, *Spectatorship*). One of the effects of the globalization of media is to be exposed to images of suffering from all over the world, often of “distant sufferers” in faraway countries (Chouliaraki, *Spectatorship* 1). In the case of September 11, the shock was partly due to its performative aspect; as W. J. T. Mitchell aptly remarks, the destruction of the Twin Towers was *staged* as a spectacle by the terrorists.⁹ The shock was also partly due to the novel position of US citizens as victims, a position of “suffering, fear, and death that many people endure on a daily basis in violent and insecure situations in other parts of the world” (Kellner, *From 9/11* 54). Although for Europe the images were from across the Atlantic, the identification with the imagined community of the West was strong enough to establish “a degree of proximity” (Chouliaraki, *Spectatorship* 160). The famous slogan “Nous sommes tous Américains” by Colombani in *Le Monde* demonstrated the sympathetic identification of Europeans (and others around the world) with the United States a few days after the attack, an empathy that was quickly lost after the US started attacking Afghanistan and Iraq.

When television forces the spectator into the position of the eyewitness, it “at once exposes us to, and insulates us from, actual suffering” (Morley/Robins, “Western Eyes” 141). Television images of suffering elicit emotional responses that are undoubtedly complex, ranging from being relieved that it did not happen to you, via malicious delight and sensationalism, to sincere grief and sorrow. As I argued above, such ambivalent feelings can easily lead to fear, inertia, and powerlessness. A modest first step in overcoming feelings of fear and powerlessness lies in accepting the responsibilities of being a witness. When we are a bystander in a disaster, accident, or crime “in real life,” we can be called upon to be a witness. In trauma studies, the position of the witness is of paramount importance (Caruth, *Trauma*). It carries with it an explicit acknowledgement of the suffering of the other and a responsibility for the act of witnessing: “Exposed to trauma, the self emerges as taking responsibility, as responding to what is happening before his/her eyes” (Zylinska, “Mediating murder” 240).

The question here is how the television viewer of global media might respond to the witnessing of global suffering on a daily basis. Obviously, there are no easy answers to this question. Kaplan argues that media images can only be seen as “at most vicarious trauma, not as experiencing trauma itself” (Kaplan, *Trauma*

⁹ Mitchell writes: “The real target was a globally recognizable icon, and the aim was not merely to destroy it but to stage its destruction” (*What Do Pictures Want* 14).

Culture 90). Such images can evoke an overwhelming response of empathy, but also what she calls an “empty response” when images of suffering “are provided without any context or background knowledge” (91). Chouliaraki suggests that a possible response to the spectacle of a terrorist attack like September 11 can be a mixture of identification and reflexivity (Chouliaraki, *Spectatorship*). Identification requires an involved spectator who is inspired by feelings of pity and empathy that allow for the possibility of a virtual substitution: “we are all Americans.” Reflexivity requires more distance for “impartial deliberation and rational judgment” (Chouliaraki, *Spectatorship* 179), for example, by understanding the role of the media or by putting the event in its historical and political context.

Rosi Braidotti argues that ethics is primarily about learning how to relate to human alterity (Braidotti, *Transpositions*). We need to acknowledge and feel compassion for the pain and suffering of others, but we also need to work through it. For Braidotti, that means transforming negative into positive affects: “pain into compassion, loss into a sense of bonding, isolation into care” (Braidotti, *Transpositions* 214). The television image of the suffering of the other, then, poses a challenge for the television viewer. Whether the images are real or performed, ethical accountability remains crucial at the very moment when watching turns into witnessing. Perhaps Donna Haraway’s notion of the “modest witness” can be of use here. Haraway revamps the figure of the modest witness from modern science in order to politicize practices of witnessing: “Witnessing is seeing; attesting; standing publicly accountable for, and psychically vulnerable to, one’s visions and representations” (Haraway, *Modest_Witness* 267). Thus we can rethink the spectator position in terms of empathy and affinity. For Haraway, such a position is always located or situated rather than detached or uncaring: “Location is the always partial, always finite [...]”; and: “Location is also partial in the sense of being *for* some worlds and not others” (Haraway, *Modest_Witness* 37). This is clearly not an individualized act of heroism. Rather, the accountability of witnessing involves care and compassion, as well as choice: for example, the choice for a better world. For Kaplan, too, vicarious witnessing by watching suffering through the media, for example in an event like 9/11, involves a deliberate ethical consciousness: “Witnessing involves wanting to change the kind of world where injustice, of whatever kind, is common” (Kaplan, *Trauma Culture* 122).

As a modest witness, the television viewer can respond to real and virtual images of suffering in two ways: affectively through empathy or identification, and intellectually through reflexivity and knowledge.¹⁰ Either way, ethical ac-

¹⁰ The need to understand the complexities of global mass media in relation to an ethics of spectatorship points to the necessity of visual literacy in the educational system, which is still rather undeveloped in most Western countries.

countability involves an active and affirmative response. Such a response is always local and situated in the here and now, for example by writing a check, by being nice to the person behind the counter in the supermarket, or by putting into perspective “my comfort and ‘place under the sun’ ” (Zylinska, “Mediating murder” 243), as we saw in the shorts of *11’09’01*. These are perhaps small, and rather modest, acts of charity, kindness, and care, but they are a first step out of the vicious circle of anxiety and powerlessness in which modern media culture ensnares us. We can resist the mediated memories of whichever disaster by using our ability to criticize, by separating the real from the unreal, and by allowing ourselves to be moved by the suffering of others, following our emotional response on the path to action.

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