9/11 and the Cost of Remembering

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Rendering of 'Reflecting Absence': The 9/11 Memorial currently under construction at the former site of the World Trade Center (visualisation by Squared Design Lab, 9/11 Memorial).

When thinking about myth and memory, one must consider not only the cost of forgetting, but also the cost of remembering. Is the War on Terror the necessary cost of remembering? 9/11 has become a generation-defining moment not through necessity, but by mass consent. Certainly within academia we have, almost without question, accepted the 'post 9/11' discourse; a discourse which sees radical differences between the world prior to 9/11/2001, and the world we now inhabit. As David Simpson argues, 'The event has been and will be made to mark a new epoch, and as such it is already generating a mythology and a set of practices of its own.'[1]

By describing the BP oil spill crisis in the Gulf of Mexico as an 'environmental 9/11,'[2] President Barack Obama was guilty of the same kind of rhetoric as his predecessor. Whilst he was undoubtedly attempting to elevate the gravity of the situation in the minds of the public, using the comparison in such a baseless fashion devalues it. It is an example of the signifier of 9/11 being used in a utilitarian way by the US government as a means of manipulating the strong feelings of pain and loss that many still feel in response to the event. There is no doubt that, in the case of 9/11, it is not simply an act of remembrance but also of reinterpretation. 9/11 has, in effect, already been mythologised.

'Reflecting Absence' is the huge memorial project currently under construction on the former site of the World Trade Center. In 2003, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation launched a global competition to design the memorial. The competition received 5,201 entries from artists and architects around the world. As the name suggests, the winning memorial design is certainly sombre. To this extent, the architect has resisted the temptation to eulogise the dead, but the language of loss and absence used to describe the memorial is also a retreat, or a recoiling, from the event itself. An examination of the language used in the proposal shows us just that: 'This memorial proposes a space that resonates with the feelings of loss and absence that were generated by the destruction of the World Trade Center.'[3] 'Reflecting Absence' consists of two pools of water situated where the towers once stood, described as: 'large voids, open and visible reminders of

1. D. Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), p.16
2. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10307782 [accessed 14/6/2010]
3. http://www.wtcsitememorial.org/fin7.html [accessed 5/6/2010]

the absence.'[4] These pools are surrounded by an arrangement of trees forming small clearings and groves.

The scale of the loss is something that the architect, Michael Arad, felt it important to convey through his designs. There is a sense that the destruction of 9/11, and the deep outpouring of emotion which followed, is somehow unattainable; that it cannot be assimilated into consciousness. This is also to be found in Arad's description of the experience which the memorial would offer:

> At the bottom of their descent, they find themselves behind a thin curtain of water, staring out at an enormous pool. Surrounding this pool is a continuous ribbon of names. The enormity of this space and the multitude of names that form this endless ribbon underscore the vast scope of the destruction. Standing there at the water's edge, looking at a pool of water that is flowing away into an abyss, a visitor to the site can sense that what is beyond this curtain of water and ribbon of names is inaccessible.[5]

The designs themselves may hold a sense of beauty, peace, and respect, but it is the concept which is troubling. 'Reflecting Absence', both in its name and its design, seems to suggest a void which can never be filled. It demands that we are somehow indebted to loss. By reflecting the absence we are not able to deal with it and move on. But in the case of the 9/11 memorial, are we mourning the absence of bodies or the absence of buildings? Whilst the names which appear on the memorial are representative of the human damage caused, it is the fact that the waterfalls are effectively the sunken footprints of the former World Trade Center towers that suggests an ambiguity as to what we are mourning. Then there is the case of the temporary memorial.

In the immediate aftermath of September 11th, and before an official memorial could be built, six designers worked together, creating a $500,000 tribute to the World Trade Center. This temporary memorial consisted of 88 searchlights pointed towards the sky to create the illusion of two 'phantom towers' looming over the Manhattan skyline.[6] The memorial proved so popular, in fact, that when it was finally removed, many

complained: 'they had become accustomed to the phantom towers, as if they represented an actual structure.'[7] The idea that these were ghostly towers personifies the buildings in such a way as to question whether it was the buildings themselves, those massive monuments to wealth and success, which became the objects of grief in the days after 9/11. There was, perhaps, something comforting in the towers of light, a sense of that indestructibility that was lost the day the towers, in their corporeal form, collapsed, and that has since been replaced by the reality of the brittle nature of peace, freedom, democracy, and capitalism itself inside the United States. As Jean Baudrillard poetically describes, the collapse of the towers was not the end for them, but rather part of their transformation:

> ...although the two towers have disappeared, they have not been annihilated. Even in their pulverized state, they have left behind an intense awareness of their presence. No one who knew them can cease imagining them and the imprint they made on the skyline from all points of the city. Their end in material space has borne them off into a definitive imaginary space. By the grace of terrorism, the World Trade Center has become the world's most beautiful building – the eighth wonder of the world![8]

But it is surely war, not beauty, that drives the memory of the World Trade Center today.

The sense of grief without an end, which is so clearly articulated by 'Reflecting Absence', is concurrent with the same principle as the War on Terror. Just as the war can have no end, since terror itself is an abstract concept and therefore not a force to be defeated, neither too can the absence be made into presence, since our attempts to do this meet with reflection. Both the continual cycle of the waterfalls and the 'endless' ribbon of names continue the theme of an unanswerable absence. The 9/11 memorial is the perfect example of the desire *not* to move on, *not* to forget, but to keep fresh the memory of the attacks so that it can be evoked whenever required, and for whatever purpose is required of it.

It is not just through the symbolism of the memorial that these ideas are disseminated to the public at large. The rhetoric surrounding 9/11 has been extended to all areas of news, culture, and

4. Ibid
5. Ibid
6. W.W. Dixon, *Visions of the Apocalypse: Spectacles of Destruction in American Cinema* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), p.37

7. Ibid
8. J. Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (New York: Verso, 2002), p.48

authority. Words like 'liberate' replace 'conquer' in the vocabulary of the military, and the word 'terror' is being used to justify the occupation of, and interference in, countries and regions. Culture has been mobilised in order to facilitate the transition to an outwardly aggressive foreign policy. After September 11th, the media became saturated with a lexical rhetoric, largely jingoistic, surrounding the day. Simpson describes how terms such as 'sacred ground', 'ground zero', 'shock and awe', 'infinite justice', 'enduring freedom', and 'freedom tower', all helped to shape the new culture that would arise in response to the attacks.[9] Furthermore, he argues that the description of the dead of 9/11 as 'heroes' is not only a state employed term designed to provoke an aggressive national pride, but that it is also simply wildly inaccurate. Those who died that day would not have thought of themselves as dying for any cause in particular, especially not in the name of American capitalism or globalisation.[10] However important it is to honour the dead, especially those wholly innocent people who died in the tragedy that was 9/11, to imply that they died for a cause, for a purpose, to attempt to give meaning to their deaths in this manner, reinforces the idea that they are casualties of war. But these were not combatants, and their deaths should not be falsely portrayed in this way:

> These deaths were not for the sake of freedom, even for *our* rather circumscribed version of that concept... [They have been] paraded to legitimate more deaths elsewhere – the deaths of others as innocent as themselves.[11]

Immortalising these innocent people as casualties who died a hero's death has not only given (false) meaning to their murder, but also a false meaning to the actions of those who committed the crime. It has leant a power to the cause of the terrorists and it has been used to 'legitimate more deaths elsewhere'.

The War on Terror has been couched in such a way that it is perceived by many as a war for freedom and, furthermore, a war against evil. In his book, *The Abuse of Evil*, Richard Bernstein describes how the term has been grossly misused since 9/11 and the dangers he associates with this 'abuse'[12]. Such a binary opposition as is presented by the

term 'evil' oversimplifies the complex political and socio-economic climate which is at the source of today's terrorist threat. The term is a particularly emotive one, making it difficult to analyse in any objective fashion: 'It is an abuse because, instead of inviting us to question and to *think*, this talk of evil is being used to stifle *thinking*.'[13] To express the opinion that terrorists are evil is to imply that they are motiveless, driven by an innate hatred and an unfathomable will to destroy. A similar view is expressed by Spotteswoode in Trey Parker's scathing puppet comedy, *Team America: World Police*:

> SPOTTESWOODE: "I hate to break this to you Gary, but some people out there want you dead. They're called terrorists, Gary. And they hate everything about you."
> GARY: "Why? What did I do to them? I'm just a Broadway actor."
> SPOTTESWOODE: "It's not who you are, Gary, it's what you stand for. And every single minute, of every single day, the terrorists are planning new ways to kill you and everyone else who lives in a free country. The only thing standing in their way is us."

Whilst many works of popular culture have tended to support increased militarisation and promote a culture of fear, there have also been examples of texts which have scrupulously denied the claims of government and in turn ridiculed them. Amongst the conspiracy theories suggested by texts such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* and the internet movie sensation *Zeitgeist*, the popular tract of *Team America* stands out as one of the most interesting satirical attacks on US foreign policy and cultural attitudes.[14] *Team America* operates within this 'simplistic duality' of the terrorist as 'other' (the evil to America's good), in order to attack it and display its inherent falseness. But whilst the film may highlight the dangers of stereotyping, fear mongering, and the politics of both left and right, it is notable most for its non-conformity at a time when the party-line is so often toed:

> The post-September 11 era in the United States has been a time of great political conformity. The news media have played a central role in defining the boundaries of reasonable opinion, emphasizing national resolve and unity, legitimizing a discourse

9. Simpson, p.17
10. Simpson, pp.48-49
11. Simpson, p.47
12. For a full discussion of the impact of the term evil, see R.J. Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion Since 9/11* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p.10

13. Bernstein, p.11
14. *Fahrenheit 9/11.* Dir. M. Moore. USA. Fellowship Adventure Group. 2004; *Zeitgeist.* Dir. P. Joseph. USA. GMP. 2007; *Team America: World Police.* Dir. T. Parker. USA. Paramount Pictures. 2004

that likens dissent to a soft form of treason, and spreading fear, including routine references to the color-coded "terror alert" level on the cable news channels.[15]

As William Hoynes so carefully describes in his article, 'Embedded', the impact of the news media on shaping public opinion in these delicate matters is undeniable. Hoynes claims that the high number of 'embedded' journalists bringing coverage from the front line of the Iraq war was part of a broader scheme designed to increase public support for it. Just as the 9/11 footage reshaped the event into a kind of fictional movie, the 'embedded' journalists have turned news of the recent conflicts into a live action movie which cannot help but glorify its content.

When the powerful forces of culture, the media, and government come together in such a way as occurred following 9/11, the subsequent shift in discourse can create an ideological tidal wave that sweeps away opposition, fortifying the binary relationship between good and evil, us and them. What we have been left with after the attacks is not a stronger sense of global unity, as some might claim, but an unanswerable absence. Constantly bombarded by the reminder that, since 9/11, we live in a very different, very dangerous, world; constantly told that a world of evil exists which we must find the resolve to defeat: the threat will never be over. This is the cost of remembering 9/11: the cost of war, and the cost of terror. The cost of remembering 9/11 is that we will never again be allowed to forget.

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15. W. Hoynes, 'Embedded: The News of War and the War Over News', in *Popping Culture*, ed. M. Pomerance & J. Sakeris, (Boston: Pearson, 2010), p.245

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Web Resources

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