

## **Spectators after 9/11: This is (not) like a Hollywood film.**

**Vicente Diaz Gandasegui**

The New York events have radicalized the relation of images to reality, in the same way as they have radicalized the global situation. While before we dealt with an unbroken abundance of banal images and an uninterrupted flow of spurious events, the terrorist attack in New York has resurrected both the image and the event. (...) The image consumes the event, that is, it absorbs the latter and gives it back as consumer goods. (...) one might perceive (maybe with a certain relief) a resurgence of the real, and of the violence of the real, in a supposedly virtual universe. But does reality really prevail over fiction? If it seems so, it is because reality has absorbed the energy of fiction, and become fiction itself. One could almost say that reality is jealous of fiction, that the real is jealous of the image... It is as if they duel, to find which is the most unimaginable (Baudrillard, 2001)

The events of 9/11 transformed the perception and the way of seeing images for a large portion of the world's population. Reality seems different after 9/11 and reciprocally the same can be said about fiction, blurring, once again, the thin line that separates these two very abstract concepts. Indeed, 9/11 cannot only be observed as a terrorist attack, a massive act of destruction, but also as the most relevant media event of the XXI century and the inflection point of our (post)modern era. The events of 9/11 were doubtless planned to be broadcast around the world with a symbolism to exceed the human, economical and political repercussions. The images generated by 9/11 have somehow transformed the reality of the event. As Frederic Jameson noticed, our society has become used to the 'transformation of reality into images' (Jameson, 1988: 20) and to that extent Baudrillard, referring to this particular event adds, 'Terrorism would be nothing without the media' (Baudrillard, 2001).

The target, the World Trade Centre, an emblem of the American and capitalist world was also a highly visible construction that represented the technological development of modernity, a monument that could easily be broadcast from different perspectives. Therefore, the election of the scenario by the terrorists was very relevant, as Chomsky and Chouliaraki observed, to

make patent that the guns were 'directed the other way' (Chomsky, 2001: 12) and this became 'traumatic because it confronts spectators with a new definition of the possible: the sudden and dramatic reversal of the safety-danger space-times. The West is now a sufferer and a witness of suffering' (Chouliaraki, 2006: 175).

The whole world, in one way or another, was shocked at the live events broadcast from New York or the compulsive repetition, in an endless television loop, of the two jets colliding with the towers. Indeed, the repetition of the impacts and collapse of the towers have not entirely faded away today from our television screens, but more often than not they are used to explain and justify internal and external American terrorist policies.

### **Spectators of the spectacular (un)reality of 9/11**

[After the terrorists attacks of 9/11 the] Real which returns has the status of a(nother) semblance: precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its excessive / traumatic character, we are unable to integrate into it (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition (Žižek, 2002: 19).

Spectators and the media were necessarily affected and transformed after 9/11, an event, probably the most widely documented disaster ever broadcast, that acquired the category of 'an image-event' (Baudrillard, 2001). The collision of the planes against the Twin Towers and their subsequent collapse was recorded in the historical retina together with other events such as the Kennedy's assassination, the first steps on the moon or the fall of Berlin Wall. However, the spectacular nature of 9/11 superseded anything that was broadcast before on television (live or not) and also most of the fictional productions ever made.

If there are images that are defined as shocking, the collision and collapse of the World Trade Centre constitutes the paradigm of spectacularity in (post)modern times. The images were amazing in a cinematographic way and simultaneously horrifying (even being mostly bloodless); the spectators were left to deal with this duality in their own individual way. In this regard, Kathy Smith questions the dialectical and dual relationship of the spectators

facing the aesthetic fascination and the ethical involvement with the images: 'why are fictional representations of disaster 'pleasurable', and for the spectator, how does the experience of watching fantasy differ from that of watching reality?' (Smith, 2005: 60). We find pleasure in fiction because it represents our (shared) fears, anxieties and hopes, knowing that what we watch is not real. Spectacular disaster Hollywood films of the 90's are, as King notes, 'enjoyable fantasies of destruction, enjoyable because they are meant to belong to the territory of fantasy' (King, 2005: 49). Therefore, when the fictional spectacularity increases, resembling reality, we enjoy the experience, as the distance from our reality produces a 'safety gap'. What the images of 9/11 did was to close the gap that audiovisual technologies had created in the last few decades, as reality became very similar to our fantasies. Hence, we not only have to be concerned about the confusion of reality and unreality provoked by the technological culture of the copy and the simulation, but also, 9/11 has demonstrated that reality can 'mirror' fiction in a very spectacular way. Consequently, the concept of *spectacular* in films is necessarily different after 9/11. Digital special effects cannot imitate the emotions and feelings aroused in the spectators by the attacks on the Twin Towers and all the previous efforts to amaze the audience have been annihilated by the reality of the image.

### **Was 9/11 like a movie?**

[On 9/11 the] fantasmatic screen apparition entered our reality. It is not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality (...) Where have we seen the same thing over and over again? (...) America got what it fantasised about and that was the biggest surprise (Zizek, 2002: 16-18).

The expression 'it is like a movie' was probably the most frequently phrase heard during and after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Films like *Die Hard* (McTiernan, 1988), *Independence Day* (Emmerich, 1996), *Armageddon* (Bay, 1998), *Deep Impact* (Leder, 1998) or *Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999) were the precedents of spectacular disaster Hollywood productions that created the feeling of déjà vu in a significant portion of the television audience that watched the impact of the jets and the collapse of the two towers live on the

small screen. These films were the only 'referent to fall back on in the face of such apocalyptic destruction. (...) There was a horrible way in which the ghastly imagery of 9/11 was stuff we had already made for ourselves as entertainment first' (Dixon, 2004: 9-10).

Therefore, the spectator needed a few moments to assimilate the filmic imaginaries to the reality of the facts, and realise that what was broadcast on television was not another blockbuster Hollywood disaster film but real images of the World Trade Centre. Fiction and reality are not easily distinguishable when they are both images. How to distinguish between reality and fiction is just a matter of considering the new information in light of the knowledge we already have (Howie, 2007: 4).

Indeed, it seems strange to compare the cinematographic examples of building disasters as the actual terrorist attack made the fiction less credible than before 9/11. Reality has infiltrated fantasy and consequently has transformed it, modifying our perception of unreality and our memories of it. Reciprocally, reality was *fictionalised* with the appearance of an identified villain and the presentation of the heroes, the New York firemen, which made the aftermath of 9/11 analogous to a Hollywood film. In this regard, the questions that arise are: did the broadcast of the 9/11 events (intentionally) imitate filmic conventions? Or did the way the spectators watched the broadcast of the events of 9/11 follow cinematographic codes? As Geoff King indicates, there seems to be a complicated and dialectic relationship between both the reality of 9/11 and media constructions: the enormous reality of 9/11 is also linked to the existing imagery (King, 2005: 54).

The events that followed the devastation which occurred on 9/11 affected the way in which we perceive films, transforming our symbolic and epistemological system. This episode was beyond our imagination, beyond our words and, in Lacanian terms, we can say that it was necessary to reconcile the real and the symbolic to understand its consequences (Smith, 2005: 60). The (un)reality of films was superseded by reality on 9/11 and therefore cinema required a different kind of perception to offer to its spectators as the boundaries of imagination became altered. In this respect, it is interesting to analyse how some filmmakers have approached the trauma of this historical

episode with different cinematic perspectives and techniques, reflecting the (un)reality of the event in very diverse ways.

*United 93* (Greengrass, 2006) is a film about the partially known experiences of the passengers on the flight which crashed in Pennsylvania. *United 93* reflects, paradigmatically, the cinematographic paradoxical (con)fusion of reality and unreality. Merging documented facts with fictionalisation and speculation of the events, *United 93* narrates the story using realistic techniques in a very filmic way, increasing the tension during the footage and including heroes and villains. Consequently the fictitious, as unknown, elements of the films become more relevant than the real and factual ones and the questions about the veracity of the events overcome the shocking experience of watching a film based on real facts.

In this sense, *World Trade Centre* (Stone, 2006) shares some of the elements of *United 93*, as it intends to place the spectator not only in front of a well known real event, but also a real story immersed in it. However, in *World Trade Centre*, Hollywood influence is more patent and the heroes, happy ending and American spirit are stressed in a film that Oliver Stone promised to be politically implicated (Rickli, 2009: 10) and eventually became a typical disaster movie, which, in spite of the implicit trauma of the historical event, does not shock the spectator any further. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of *World Trade Centre* is how it merged real footage from the event with fiction in a way that simultaneously makes evident the 'cinematography' of the 9/11 and the confusing boundary that separates real footage and fiction image.

Finally, the television production *The Path to 9/11* (Cunningham, 2006), attempts to gain audiovisual credibility for the spectator with the use of an unsteady camera, the intentional use of unframed, unfocussed and uncorrected colours and the resultant pretence of amateurism. Hence, the film dramatised and partly fictionalised many of the previous events that led to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 combining documentary techniques with filmic conventions; the mini-series attempts to recreate reality to immerse the spectator in the plot and the facts that are disclosed.

Immediately after the events of 9/11, even if it was not for a long period, Hollywood shifted the tendency of producing big budget disaster films to more fantastic stories such as in *Lord of the Rings* (Jackson, 2001-2003) or *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Columbus, 2001), films in which the spectator demonstrated a certain escapism from their reality instead of an interest in it. Reality was too real and painful to be narrated and described. However, one of the ironies that 9/11 presented to cinematographic spectators is that cinematic images of the Twin Towers as they used to appear were for a time deemed more harmful than images of those same buildings at the exact moment of their destruction (Schneider, 2005: 36). Can fiction be more deleterious than reality?

## **Documenting 9/11**

There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience.  
And there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential (Baudrillard, 1994: 12-13)

There is an ever increasing number of documentaries about 9/11 responding to the avid demand from spectators, making true the expression of 'blockbuster documentaries, a term that just a few years ago would have been derided as an oxymoron' (Higgins, 2005: 22). All the aspects of the events have been analysed from different perspectives and using a wide variety of documentary techniques. Whilst most of the documentaries about 9/11 (*Millionaire Widows* (Wells, 2008), *9/11 Conspiracy Files* (Smith, 2006), *The Falling Man* (Singer, 2006) or *Phone Calls from the Towers* (Kent, 2009)) follow a classic structure of personal impressions of witnesses, survivors, relatives or friends, combined with real audiovisual documentation of the events, all of which is narrated and connected by a voice-over narrator, there are a few distinctive and relevant exceptions to this pattern that put the spectator in front of different audiovisual disjunctives.

The documentary *9/11* (Hanlon, 2002) was filmed when the Naudet brothers, following a novice fireman in New York, became direct witnesses of the events and constitutes the only known footage of both the impact of the first jet and the collapse of Tower 2 from the lobby of Tower 1. *9/11* has been

imbued with cinematographic Hollywood style, in which realism meets narration, increasing the tension during the length of the film (in three clear acts) and casting doubt about the survival of the novice fireman, whose intervention in the post 9/11 interviews was suppressed to increase the tension. Interestingly, the novice fireman, who was intended to be the main protagonist in this documentary was (unintentionally) replaced in his role during the film by the two directors, whose involvement in the event transformed the film into the most real documentation of 9/11. Indeed, what makes *9/11* different is the knowledge that what is happening is real, probably not all the reality, as the filmmakers confessed the application of a certain self-censorship, but we do not have to learn the facts through other people's description, experiences and stories. *9/11* agitates the spectators because it is not possible to disbelieve what we watch and the images bring us back to the exact moment when we watched the terrorist attacks on television, but this time the surprise and scepticism of that day is replaced by the terrible knowledge of what is about to happen.

What *9/11* demonstrates is that even though fiction can imitate real footage with perfect credibility, what it cannot emulate are the feelings that arise in the spectator when he/she is aware that the footage is not just a representation of real facts. Special effects and digital technologies can deceive the spectator but cannot create the feeling of knowing that the people that we are watching are facing one of the most important moments in contemporary history. Confronting Baudrillard, and in spite of the images themselves being a representation of reality, somehow a *simulation*, it is important to accept that the scenes of *9/11* are not only reproducing reality but 'are' reality, and that makes them more powerful and impacting.

A good example of the contrary which reinforces the unique quality of real footage, is the documentary *9/11: The Twin Towers* (Dale, 2006). Which presents a reconstruction and dramatization of different stories inside the towers in which there is a clear component of fiction. *9/11: The Twin Towers* inserts interviews with people who lived through the experience in first person with relatives of those who died. In spite of the veridical stories that are narrated, actors interpreted both, those we see in the interviews and

those who died. The lack of resemblance amongst survivors and actors, together with unreliable scenarios transform a shocking real story in a fiction that (un)consciously raises questions in the spectators about the degree of (un)reality of the facts.

Finally, the largely acclaimed, controversial and award winning documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Moore, 2004) reflects the events of 9/11 from a different perspective, personal, ironic and highly politicised. *Fahrenheit 9/11* together with *Loose Change* (Avery, 2005) became a 'signpost in 9/11 counterculture that disputed a number of the facts reported about 9/11' (Howie: 2007: 2). The combination of interviews, personal reflections, use of fictional films and real footage results in an original product that avoids the spectacularity of the 9/11 images to the point that the impact of the jets are only audible whilst we watch a black screen. Indeed, *Fahrenheit 9/11* is not about 9/11 but the political consequences of the attacks. Therefore, the spectators are positioned away from the spectacularity of the terrorist attacks but, in a different political point of view, towards everything that surrounded and unleashed 9/11.

## Conclusions

If it seems that reality is a precondition for the image it is because the image has incorporated all the best characteristics of reality and improved upon them. Images of 9/11 and images in disaster movies are both real images. On 9/11 terrorism was not only an image: it was real. (...) The image of 9/11 and the Hollywood disaster movies that it so resembles merge to create something more powerful and terrifying than either 9/11 or the Hollywood movie alone. This is real fiction, and it is testament to the power of 9/11 and terrorism (Howie, 2007: 5).

In the days of digitalization and technological creation of the image, 9/11 and its media aftermath represented a symbolical involution in this path. The terrorist attacks carried in their image something other than the explosions of jets against buildings and the collapse of the towers, also, they included a symbolical message, that of the safe western society being in danger, something that we have only seen in fiction films before, and that

consequently provoked a trauma. The trauma also responded to the unexpected impact of the images as we did not buy a ticket or watch the film on our television screens before we watched such spectacular destruction; spectators were not ready for that, if such a thing is possible. Audiences were well prepared for fictional disasters but not real destruction that exceeds what digital technologies can produce in Hollywood.

As time and Hollywood productions have demonstrated, the resurgence of the real did not provoke the death of the fiction and the initial (in fact, very short) trauma of watching disasters and enjoying the vision of it was quickly redirected with a new appetite for destruction with the war against terrorism (*Black Hawk Down* (Scott, 2001)), natural disaster films that warn us of the climate change (*The Day After Tomorrow* (Emmerich, 2004)) or even, terrorist attacks in stadiums (*Incendiarly* (Maguire, 2008)). Would this mean that we are anticipating and hinting at another disaster, as Robert Altman said after the attacks?<sup>1</sup> I believe the success of these disaster films among audiences is based on an existing anxiety in the spectators; they are the consequence, the outcome of an (un)declared fear, not the cause of these threats. It is indeed surprising that there are not many more films about the events of 9/11 and its consequences. Perhaps we can find the reason for that in the impossibility of producing fictional images that can supersede the real footage of 9/11 and provoke an impact in the spectators.

9/11 established a new level of reality to measure fiction against and also put the spectators in a new symbolic position in which the western world is a victim and not only the saviour. In this sense the raw and cruel reality described in documentaries such as *9/11* shocks the spectator with something that before was only expected to be found in fiction, but this time the effect is different, because we know it is real and because we know what the explosions that we watched provoked.

The other alternative to look at such a traumatic event in our memories is through secondary sources, a fictionalisation of the events and characters, or the use of irony. The only serious way to approach certain

---

<sup>1</sup> Altman words after the attack were: 'The movies set the pattern and these people have copied the movies. Nobody would have thought to commit an atrocity like that unless they'd seen it in a movie. How dare we continue to show this kind of mass destruction in movies?' (Dixon, 2004: 143)

aspects of our culture is with humour, stripping the taboos and facing difficult aspects. Michael Moore has found the way to exploit this resource with documentaries that use irony and make the spectator laugh whilst approaching very serious questions from a very personal perspective, as with the arms industry in *Bowling for Columbine* (Moore, 2002) and the aftermath of September 11 in *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

Our world, our reality is not the same since 9/11 and therefore the spectators cannot be the same. The media is a reflection of our world as much as our world is a reflection of the media, and this double mirror has been modified with the shock and trauma generated by the certainty that terror can occur in any possible place at any given time. 'Terror' is not only the expression that defined the war that occurred after the terrorist attacks but, also, the concept that defines western mentality. Indeed, Arnold Schwarzenegger described audiences behaviour when asked about the early release of *Collateral Damage* (Davis, 2002) after 9/11 saying: 'people enjoy these movies because they feel it could be real' (Markowitz, 2004: 202). Therefore, when terror has assumed such relevance in our western (un)consciousness, media is not only assuming it, but also disseminating it. Spectators are active and passive elements in this equation that also involves ideology and media. Certainly, if reality has changed and media and the way it has broadcast (un)reality has changed, spectators have also changed the way they perceive the media (and the world).

## References

- BAUDRILLARD, J. (1994) *The Illusion of the End*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- BAUDRILLARD, J. (2001) 'El Terrorismo' [online] Available Internet: <http://www.henciclopedia.org.uy/autores/Baudrillard/TraducBaudrillard.htm>. [Accessed on 11/02/2004]
- CHOMSKY, N. (2001) *9-11*, New York: Seven Stories
- CHOULIARAKI, L (2006) *The spectatorship of Suffering*, London: Sage Publications.
- DIXON, W. W (2004) *Film and Television after 9/11*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- HIGGINS, L. A. (1995) 'Documentary in an Ago of Terror' , The Johns Hopkins University Press, 22 (2), p.20-38.
- HOWIE, L. (2007) 'Real Fiction: Witnessing Terrorism Without Violence' . [online] Available Internet: <http://www.tasa.org.au/conferences/conferencepapers07/papers/157.pdf> [Accessed 09/11/09]
- JAMESON, F. (1998) *The cultural turn : selected writings on the postmodern, 1983-1998*, London; Verso.
- KELLNER, D. (2005) 'Media, Culture and the Triumph of the Spectacle' in King, G. (2005) *The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to 'reality' TV and Beyond*, Bristol: Intellect.
- KING, G. (2005) *The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to 'reality' TV and Beyond*, Bristol: Intellect.
- MARKOWITZ, J (2004) 'Reel Terror Post 9/11' in DIXON, W. W (2004) *Film and Television after 9/11*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- RICKLI, C (2009) 'An Event "like a Movie"? Hollywood and 9/11', Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies. 10. [online] Available Internet: [http://www-copas.uni-regensburg.de/articles/issue\\_10/10\\_00\\_contents.php](http://www-copas.uni-regensburg.de/articles/issue_10/10_00_contents.php) [Accessed 12/11/2009].
- SCHNEIDER, S. J (2005) 'Architectural Nostalgia' in DIXON, W. W (2004) *Film and Television after 9/11*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- SMITH, K (2005) 'September 11 and the Global Audience' in King, G. (2005) *The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to 'reality' TV and Beyond*, Bristol: Intellect.

ŽIŽEK, S. (2002) *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, London: Verso

## **Films and documentaries**

*9/11* (2002) Hanlon, J. USA/France: Columbia Broadcasting System.

*9/11 Conspiracy Files* (2006) Smith, G. UK: British Broadcasting Corporation.

*9/11 Millionaire Widows* (2008) Wells, A: USA: Talent Television.

*9/11: The Twin Towers* (2006) Dale, R. United Kingdom: Dangerous Films.

*Armageddon* (1998) Bay, M. USA: Touchstone Pictures.

*Black Hawk Down* (2001) Scott, R. USA: Revolution Studios.

*Bowling for Columbine* (2002) Moore, M. USA: Alliance Atlantics Communications.

*Collateral Damage* (2002) Davis, A. USA: Warner Bros Pictures.

*The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) Emmerich, R. USA: Twentieth Century Fox.

*Deep Impact* (1988) Leder, M. USA: Paramount Pictures.

*Die Hard* (1988) McTiernan, J. USA: Twentieth Century Fox.

*Fahrenheit 9/11*(2004) Moore, M. USA: Fellowship Adventure Group.

*The Falling Man* (2006) Singer, H. U. K: Darlow Smithson Production.

*Fight Club* (1999) Fincher, D. USA: Art Linson Productions.

*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (2001) Columbus, C. UK/USA:  
Warner Bros Pictures

*Incendiary* (2008) Maguire, S. United Kingdom: Aramid Entertainment Fund.

*Independence Day* (1996) Emmerich, R. USA: Centropolis Entertainment.

*Lord of the Rings* Trilogy (2001-2003) Jackson, P, New Zealand/UK/USA: New Line Cinema.

*Loose Change* (2005) Avery D. USA: Microcinema International.

*The Path to 9/11* (2006) Cunningham, D. L. USA: Marc Platt Productions.

*Phone Calls from the Towers* (2009) Kent, J. United Kingdom: Darlow  
Smithson Productions

*United 93* (2006) Greengrass, P. UK/France/USA: Universal Pictures.

*World Trade Centre* (2006) Stone, O. USA: Paramount Pictures.