Sacred Heart UNIVERSITY

Sacred Heart University
DigitalCommons@SHU

School of Communication and Media Arts Faculty Publications

Communication and Media Arts (SCMA)

Winter 2004

Teaching 9/11 and Why I'm Not Doing it Anymore

Louise Spence
Sacred Heart University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/media_fac

Part of the Critical and Cultural Studies Commons, Other Film and Media Studies Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation
Spence, Louise. "Teaching 9/11 And Why I'm Not Doing It Anymore." Cinema Journal 43.2 (2004): 100-105.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Communication and Media Arts (SCMA) at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Communication and Media Arts Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact ferribyp@sacredheart.edu.

Teaching 9/11 and Why I'm Not Doing It Anymore

by Louise Spence

Soon after 9/11, I noticed a similarity between images of Hiroshima after the dropping of the atomic bomb and the wreckage of the World Trade Center. Yet the popular discourses on the tragedy compared the attacks on the twin towers not with the devastation of a civilian population but with the attacks on our military ships in Pearl Harbor. This inspired me to think more carefully about how I could provoke students to fight the centripetal pull of the events. How could I create an environment where students felt both at ease to express their opinions freely and confident enough to challenge the false abstractions and simple dichotomies on which certainties are based? Where could they find the tools to break into the monolithic discourses that were being erected?

Sacred Heart University, where I teach media studies, is a working-class institution an hour from New York City. Many students come from the metropolitan New York area and had family and friends who worked or lived in lower Manhattan at the time of the attacks. Some had internships in "the city." Some are the sons and daughters of uniformed service personnel or are themselves firefighters, police officers, or postal workers. And a number of the students have their tuition paid by the military. Still, within the student body, there is diversity in political awareness and political sophistication.

This essay is about a course I taught during the 2002–03 academic year, "Reading Seminar in Media and Cultural Theory." This one-semester seminar is an exit course, a culminating experience for students majoring in media studies, and a bonding opportunity for the senior class, especially important to the part-time and returning students. It tackles advanced work in the theoretical and critical context of the mass media as social phenomenon: their ontologies, codes and conventions, productions of meaning, and positioning of the viewer/reader. The course uses specific problematics, which change nearly every year, to encourage critical and creative thinking about the ways the media affect our personal and collective consciousness. The role of the instructor is primarily Socratic: to pose questions that unsettle and challenge, to test orthodoxies, and to suggest routes by which students can discover the theoretical methods appropriate for their endeavors.

I decided to devote the 2002–03 senior reading seminar to the study of representations of the Holocaust and the events of 9/11. We explored the theories of Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, and Hayden White by concentrating on how the Holocaust and the recent attacks on the United States have been represented in the media and in the popular imagination. I did not mean to equate 9/11 and the Holocaust; rather, I wanted to draw on the substantial body of literature on how the Holocaust has been represented to acquire methods that we might adapt for our own analyses of the representations of 9/11: representations of the attacks on the World Trade

Figure 3. Hiroshima after the dropping of the atomic bomb, pictured here, looked uncannily similar to shots of the wreckage of the World Trade Center after 9/11.

Center and the Pentagon, of our traumatic loss, and of our personal and collective grief. I was hoping this analysis would help students resist the presumably hegemonic discourses on terror.

When I first began to teach the seminar, we were close to the one-year anniversary of the disaster and it was already becoming clear to the students that the history of the event was being written. I wanted us to look at what forms the remembrances took and to ask ourselves some difficult questions: How, and for what social purposes, are particular versions of the past produced, installed, and maintained as public memory and as history? How do we, to quote Hayden White, "translate knowing into telling"?[1] How have traumatic events and traumatic memories been mediated by stories, images, artifacts, and public commemorations? And how have these discourses contributed to the effort to turn grief into victory? This was really a course about historiography—the politics of history—and the students seemed receptive to that.

A year later, however, the students still understood the events of 9/11 in affective and emotional terms. That is, they approached the events and the stories being told about 9/11 in noncognitive and nonnarrative ways—and this caused conceptual and psychic problems for them. I certainly did not expect—or need—a lack of feeling, a separation of emotion and intellection, a totalizing understanding, or an

authoritative master narrative, but what I got was a surprising series of flat "truths" described, not analyzed, recited but not examined. The mutability of meaning that they dealt with in very perceptive ways when we discussed the Holocaust was ignored when they discussed 9/11.

I have thought long on why this was so, and I think it is because students conceptualized 9/11 as senseless violence and therefore a meaningless event. The iconic power of the images they "witnessed," for many in real time, still seemed inexplicable. It was almost as if meaning were suspended or overwhelmed by the spectacle that assaulted their imaginations. While I was asking them to explore and investigate, they wanted neat, tied-down meaning, absolute clarity, testifying to their presence. Whereas they had had no problem with the theory that meaning might be polysemic, they had a problem with the openness of this story.

The lessons they had learned about the cultural and historical lenses through which the Holocaust has been perceived, the origins of the term *Holocaust* and the preference of many for the Hebrew term *Shoah,* and how different governments represented the Holocaust were based on the notion that the Shoah was a story with some containment—perhaps a radical rupture in human history but at least a crisis that has some historical closure; it was securely ensconced in the past.[2] Our tragic story was not so safely contained. Besides, like the media, my students did not want to ask "Why?" Their stories of 9/11 began at 8:46 A.M. They visualized an infinite middle.

This combination of a weak beginning and the delay or absence of resolution meant that they were unable to give creative shape to the horror. Because they could not find or impose a satisfactory back story, and could not yet imagine the closure needed for coherence and unity, they were powerless to create a significant 9/11 narrative. Unable to imagine a redemptive myth that would endow the deaths with meaning, they were not able to translate the events into a familiar mimetic form. The global political situation translated into a narrative conundrum.

The larger political, social, and moral sense of uncertainty was displaced onto an anxiety about openness, an anxious uncertainty not only about what happens next but also about why we are here. My students seemed stranded in a middle, suspended in a void of space, knowledge, and time. In order not to be subsumed by the abyss, to avoid the enigmatic and ambiguous, they skirted, they bridged, and they avoided unbreachable discrepancies. They wanted to protect any thread of continuity they could find, to recover their sense of security. Perhaps for the same reason, they found it disturbing to continue seeing our nation as a victim. That would have suggested the symbolic collapse of the whole system. The most powerful nation on earth is not the most secure? Rather than face our vulnerability and suffering with study and reflection, they, like our nation's leaders, looked for closure.[3]

The idea that the greatest power in the world might not also be the greatest country seemed to be too much for the students to handle. As a matter of fact, for some, the only way of explaining the "why" of the attacks was that "they" hated "us" because of our freedoms and affluence, because "we" are so great.[4] They wanted so much to believe in our goodness and innocence that they ignored everything they

had "learned" in previous courses about the banality of evil, including from discussions in this very class.[5]

Again like the media, they had no problem seeing hatred and violence as contemptible and needing to be addressed; it was much more difficult to see hatred and violence as a natural part of the system. That was more threatening than the Holocaust—and explains why they needed to see the Holocaust as exceptional. It also suggests why they needed to see evil as embodied in Osama bin Laden and later Saddam Hussein and, therefore, possible to destroy. In a sense, their fear of terrorists papered over the more existential threat of understanding terrorism.

In their scramble for comfort, they reverted to archetypal neopositivists. I had not anticipated how entrenched the notions of truth and accuracy would be. In wanting to be faithful to the "facts," students drew on a conception of history and representation that was based on making past events objectively present (even though they had considered how nations have memorialized the Holocaust according to their own motives, needs, and ideals[6] and grappled in their writing about the Holocaust with the possibility that some events may be unknowable).

Their truth-telling agenda, their demand for accuracy and faithfulness to the facts, and their conceptions of history and representation as grounded in recovering a past and objective observation that registers timeless truths made it difficult for the students to imagine a realist narrative. It was as if they sensed an intrinsic relationship between "completeness" and "knowability." That is, the base of "meaningless" made it difficult to transform the trauma of the Real, or the "irreal" (a nightmarish unreal specter), as Slavoj Žižek would put it,[7] into a significant narrative, even a nonfiction narrative, to be analyzed. Instead, they collected, inventoried, ordered, cataloged, annotated, and labeled facts, images, and memories. And interestingly, although they unanimously preferred Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993)—and even Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1955)—to Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), they ended up adopting Lanzmann's archival mode: collecting the traces of the event, rather than representing it.

Falling back on their natural preference for content over form,[8] and frustrated with their inability to ascribe meaning to the events of 9/11, they avoided issues of representation and retreated to uninterrogated, seemingly transparent facts.[9] To use Gérard Genette's distinction, their facts were diegesis, not mimesis.[10] Their truth was a settled and integral object of knowledge, so there was no need to analyze the discourses through which that truth had acquired meaning.

Paradoxically, the antirealist claims of Elie Wiesel, Paul Celan, Claude Lanzmann, and others about the unrepresentability of events that many consider unimaginable overpowered the realist aesthetic that students loved so dearly. Although it may not have been at all conscious, this deference to the unspeakable was a strategic means of coping. For the students, 9/11 had become, or was still, consecrated ground. This is not astonishing given the difficult, elusive, and ungraspable nature of the subject and how close to it they were geographically, temporally, and psychically. Was I asking them to assault the present with intellection, wariness, conscience, and compassion; to acknowledge the practical and spiritual value of

struggle; to seek a place of understanding, however tenuous, between mourning and anger, on the one hand, and rational skepticism, on the other? Or was I asking them to unmask the fiction of the real in their lives, to track the trajectory of the tennis ball from the position of the ball?

By the spring of 2003, my second semester of teaching the seminar, as our national tragedy was expanding into global warfare, I had begun to wonder if keeping the attacks center stage did not serve to aggrandize them, thus supporting the war effort. I had also begun to realize that if students were able to narrativize the attacks on the U.S., the course might foster a naïve, if heartfelt, identification of the attacks with the Holocaust (although the situations were by no means comparable), thus sentimentalizing 9/11 and contributing to the fetishistic attempt to adorn the meaning of the attacks with an aura of sacred piety.

In the right atmosphere, teaching can be both a joy and a form of political engagement. But it is now clear that what seemed like a well-conceived course in the fall of 2001 felt more like collusion by the spring of 2003. That is a surrender that I as a teacher (and a New Yorker) am not willing to make.

Notes

This work is greatly indebted to my students at Sacred Heart University, the participants in the workshop on teaching 9/11 at the 2003 conference of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, comments by Roald Hoffmann, Michael Ventimiglia, and Sandra Young, and many conversations with my chair and friend, David Curtis. His impatience with all things sentimental and pretentious has kept me in line.

1. Hayden White, *The Content of Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 1.
2. Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 39.
3. The need for an ending, for some sort of redemptive closure or higher purpose, may be why the students found it so hard to question the U.S. attacks on Afghanistan and the pending war with Iraq.
4. Of course, the "we" in this consensus-building syntax—a "we" constituted by images on television and the Internet and the calls for solidarity that swept the U.S. after the attacks—is, as Annabelle Sreberny points out, a falsely homogeneous non-Muslim "we." Sreberny, "Trauma Talk: Reconfiguring the Inside and the Outside," in Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan, eds., *Journalism after September 11* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 223.
5. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963). It is important to remember that traditional-aged students have lived through—and generally taken for granted—multiple invasions: Granada, Panama, and Desert Storm are some examples. They have lived through endless U.S. aggression, with each encounter seemingly satisfying the urge to have a victor and a loser; however, they have had a hard time conceiving that attacks could be turned back on us or happen on home soil.
6. We began the semester by reading Walter Benjamin's "Theses on a Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 253–64.
7. Slavoj Žižek, "Welcome to the Desert of the Real!" in Stanley Hauerwas and Frank Lentricchia, eds., *Dissent from the Homeland: Essays after September 11*, theme issue

of *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 2 (spring 2002): 385.

8. I am grateful to David Curtis for pointing this out.
9. Ironically, the students created annals of facts, similar to those that had made them laugh when we read excerpts from White, *The Content of Form*, 4–15.
10. Although the students were thankful for incontrovertible information, information, as Walter Benjamin argues, is ephemeral; it lives only in the moment "in which it is new." By contrast, narrative "preserves and concentrates its strength" and achieves "amplitude that information lacks." Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations*, 89–90.

Teaching through Feelings and Personal Beliefs: 9/11 as Case Study

by Sarah Projansky

When I first conceived of a course on post-9/11 cinema, I was responding to my own personal experience. The pressing nature of the event on my consciousness (as a former New Yorker and a critic of popular culture) meant that every film I saw related to 9/11. For example, while watching *Spiderman* (Sam Raimi, 2002), I was stunned by the destruction of the Roosevelt Island tram, which I took often as a teenager. I wondered how post-9/11 audiences would respond to images of destruction, and I began thinking about how this example could help students theorize the representation of violence and understand the complex relationship between text and audience.

Members of the press have criticized the TV sitcom *Friends* because it is set in New York but goes on "as if Sept. 11 never happened."[1] But *Friends* did not go on as if nothing had happened. The show strategically placed patriotic and pro–New York imagery throughout episodes in the 2001–02 season, including FDNY T-shirts, a U.S. flag on Joey's wall, and doodles of the Statue of Liberty in Joey's apartment. Art on a coffeehouse wall was obviously patriotic and then later subtly so. First, an American flag and then a painting of "Uncle Sam" pointing his finger appeared. Later, in the 2002–03 season, a red, white, and blue abstract painting was seen in this prominent spot on the set.[2]

While dialogue on *Friends* may never have referred to 9/11, the mise-en-scène certainly did, implying that "the friends" were "going on with their lives" (as Mayor Giuliani had instructed) by expressing patriotism but not changing their everyday routines. Thus, *Friends* participated in a visual patriotism that contributed to a larger pro-war political stance against terrorism. As I developed my course, I hoped students would understand through this example the ideological taken-for-grantedness of patriotic ideology and pro-war imagery in popular culture. Even the film *Sweet Home Alabama* (Andy Tennant, 2002) seemed to reference 9/11.

The sexual banter and tension in screwball comedies can often be read against the grain as hostility and violence, but in the post-9/11 context *Sweet Home*

Copyright of Cinema Journal is the property of University of Texas Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of Cinema Journal is the property of University of Texas Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.