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In Focus: Teaching 9/11

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In Focus: Teaching 9/11

edited by Louise Spence

Dealing with emotionally and politically laden subject matter in the classroom is not always easy. The September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States raised important questions that concern all teachers—questions about ethical and moral responses, about the political and ideological implications of both reportage and classroom activities, and about faithful representation and documentary truth. For many, 9/11 inspired a reaching out to others and a spiritual reawakening. For others, 9/11 rekindled old rifts and urban and racial fears.

How can we teach 9/11 without imposing a universally "true" interpretation on the events or on our reactions? Many of our students felt that they "witnessed" the events contemporaneously on TV or the Internet. For most of them, the photographic images seemed so real that they fixed the events for posterity.

Seeing events happening in the present, what George Gerbner has called "instant history,"[1] may have encouraged the idea of a collective audience participating in a national symbolic. And for a short while, it may have seemed as if our collective remembering, our shared past, provided a sense of national identity, even if our individual political views, class, or cultural backgrounds had made us seem very different before. For these reasons, it is important for us—and for students—to analyze how history, memory, and national culture have been mediated by images and stories.

How has our appetite for spectacular images in disaster movies affected our understanding of what happened on 9/11? How have the attacks affected our readings of other cultural artifacts? Has the spectacle of the World Trade Center towers collapsing changed our perceptions of violence? How can we use the coverage of the events, the testimony of survivors, and the commemorations to raise questions about how our history and our nationhood have been constructed? How does instant access to new communication technology or the classroom environment—the ability to share with others—affect the discussion? How have students received and created alternatives to mainstream representations?

The contributors to this In Focus section, the first to appear in *Cinema Journal*, do not address all these questions; nor are these the only questions the contributors might have asked. As we taught and wrote, new problems and fresh inquiries were constantly being generated. These essays all began with a specific historical moment, but together they represent a range of approaches and methodologies that might be brought to bear on the subject. Rich in anecdote, insights, and analytical detail, animated by both political and scholarly agendas, these essays lay the groundwork for the critical rethinking of a pedagogy—a materialist pedagogy—that responds to current events and is linked to the production of knowledge, the language of possibility, and social transformation. It is our hope that these essays will provoke

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more discussion not only about how 9/11 has affected the methods and discourses used in our classrooms but also about teaching in general.

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1. George Gerbner, "Persian Gulf War, the Movie," in Hamid Mowlawa, George Gerbner, and Herbert Schiller, eds., *Triumph of the Image: The Media's War in the Persian Gulf—a Global Perspective* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1992), 244, quoted in Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 125.

Applied Humanism: The Re:constructions Project

by Henry Jenkins

In the fall of 2001, my graduate media theory seminar at MIT met every Tuesday and Thursday at noon. Classes had started a week before 9/11. The opening discussion focused on Thomas McLaughlin's concept of vernacular theory. I had emphasized that all kinds of groups for all kinds of reasons both produce and consume media theory, although they do so with different languages and with different institutional norms. From here, we had discussed the ways academic theorists might more fully engage with other producers and consumers of theory and how this would require a shift in rhetoric. We talked a lot about the concept of applied humanism, which is one of the cornerstones of the comparative media studies approach—the idea that insights from the humanities and social sciences need to be applied and tested at actual sites of media change. MIT has applied physics, applied math. It was time it had applied humanism. We challenged our students to do projects that had real-world impact and that confronted pragmatic challenges.

I had to go almost immediately from hearing the news of the tragedy on 9/11 to conducting a seminar. As I walked toward the classroom, I passed graduate students huddled around radios or reading information off the Internet, many of them openly weeping. Afterward, everyone focused on New York City, but at that moment Boston was profoundly affected because the airplanes that had crashed into the towers had departed from Boston's Logan Airport. No one felt like class, yet nobody wanted to be alone. Since I live on campus, I phoned my wife to tell her I was bringing the class home to watch news reports.

Most of the students came with me. Some made calls on their cell phones to friends and family members; others channel zapped before focusing on BBC America, which MIT Cable had just added a few days before; and some used wireless laptops to glean information from the Web.

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