

Conjuring Trauma: The Naudet Brothers' 9/11 Documentary

Stef Craps

Abstract: The events of 11 September 2001 caused a rupture not only in the normal order of things but also, and perhaps especially, in the signifying systems underwriting that order. The Naudet brothers' remarkable 9/11 documentary, which aired on CBS on 10 March 2002 and on TV stations around the world on the first anniversary of the attacks, seeks to reinstitute the authority of the conventions and constructions of a culture whose limits the events of 11 September had painfully exposed. The film—entitled *9/11*—is marked by a fundamental tension between the revelation of an abysmal crisis of meaning, on the one hand, and the desire to bring this crisis under control, on the other. The filmmakers attempt to mitigate the traumatic potential of their unique atrocity footage by sanitizing it and integrating it into a Hollywood-style coming-of-age drama tracing a probationary fire-fighter's perilous journey from innocence to experience. Thus, the focus shifts from a disorienting and overwhelming sense of loss to comforting, ideologically charged notions of heroism and community that perpetuate an idealized national self-image and come to function as a moral justification for retaliation. In its drive to obtain mastery over trauma by rendering it legible in terms of existing cultural codes, *9/11* appears to disregard what Cathy Caruth calls "the event's essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding*" (154). Yet, for all its investment in a classical realist aesthetic, the film remains haunted by a traumatic history that exceeds and breaks down accustomed habits of thought, narration, and visualization.

Keywords: 9/11, Naudet, documentary, trauma, denial, heroism, community

Résumé : Les événements du 11 septembre 2001 ont provoqué une rupture non seulement dans l'ordre naturel des choses, mais également, et peut-être tout particulièrement, dans les systèmes de signifiés qui sous-tendent cet ordre des choses. Le remarquable documentaire sur le

11 septembre réalisé par les frères Naudet, présenté par le réseau CBS le 10 mars 2002, puis par de nombreuses chaînes de télévision du monde entier pour souligner le premier anniversaire des attentats, tente de rétablir l'autorité des conventions et constructions d'une culture dont les limites ont été douloureusement mises à jour par les attentats du 11 septembre. Le film — intitulé *9/11* — se caractérise par une tension fondamentale entre la révélation une grave crise de signification d'une part, et le désir de dominer cette crise d'autre part. Les réalisateurs tentent d'atténuer le potentiel traumatisant des scènes atroces qu'ils présentent en les expurgeant de leurs contenus les plus crus et en les intégrant dans un scénario de style hollywoodien, dans lequel un jeune pompier à ses premières armes effectue un dangereux parcours qui va de l'innocence à l'expérience. Ainsi, l'accent passe d'un sentiment d'énorme perte à un sentiment d'héroïsme et de sens communautaire réconfortant, chargé sur le plan idéologique, qui perpétuant une image nationale idéalisée et qui finit par servir de justification à d'éventuelles représailles. Dans son intention de maîtriser le traumatisme en le rendant intelligible en termes des codes culturels existants, *9/11* semble ignorer complètement ce que Cathy Caruth a appelé "l'incompréhensibilité fondamentale des événements, la force de *l'affront fait à la compréhension* [the event's essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding*]" (154). Pourtant, malgré son parti pris pour une esthétique réaliste classique, le film reste marqué par une histoire traumatisante qui dépasse et brise les modes de pensée, de narration et de vision habituels.

Mots clés : 11 septembre, Naudet, documentaire, traumatisme, déni, héroïsme, communauté

The events of 11 September 2001 caused a rupture not only in the normal order of things but also, and perhaps especially, in the signifying systems underwriting that order. According to Jacques Derrida, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon radically unsettled "the conceptual, semantic, and one could even say hermeneutic apparatus that might have allowed one to see coming, to comprehend, interpret, describe, speak of, and name 'September 11'—and in so doing to neutralize the traumatism and come to terms with it through a 'work of mourning'" (qtd. in Borradori 93). The Naudet brothers' remarkable *9/11* documentary, which aired on CBS on 10 March 2002 and on TV stations around the world on the first anniversary of the attacks, seeks to reinstitute the authority of the conventions and constructions of a culture whose limits the events of 11 September had painfully exposed.¹ The film—entitled *9/11*—is marked by a fundamental tension between the revelation of an abysmal crisis of meaning, on the

one hand, and the desire to bring this crisis under control, on the other. The filmmakers attempt to mitigate the traumatic potential of their unique atrocity footage by sanitizing it and integrating it into a Hollywood-style coming-of-age drama, tracing a probationary fire-fighter's perilous journey from innocence to experience. Thus, the focus shifts from a disorienting and overwhelming sense of loss to comforting, ideologically charged notions of heroism and community that perpetuate an idealized national self-image and come to function as a moral justification for retaliation. In its drive to obtain mastery over trauma by rendering it legible in terms of existing cultural codes, *9/11* appears to disregard what Cathy Caruth calls "the event's essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding*" (154). Yet, for all its investment in a classical realist aesthetic, the film remains haunted by a traumatic history that exceeds and breaks down accustomed habits of thought, narration, and visualization.

Before becoming accidental witnesses to history with *9/11*, the French-born Jules and Gedeon Naudet, who moved to the United States in 1989 and graduated from the New York Film School in 1995, had already made another documentary film about an American subject. *Hope, Gloves and Redemption: The Story of Mickey and Negra Rosario*, which enjoyed a DVD release in the wake of the success of *9/11*, follows an ex-gang member from Spanish Harlem and his wife, who turned their lives around and set up a community boxing studio to help other urban youth avoid the temptations of gang life. Prior to its DVD release, this uplifting documentary, framed as a validation of the American dream, had picked up the Grand Jury Prize for Documentary and the award for Best Cinematography at the 2001 New York International Independent Film and Video Festival. The Naudet brothers set out to duplicate the success formula of this documentary in their next film, the one that wound up as *9/11*. Their intention was to follow a rookie New York fire-fighter, Tony Benetatos, through his first year on the job to capture the process they describe in the film as "a kid becom[ing] a man in nine months." The first part of the documentary shows Benetatos going through the usual work of a probationary fire-fighter (or "probie"), including cleaning dishes and washing a fire truck, as he anxiously awaits his first major fire—which turns out to be a long time coming: ironically, there were no major fires handled by his company (Engine 7, Ladder 1) in the months leading up to the 11 September attacks, at least not while he was on duty.

In one of the amazing turns of circumstances shown in the film, Jules Naudet is out with some of the company's fire-fighters when they respond at about 8:30 a.m. on the day of the disaster to a routine call to investigate a suspected gas leak at an intersection less than a mile north of the World Trade Center. While there, he hears the roar of a low-flying jet and turns his camera upwards, thus shooting the only known video of the first plane hitting Tower 1. Accompanying the fire-fighters, the two French brothers manage to capture extraordinary footage of the World Trade Center disaster, Jules from inside the lobby of Tower 1, where the battalion chiefs are planning their rescue operations, Gedeon from outside, as he makes his way from the firehouse to the World Trade Center on foot and by pick-up truck. While Jules films the fire-fighters' frantic attempts to get a handle on the situation, Gedeon records the reaction of the watching crowds in the streets of Manhattan. We are shown how the men in the Tower 1 lobby are thrown into darkness as Tower 2 collapses, how they struggle to escape the building while avoiding debris and people jumping to their deaths, and how they run for cover after the collapse of Tower 1. We see downtown streets full of people pointing at the towers and talking with one another. Later, the streets are full of people trying to get away from the site of the disaster. Later still, they are empty of people but full of dust and ash.

The footage shot by the Naudet brothers on 11 September, which is at the heart of the documentary, is powerful, frightening, and overwhelming. Their harrowing images drive home the traumatic impact of events in excess of our conceptual categories and frames of reference. Besides filming the horrific events themselves from up close, the camera also captures the look of bewilderment, disbelief, incomprehension, fear, and powerlessness on the faces of people caught in the most appalling disaster. The retrospective interviews with the filmmakers and the fire-fighters that are interspersed with this footage confirm these responses. Gedeon and Jules recall inability of the passers-by and the fire-fighters to believe what was happening before their eyes: "[w]alking to the World Trade Center, passing by these people, filming their astonishment. Eyes saying: this is not happening?" (Gedeon); "I was seeing the look on the fire-fighters [*sic*]. It was not fear, it was: what's going on? Disbelief. That made me panic a little bit. That made me panic" (Jules). Several fire-fighters stress the complete unexpectedness of what took place ("we'd never experienced something like this before") and the impossibility of bringing the situation under

control (“what do we do, what do we do for this?”). These reactions are clearly symptomatic of trauma, understood as a sudden, unexpected, and overwhelming experience that escapes one’s grasp—whether conceptual or physical—and, as a result, keeps haunting one. The haunting power of the events of 11 September is apparent from the following comment made by Jules: “[e]very now and then I still wonder: is it really true, you know? I know it happened, but I don’t know: how do you deal with something like this? It’s the eleventh every day for me when I wake up.”

The question of how to cope with trauma is right at the forefront of the documentary. The filmmakers deploy various strategies to defuse their explosive footage and thus to contain, control, and manage the trauma it conveys. In fact, their efforts to “detrumatize” 11 September started well before they got to the editing room. Amid concerns prior to its first CBS broadcast over the possibly graphic content of the documentary, Jules Naudet told reporters and critics at a small press screening that “[t]here was never any graphic footage. We did self-censorship” (qtd. in Anderson and Swanson). In the program, Jules says that, as he entered the lobby of Tower 1 with the fire-fighters, he saw people engulfed in flames. By his own account, he chose not to film them, thinking “no one should see this.” Indeed, despite the carnage that took the lives of nearly 3,000 people, there is nothing grisly in the footage we are shown.² While the scenes of devastation are unrelenting, no gore, no mutilated bodies or body parts, and no one jumping from the towers are ever visible. The only injury seen in the film is a small cut on the upper cheek of a fire-fighter who is shown resting after the second collapse.³ The filmmakers’ self-censorship was widely seen as a commendable decision to stay within the bounds of good taste. Good taste, however, is hardly the self-evident and innocent concept it appears to be. Rather, it functions as a cover for ideological motives. As Slavoj Žižek has argued with reference to the television coverage of the World Trade Center disaster, the absence on-screen of graphic depictions of death—which stands in stark contrast with the in-your-face gore of reporting on Third-World calamities—effects a “derealization” of the horror that ultimately serves to restore First-World complacency:

while the number of victims—3,000—is repeated all the time, it is surprising how little of the actual carnage we see—no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people . . . in clear contrast to reporting on Third World

catastrophies, where the whole point is to produce a scoop of some gruesome detail: Somalis dying of hunger, raped Bosnian women, men with their throats cut. . . . Is this not yet further proof of how, even in this tragic moment, the distance which separates Us from Them, from their reality, is maintained: the real horror happens *there*, not *here*? (13)⁴

If this ideological (self-)censorship reduces the traumatic impact of the events of 11 September, their incorporation into a familiar narrative form only reinforces this effect. At the beginning of the documentary, James Hanlon, the Naudet brothers' fire-fighter friend, who acts as the film's narrator and co-director, suggests that the events of 11 September caused the filmmakers to abandon their original plan of making "a documentary about a fire-fighter." The film they ended up making, so Hanlon asserts, is "a documentary about 9/11." Remarkably, however, the radical shift of focus implied here does not take place. Though the unique footage shot by the Naudet brothers at and near the World Trade Center on 11 September obviously forms the centrepiece of the documentary, the filmmakers have actually produced the all-American coming-of-age drama they intended to make all along. The documentary takes the form of a rite-of-passage narrative, in which Tony Benetatos proves himself as a fire-fighter on 11 September, thus realizing his self-declared desire to become a hero.⁵ Nothing, it seems, is allowed to stand in the way of the fulfilment of this quintessential American dream. The World Trade Center disaster is presented as a test of the probie's manhood, an obstacle to be overcome. Hanlon announces as much early on in the film, when he says about his colleagues at the firehouse, "Soon they'd face the unthinkable. The question was: would Tony be ready?" At the end of the film, he proclaims Benetatos to have passed the test: "It turns out Tony became a man [not in nine months—i.e., the duration of his probationary period—but] in about nine hours, trying to help out on 9/11."

In the spirit of the originally planned documentary, the program takes on the structure of a classical Hollywood film, complete with an omniscient narrator, a protagonist, a carefully crafted storyline, a dramatic soundtrack, and the obligatory happy ending:⁶ indeed, not only does Tony emerge from the scene of the disaster a hero, but all the company's other fire-fighters turn out to have survived the ordeal as well.⁷ While it is striking how the events lent themselves to this formulaic Hollywood treatment, it has to be said that the filmmakers spared no effort in exploiting their

material's Hollywood potential. This is particularly clear in the build-up of suspense in the film, which relies partly on brief flash-forwards and foreboding comments by the narrator during the long wait for a real fire and partly also on the absence of the protagonist from the interview segments filmed after 11 September, an absence maintained until the finale. Unlike the other fire-fighters, for most of the film, Benetatos only appears in footage from before 11 September. Thus, a further element of tension is added: the central question becomes whether or not our young, unseasoned hero has survived the catastrophe. This mystery is not resolved until all the other fire-fighters have returned alive and well to the station, where they sit worrying about the probie who is still unaccounted for; suddenly, in walks Benetatos, "like an urban cowboy, appearing alone from the cloudy, dust-covered horizon" (Lubin 126). Only now do we get to see the protagonist in after-the-fact interview footage.

The filmmakers' decision to frame their documentary as a Hollywood-style rite-of-passage drama drew mixed responses. Marc Peyser, a writer for *Newsweek*, notes,

At its best, "9/11" . . . is as close to a feel-good movie as it can be, considering the tragic cloth from which it is made. . . . At its best, "9/11" is much more than a mere document of one of the deadliest days in American history. With its richly drawn characters, its plot twists and its raw emotion, "9/11" often plays out like a three-act Hollywood movie. The only problem is, it's all real.

Peyser himself does not seem overly troubled by this problem; in fact, reading his article—appropriately titled "If Only It Were Just a Movie"—one gets the impression that the author is more than happy to take his wishes for reality.⁸ A very different note is sounded by Chris Rylant of *TeeVee*, who, in an article that recalls Theodor Adorno's famous injunction against writing poetry after Auschwitz and Elie Wiesel's critique of the television miniseries *Holocaust*, angrily denounces what he sees as "the ridiculously manipulative filmmaking of 9/11," calling it "shameless." In his view, the documentary's systematic and exclusive focus on the birth of a hero amounts to a betrayal of the victims, whose suffering is smoothed over and ignored:

As if we needed to be thinking about the fate of this one handsome young hero-with-a-capital-H because we couldn't

really feel the violent deaths of tens of hundreds of nameless office workers. Just like the sinking of the Titanic and the bombing of Pearl Harbor needed romantic triangles to make them worthwhile and interesting, we needed to wonder if this one Probie fire-fighter would make it out alive. Never mind the destruction of two office buildings and thousands of people.

The Hollywoodization of the Naudet brothers' documentary is underlined by the inclusion of narration by long-time Tribeca resident Robert De Niro, who appears briefly in three segments as host. His film-star status makes De Niro a paradoxical guarantor of the authenticity of the footage: his assurances that the film in which he features is a truthful record of reality inevitably produce a derealization effect. In fact, from the other remarks the actor makes it becomes evident that his services have been enlisted for just this purpose. De Niro, Hollywood's archetypal tough guy, introduces the documentary as an epic tale of courage, strength, and triumph: "This is the story of how the city's bravest rose to their greatest challenge on September 11." Just before the second act, featuring the World Trade Center scenes, he returns to announce that "[w]hat you're about to see is how brave men work under stress, surrounded by chaos." Clearly, De Niro's framing remarks are meant to guide the viewer's interpretation of the Naudet brothers' atrocity footage in such a way as to counteract its traumatizing potential. Rather than presenting these disturbing images as testimony to the murderous nightmare of terrorism, he attempts to strip them of their essential horror (however mitigated) by integrating them into an edifying story of grace under pressure. That this is the intention becomes crystal clear when, in his final appearance at the end of the film, De Niro claims that "the moment in history" that the viewer has just witnessed is "[n]ot a moment of terror but one of strength, when good men did great things. Tens of thousands were saved by simple acts of courage. We hope that will be the true legacy of the men from Engine 7, Ladder 1."⁹ In substituting heroism for terror, this passage effectively dramatizes the "strange movement of language" observed by James Berger in the aftermath of 11 September: "the transformation of overwhelming loss into a kind of victory. The media soon spoke more about the heroes of September 11 than of the dead" (55).¹⁰ A tropological movement takes place, in which the traumatic excess of a deathly disaster is domesticated through anthropomorphization and reversal into life-saving heroism.

Interestingly, De Niro's representation of the fire-fighters as formidable heroes performing extraordinary feats is radically at odds with the men's self-representation and with their own experience of the events of 11 September as they describe it in the retrospective interview segments. One of them evokes an overwhelming sense of loss and powerlessness: "We lost so much in that two-hour period. We felt like we got the hell kicked out of us." James Hanlon mentions his surprise at being treated like a hero by people in the streets: "It was weird in a way, walking back to the firehouse. People were cheering us, but we sure didn't feel like heroes." In the additional interviews on the DVD which did not make the final cut of the film, other men of Engine 7, Ladder 1 speak of feeling "helpless" and "terrified," and admit that "There was not much you could do." This is also the impression one gets from watching the footage shot by Jules inside the lobby of Tower 1, which shows scenes of chaos and indecision, and captures the look of utter disbelief and confusion on the fire-fighters' faces. Apparently, making heroes of the fire-fighters is demanded not so much by the facts of the case as by the conventional narrative form into which those facts have been inserted.¹¹

Another way in which De Niro seeks to soften the impact of the documentary materials has to do with the numerous expletives used by the witnesses. At the beginning of the program, he warns the viewer that, although what he or she is about to see has been "edited with great care," still "some of the language is rough." After all, he explains, "[T]hese men had never been tested like this before." In the course of the documentary, we do, indeed, frequently hear people curse, "Holy shit!"; "There's another fucking plane!"; "And you know the fucking Pentagon is burning now!" and so on. In fact, it has been claimed that the amount of understandable profanity spoken by the fire-fighters in 9/11 was unprecedented for American network television, which is notoriously squeamish about this issue (Erickson). Trauma pushes people beyond the boundaries of normal, socially acceptable speech: an excessive event, it seems, can only be matched by excessive language. The filmmakers apparently felt that editing out swear words would have been too intrusive an intervention; however, to cushion the supposed shock to the viewer they decided to have De Niro give him or her advance warning of what was about to assail his or her ears. Thus, the confrontation with foul language is prevented from having anything even remotely resembling a traumatic effect—after all, for something to be traumatic it has to

catch one off-guard and unprepared. Still, the decision not to tone down the language used by the fire-fighters managed to attract a great deal of media attention; a fact which, as Claudia Rosett observes, can only be accounted for by the extreme care with which the genuinely shocking aspects of the project had been handled.

While De Niro's narration is mostly concerned with the creation of heroism, the greatest good resulting from the World Trade Center disaster, according to the documentary, is the strengthening of community ties. The focus in this film, made by two brothers, is not only on heroism but also on brotherhood. An important subplot, with strong mythological overtones,¹² recounts the story of the Naudet brothers' separation by the events, their agonizing over each other's fate (both of them fear that the other one may be dead), and their emotional reunion at the fire station (which, curiously, is filmed by a third person). Gedeon tells us how, when the second tower came down, "the only thing I could think about was Jules," and how he vowed to himself that, "[i]f I would survive that, I would be a better brother [*sic*]." The documentary also highlights the bonds of brotherhood between the fire-fighters. The men of Engine 7, Ladder 1 are pictured as forming a tight-knit community, which closely resembles a family. The film not only documents the probie's integration into the firemen's community but also shows how the filmmakers themselves gradually become accepted as members of this fraternity. While reminiscing about the evening of 10 September, when he and his brother had cooked a meal for the other men, Gedeon points out that "we were getting accepted." This process is completed when, back at the firehouse after the traumatic events they have lived through together, one of the firemen tells Jules, "Yesterday you had one brother. Today you have 50." At the end of the program, the viewer is invited to share in the community experience by donating money to a fire-fighter-related charity, the Uniformed Firefighters Association Scholarship Fund. The documentary thus shifts attention away from the traumatic events to focus on the sense of caring and kinship forged in the shared disaster. Community, as Orly Lubin points out, becomes "the tool of the containment of the trauma" (124). The emphasis placed on the sense of community and togetherness born at the moment of the traumatic event amounts to a form of denial—"denial," as Berger explains, "in a specifically psychoanalytic sense: not a repression of the trauma or a claim that it didn't happen but a claim that the trauma's consequences will

not be traumatic; that it will not have symptoms but, rather, only beneficial lessons and varieties of redemption" (55).

The community rhetoric mobilized in *9/11* is highly ideologically charged. Though Jules Naudet told reporters that "the film is meant to be seen solely as a tribute to the firemen, not as an argument for war" (Dreher), the documentary confirms preconceptions and assumptions that enabled a discourse of revenge and military action to take root.¹³ Indeed, the film taps into the rhetoric of foundational innocence on which Americans have traditionally established their public identity (but which has always hidden a more rapacious reality): the belief that they are the chosen people, a nation founded in innocence and godliness. The story recounted in the Naudet brothers' documentary purports to represent the national experience of the events of 11 September. In fact, the film can be seen to claim wider validity for the experience it documents through its title, which promises to tell us not a particular story but the whole story of 11 September. The viewer is led to interpret the probie's journey from innocence to experience as an allegory of the fate of the entire nation. The fire-fighters' community in general, and Benetatos in particular, metonymically and metaphorically represent the United States, a nation that sees itself as a force for good, the world's fireman.¹⁴ The probie's self-description as "a person who tries to do good, just like every other person in the fire department" is entirely consistent with this benign national self-image. As a fire-fighter, adds James Hanlon, "You do your job, you risk your life to help people." This notion is echoed by Robert De Niro: "Firemen live to help others live; it's that simple."¹⁵

With the premise of US benevolence firmly in place, the film can only present the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center as an act of pure and inexplicable evil. In an apparent effort to avoid political controversy, the filmmakers provide little or no context for what transpired that day. The documentary does not reach beyond the story of the men of Engine 7, Ladder 1; it refrains from placing the disaster in a broader political or social context. In so doing, it effectively buys into the myth of American exceptionalism. After all, the viewer is given no way of framing the attack as anything other than a completely irrational and totally undeserved act of aggression. We learn from one of the fire-fighters that that day made him realize "how evil evil can be"; no further explanation is offered. The appropriate response to 11 September is voiced by the probie, who—"expressing what we all felt"

(Gedeon)—immediately defines the events as a declaration of war, as he watches them unfold on TV. Hearing that a plane has crashed into the Pentagon, he exclaims, “The Pentagon’s on fucking fire? War! This is war!” In a post-11 September interview fragment, Benetatos, wise from experience, reflects, “I know it’s either this or the army now. And I like saving lives, I don’t like taking them. But after what I saw, if my country decides to send me to go kill, I’ll do it now.” This view, expressed by a confirmed hero, is in no way challenged in the film, which leaves little or no room for alternative interpretations. Throughout, the documentary maintains the innocence of the victim-nation suffering an unjust injury inflicted on it for reasons that are left entirely unclear. From this perspective, the military response—the only one conceivable—appears as a legitimate act of self-defence.¹⁶

In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler addresses the passage from the experience of vulnerability and loss to military violence and retribution in a way that helps to shed further light on the ideological underpinnings of 9/11. Discussing the aftermath of the 11 September attacks, Butler points out that “it is one matter to suffer violence and quite another to use that fact to ground a framework in which one’s injury authorizes limitless aggression against targets that may or may not be related to the sources of one’s own suffering” (4). This explanatory framework, which has emerged in tandem with the experience of violence, works “both to preclude certain kinds of questions, certain kinds of historical inquiries, and to function as a moral justification for retaliation” (4). Moreover, it is said to have a narrative dimension. In the United States, Butler observes, the story is typically told from a first-person narrative point of view and begins with the events of 11 September, events that have no relevant prehistory—after all, to tell the story another way, to ask how things came to such a pass, is “to complicate the question of agency,” which leads to “the fear of moral equivocation”: “In order to condemn these acts as inexcusable, absolutely wrong, in order to sustain the affective structure in which we are, on the one hand, victimized and, on the other, engaged in a righteous cause of rooting out terror, we have to begin the story with the experience of violence we suffered” (6). There is a strong desire to shore up the first-person point of view and to preclude from the telling accounts that might involve a decentring of the narrative “I” within the international political domain: “This decentring is precisely what we seek to rectify through a recentering. A narrative form emerges to compensate

for the enormous narcissistic wound opened up by the public display of our physical vulnerability" (7). This is, of course, exactly the form taken by the Naudet brothers' documentary as it attempts to convert a "decentring" tale of terror into a "re-centring" story of heroism and community spirit. Butler insists on the urgent need to decentre this first-person narrative if the world is to be spared still worse disasters. She sees the temporary dislocation from First World privilege caused by the 11 September attacks as offering a chance to begin to imagine a world in which such violence might be minimized, a world in which "an inevitable interdependency becomes acknowledged as the basis for global political community" (xii-xiii). For this vision to become reality, she writes, "we will need to emerge from the narrative perspective of US unilateralism and, as it were, its defensive structures, to consider the ways in which our lives are profoundly implicated in the lives of others" (7).

Butler's ideal of narrative decentring is strikingly realized in Alain Brigand's *11'09"01*, another 11 September film produced by a Frenchman that came out in 2002. However, this is where the similarities between *9/11* and *11'09"01* stop. Commissioned by Brigand as a response to the terrorist attacks, *11'09"01* brings together eleven directors from as many countries, each contributing a film lasting eleven minutes, nine seconds, and one frame. The title refers to this duration as well as to the date of the attacks as it would appear on a European calendar. Hence, the decentring of the customary first-person point of view that Brigand's omnibus film enacts is already signalled by its title, which suggests foreignness.¹⁷ The Naudets' film, by contrast, is content to use the American notation of the date for its title. Varying enormously in style, scope, and content, the eleven segments of *11'09"01* testify to the resonance of the 11 September attacks around the world. Unlike *9/11*, which places the events in a political and historical vacuum and thus ends up echoing the official discourse, many of the films making up *11'09"01* insist on the interconnectedness of 11 September with tragedies taking place elsewhere for which the United States is seen to be at least partially responsible. British director Ken Loach, for example, links 11 September 2001 with 11 September 1973, when Chilean president Salvador Allende was killed during a CIA-backed *coup d'état* that put dictator Augusto Pinochet in power. In the episode contributed by Egyptian director Youssef Chahine, the ghost of a US marine is lectured on various international atrocities carried out in the name of American foreign policy. However, while it clearly distances itself from the American

patriotic narrative of innocence under siege, *11'09'01* at no point refuses empathy with or denigrates the suffering of the victims of the World Trade Center attacks. Rather than playing the who-suffered-most game or getting involved in "the moralizing mathematics of guilt and horror," the film adopts what Žižek calls "the only appropriate stance," namely "unconditional solidarity with *all* victims" (51).¹⁸

In contrast with *11'09'01*, *9/11* carefully avoids the subject of US responsibility for Third-World poverty and political repression. In fact, the New York Fire Department is a highly appropriate subject for this film, as the make-up of its workforce reveals a similar kind of blindness to issues of equality, inclusion, and solidarity. It is a matter of public record that the fire department of the multicultural *mélange* that is New York has a serious minorities problem: "There are approximately 11,500 firefighters and officers in the FDNY, of whom about 300 are black; that's about 3 per cent. The department, which is 92 per cent white, has been historically dominated by the city's Irish and Italian communities and is the least diverse fire department of any big city in America" (Knight). Like African Americans, Hispanics make up only 3 per cent of New York City fire-fighters, and women even less than 0.3 per cent (Latour). In May 2001, the city's Equal Employment Practices Commission found that the severe underrepresentation of these groups, far from being accidental, could be attributed to the fire department's having "created barriers to the hiring of minorities, women and the poor" (Latour).¹⁹ This dramatic lack of diversity—a long-standing problem for which the New York Fire Department has been much criticized—is reflected in *9/11*, which shows only one African American and not a single Hispanic or woman employed at the Engine 7, Ladder 1 firehouse. Only a handful of African American and Hispanic fire-fighters and no women fire-fighters are shown working in or near the World Trade Center on 11 September, and the dead fire-fighters whose pictures are displayed at the end of the film are overwhelmingly white and without exception male. The fire-fighting community that is held up in the Naudets' documentary as a model for the US as a nation thus turns out to be a privileged and exclusionary white brotherhood. Not only, then, does *9/11* turn a blind eye to issues of social justice at the international level by maintaining an overly simplistic good (us) versus evil (them) philosophy, but it also wilfully ignores the demands of social justice closer to home by singing the praises of an insular, defensive, and intransigent

type of community. Evidently, we are a long way here from the ideal of an inclusive and equitable global community as envisaged by Butler, an ideal that appears to underlie Brigand's *11'09"01*.²⁰

Remarkably in tune with the dominant political discourse of its time, *9/11* provides us with an example of what Eric Santner has called "narrative fetishism": "the construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma that called that narrative into being in the first place" (144). The film superimposes a linear narrative of heroism and community upon the traumatic reality of the attacks in order to deprive it of its potential significance. As we have seen, *9/11* does not shirk from suppressing evidence of trauma by excluding or sanitizing graphic footage nor from undermining the authority of eye-witness testimony by frequently contradicting the fire-fighters' own experience and by adopting an attitude of patronizing tolerance towards linguistic excesses. Viewed from a different angle, however, *9/11* offers a critique rather than an instantiation of the way in which 11 September is officially remembered. In its very attempt to marginalize trauma and testimony, the film actually shows how trauma overflows the limits of the memorializing strategies deployed to contain it, thereby demonstrating their inadequacy and tenuousness. Its attempted portrayal of trauma as a discrete past event, locatable, representable, and curable, is belied by traces of trauma seeping through the manifest narrative, resisting processes of identification, comprehension, and facile redemption.

One of these traces is the moment in the film when Tower 2 collapses, covering the lobby of Tower 1 with debris. As Jules Naudet runs up an escalator for shelter, not knowing what has happened, his camera keeps rolling. We hear a deafening rumble which drowns out all other sounds to the point of doing actual damage to the soundtrack, the lens is covered with grit, and then everything becomes pitch black. Something similar happens after the collapse of Tower 1, which both Jules and Gedeon were filming from nearby streets. As the streets fill up with dust and debris, they start running for their lives but eventually fall to the ground. Again, the cameras keep rolling, recording the loud noise and the onset of darkness as the lenses turn brown and gritty. Together with the sound of people falling to their deaths, these three scenes represent the most direct intrusions of reality in the documentary. As if caught in a repetition compulsion, the film keeps returning to

these extraordinary images, which stand out by their indexical quality: reality physically imprints itself upon the camera instead of merely being recorded by it, in much the same way as a traumatic event falls directly into the psyche, bypassing perception and consciousness. While the film's apparent objective is to make trauma visible and narratable, in these haunting scenes, trauma reveals itself as an impossibility of seeing, hearing, and knowing.

That the truth of trauma resides in its resistance to perception and understanding is borne out by the testimony of the survivors, from which we learn that the fire-fighters on the scene were almost totally oblivious to the reality of what was going on. For example, while the whole world had seen Tower 2 collapse on live television, the people trapped inside the lobby of Tower 1 did not have a clue as to what had happened—which explains why, having finally made their way out, they kept standing in the immediate vicinity of the doomed tower. In an interview recently made public as part of the 9/11 records, Joseph Pfeifer, the battalion chief whom Jules had found himself shadowing for most of the day, recalls, "We got out there and then we were standing under the bridge trying to see what was going on. I couldn't see what was going on. Everything was covered with smoke. I couldn't see what collapsed. Our eyes were full of garbage. . . . We're standing on the street and still not knowing the full implication of what took place because you couldn't see." The film shows how the fire-fighters only began to realize what they had lived through after they had got back to the firehouse. The emphasis placed by various eye-witnesses on the events' defiance of sight and comprehension challenges the assumptions structuring the film's conventional narrative, in particular, the view that there is an intact history out there waiting to be lured into vision and spoken as pure meaning. In fact, no sooner does *9/11* assert its claim to total visual mastery over the events of 11 September than this claim is rebutted by the very footage intended to substantiate it. James Hanlon's promise at the beginning of the film that the viewer "will see all of it," "beginning to end," is immediately followed by a flash-forward to the dust- and debris-filled images shot by Jules during the collapse of Tower 2. With the picture going black, it becomes impossible for the viewer to see anything at all.

It is precisely this tension between the desire to know the subject being represented and the—implicit—recognition of the limits of that knowing that makes *9/11* so compelling. With one hand the

film offers the familiar gesture of memory as forgetting—the incorporation of trauma into a reassuring narrative of national greatness—and with the other hand it takes away the comfort of resting in this narrative. Whatever ethical value the documentary can be said to possess lies in the tension between these two gestures, which, if nothing more, at least complicates the return to the “dogmatic slumber” (Derrida, qtd. in Borradori 100) from which 11 September had awakened us.

Notes

- 1 This is especially true of the televised version of the documentary, which differs in several respects from the DVD edition released by Paramount Pictures in 2002 under the title *9/11: The Filmmakers' Commemorative Edition*. Most notably, Robert De Niro, who hosted the CBS program, does not appear on the DVD edition. Yet, with a running time of 129 minutes, the DVD edition is about a quarter of an hour longer than the CBS broadcast. Some footage has been added that expands on the original material; for example, scenes from the training of new recruits, scenes from within the firehouse, and scenes from the recovery effort. As a result, the tight narrative structure undergirding the TV version is loosened somewhat. By way of bonus material, the DVD features a 53-minute interview section containing further commentary from the fire-fighters.
- 2 In fact, the only visual evidence of death in the documentary comes in the form of two still images of the intact body of Father Mychal Judge, the fire department's chaplain, being carried to a nearby church. His death—distanced as it is through the use of still rather than moving images—can hardly be called representative, as the vast majority of the victims of 11 September were denied such dignity, their bodies being all but obliterated and therefore hard (if not impossible) to identify. As one of the fire-fighters testifies in the additional interview section on the DVD, “There were many . . . there were many, eh . . . it wasn't many bodies, but it was many . . . pieces, body parts. There was, I saw one or two . . . whole bodies, but not . . . it wasn't many. . . . I imagine the people were the same as the building: nothing left.” Moreover, the chaplain's death is rescued from meaninglessness by the uncanny resemblance between the scene captured in the two photographs and traditional pictorial representations of the descent from the cross, which has the effect of turning the clergyman into a Christ-like sacrificial victim. (I owe this point to my colleague Kristiaan Versluys.)
- 3 One might argue, as many have, that the noise of the impact of the bodies on the glass and metal awning outside Tower 1 is disturbing enough. While these sounds are definitely chilling, as are the screams we hear of terrified burn victims inside the lobby, it should be pointed out that the original soundtrack recorded by Jules's on-camera

microphone was manipulated so as to soften the shock effect. Appearances notwithstanding, what we get to hear is a diluted and sanitized version of the original soundtrack: as executive producer Susan Zirinsky explained at the press screening, most of the crashes were edited out on the grounds that “[t]o have that incredible crush of sound every 20 or 30 seconds would have been very tough for the audience” (qtd. in Laurence).

- 4 A similar point is made by Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others*: Staying within the bounds of good taste was the primary reason given for not showing any of the horrific pictures of the dead taken at the site of the World Trade Center in the immediate aftermath of the attack on September 11, 2001. . . . This novel insistence on good taste in a culture saturated with commercial incentives to lower standards of taste may be puzzling. But it makes sense if understood as obscuring a host of concerns and anxieties about public order and public morale that cannot be named, as well as pointing to the inability otherwise to formulate or defend traditional conventions of how to mourn. (68–9)
- 5 In an interview segment filmed at the Fire Academy in June 2001 and shown at the beginning of the documentary, Benetatos says, “It sounds kind of cheesy, but I always kind of wanted to be a hero, and this is really the only thing you can do that you can do that [*sic*].”
- 6 See also Orly Lubin’s discussion of the documentary’s compliance with Hollywood conventions (125–7).
- 7 In view of the documentary’s own affinity with mainstream disaster films, the Hollywood comparisons invoked by some of the witnesses to convey the magnitude of the events take on an ironic ring. A news correspondent reports from on the ground that “[t]he scene here is just one right out of one of those movies you would see in Hollywood,” and, in the DVD version, a passer-by is heard saying, “Like something out of *The Towering Inferno*, like a movie.”
- 8 Not only does Peyser speak of “richly drawn characters” and “plot twists” in the above passage, but he also uses film vocabulary to describe the thumps of bodies hitting the roof of the lobby, calling them “the most chilling sound effects ever heard on television.”
- 9 De Niro’s words were echoed by Susan Zirinsky at the pre-screening press meeting. Responding to Zirinsky’s claim in an article titled “Shield Us on Sunday Night? No, Just Show Us: Airing the Culture of Denial on CBS,” Claudia Rosett puts her finger on the problem: “Moment of strength? Well, yes, unquestionably there was valor. But given that the overwhelming event this bravery sought to address was, actually, terror, this amounts to a cleaned up version of the realities of that day.”

- 10 "Or," Berger continues, "the dead were spoken of now as heroes" (55). Extending the creation of heroes to include the dead is also noticeable in the Naudet brothers' documentary. By way of an epilogue, photographs of the 344 fire-fighters who lost their lives on 11 September are displayed four by four against the background of the Stars and Stripes. They are commemorated as national heroes who made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of their country. By conceiving the catastrophe as a purposive and meaningful sacrificial operation, the documentary effectively softens its traumatic core.
- 11 As a cinematic tribute to fire-fighters, *9/11* stands in a long tradition of adulatory films about the fire-fighting profession, stretching from *Life of an American Fireman* (1903) to *The Towering Inferno* (1974) and from *Backdraft* (1991) to *The Guys* (2002) and *Ladder 49* (2004).
- 12 While there are numerous myths featuring two brothers, one is particularly reminded of the legendary love of Castor and Pollux, the twin sons of Jupiter and Leda.
- 13 That the documentary promotes a pro-war political agenda was recognized at the press meeting by Susan Zirinsky, who defended the timing of the broadcast as follows: "This is the right time. We can't forget what drove this country to be at war. It is really important to not forget what happened" (qtd. in Long). Appearing on Fox's *The O'Reilly Factor* later that week, Zirinsky again invoked the war being fought in Afghanistan and stressed the supposed need "to keep that mission alive." As Chris Fitzpatrick points out, Zirinsky's attitude, "borrowed from John Ashcroft," suggests that "the true function of *9/11* may be getting America's jingoistic blood boiling." The Naudets' and Zirinsky's apparent disagreement about the purpose of the documentary is a rare breach of Franco-American unity: judging from interviews with directors and producers, there was a complete consensus among the different parties involved on just about every other aspect of the film.
- 14 A similar observation is made by André Habib in "Autour de *9/11* — Terrains battus: Reconquête fictionnelle ou dommages au réel," one of the most insightful articles on the Naudet brothers' documentary that I have come across. Habib also regards the probie as "*une métonymie des États-Unis en entier*" ("a metonymy of the United States as a whole"):
- Tony, c'est les États-Unis, jusque là ménagés par l'Histoire, assoiffés d'héroïsme mais maintenus à l'écart de toute épreuve véritable. C'est comme si tout le pays avait été, jusqu'à cette date fatidique, en probation, et que, après le 11 septembre, elle avait subi son initiation, devenant, du coup, mûre pour l'Histoire.
- (Tony is the United States, until then spared by History, thirsty for heroism but kept away from any real challenge. It is as if the whole country had, until that fateful date, been on probation,

and as if, after September 11, it had undergone its initiation and thereby become ripe for History.)

- 15 Compare Žižek: “[i]s not the surprise at why are they not loved [*sic*] for what they are doing to the world the most fundamental American reaction (at least) since the Vietnam war? We just try to be good, to help others, to bring peace and prosperity, and look what we get in return” (145–6).
- 16 In this respect, the Naudet brothers’ documentary is of a piece with other post-11 September mass-audience films. As Wheeler Winston Dixon observes, “[T]he bulk of mainstream American cinema since 9/11, whether the films were in production before or not, seems centered on a desire to replicate the idea of the ‘just war,’ in which military reprisals, and the concomitant escalation of warfare, seem simultaneously inevitable and justified” (1).
- 17 In the United States, however, Brigand’s film was released (belatedly, in 2003) under the name *September 11* in an apparent effort to counteract this disorienting effect.
- 18 However, this did not stop *Variety* from calling the film “stridently anti-American” (Godard 1). Dixon correctly points out that *11’09’01*, “far from being anti-American, is more accurately critical of American policy in the wake of 9/11, a very different matter” (5). In his view, the contested episodes of Brigand’s film “bring a welcome breath of dissenting opinion to current cinematic discourse on the attacks of 9/11” (5).
- 19 Efforts to get the department to comply with the commission’s recommendations were suspended indefinitely in the wake of the 11 September attacks (Latour).
- 20 In *11’09’01*, the reality of racism and xenophobia in New York is poignantly evoked by the Indian director Mira Nair, whose segment deals with the chilling effects of 11 September on the American Muslim community. Set in New York City, Nair’s film recounts the story (based on actual events) of a Pakistani American family whose eldest son goes missing on the morning of 11 September. For several months, the FBI and the media keep claiming that he was a terrorist, causing his family to be shunned and ostracized by their initially supportive neighbours. Eventually, however, it emerges that the young man, a medic, was killed while attempting to rescue people at the World Trade Center. Once the truth is known, he is hailed as a hero.

Works Cited

Adorno, Theodor. “Cultural Criticism and Society.” *Prisms*. Trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984. 17–34.

- Anderson, Lisa, and Stevenson Swanson. "Film Goes inside World Trade Center: Gripping Sept. 11 Footage Followed NYC Firefighters." *Chicago Tribune* 5 Mar. 2002. *Advocate*. 23 July 2005 <<http://www.stamfordadvocate.com/classified/jobs/sns-worldtrade-filmfootage-ct.story>>.
- Berger, James. "'There's No Backhand to This.'" *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*. Ed. Judith Greenberg. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2003. 52–9.
- Borradori, Giovanna. *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003.
- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004.
- Caruth, Cathy. "Recapturing the Past." Introduction. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. 151–7.
- Dixon, Wheeler Winston. "Something Lost—Film after 9/11." Introduction. *Film and Television after 9/11*. Ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004. 1–28.
- Dreher, Rod. "Inside the Inferno: The 9/11 Documentary." *National Review Online* 7 Mar. 2002. 23 July 2005 <<http://www.nationalreview.com/dreher/dreher030702.shtml>>.
- 11'09"01. Dir. Youssef Chahine et al. Prod. Alain Brigand. DVD. Galatée Films / Studio Canal, 2002.
- Erickson, Hal. "9/11." *All-Movie Guide*. 22 Sept. 2005 <<http://allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=1:265838>>.
- Fitzpatrick, Chris. "9/11: Happy Anniversary!" *PopMatters.com*. 23 July 2005 <<http://www.popmatters.com/tv/reviews/n/9-11.shtml>>.
- Godard, François. "Canal Plus 9/11 Pic Courts Controversy." *Daily Variety* 21 Aug. 2002: 1, 20.
- Habib, André. "Autour de 9/11—Terrains battus: Reconquête fictionnelle ou dommages au réel." *Hors Champs* June 2002. 23 July 2005 <http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/article.php3?id_article=81>.
- Hope, Gloves and Redemption*. Dir. Jules Naudet and Gedeon Naudet. 1999. DVD. Pathfinder, 2003.
- Knight, Sam. "New York's Whitest." Slices of New York. *Times Online* 21 Feb. 2005. 23 Sept. 2005 <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,18391-1493837,00.html>>.
- Latour, Jane. "Looking for a Fire Department That Looks like New York." *Gotham Gazette* 3 Dec. 2001. 23 Sept. 2005 <<http://www.gothamgazette.com/iotw/firedepartment/doc1.shtml>>.
- Laurence, Robert P. "Two-Hour Special 9/11 Conveys Horror without Being Graphic." *San Diego Union-Tribune* 8 Mar. 2002. 23 July 2005 <<http://www.signonsandiego.com/tvradio/cbs911.html>>.

Long, Tom. "Healing or Haunting?" *Detroit News* 8 Mar. 2002. 23 Sept. 2005 <<http://www.detnews.com/2002/entertainment/0203/10/d01-435103.htm>>.

Lubin, Orly. "Masked Power: An Encounter with the Social Body in the Flesh." *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*. Ed. Judith Greenberg. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2003. 124-31.

9/11. Dir. Jules Naudet, Gedeon Naudet, and James Hanlon. CBS. 10 Mar. 2002.

9/11: *The Filmmakers' Commemorative Edition*. Dir. Jules Naudet, Gedeon Naudet, and James Hanlon. DVD. Paramount, 2002.

Peysner, Marc. "If Only It Were Just a Movie: The CBS Documentary '9/11' is Riveting and Surprisingly Poignant." *Newsweek* 8 Mar. 2002. MSNBC. 23 July 2005 <<http://msnbc.msn.com/id/3067263/>>.

Pfeifer, Joseph. "World Trade Center Task Force Interview." 23 Oct. 2001. The Sept. 11 Records: Oral Histories from Sept. 11 Compiled by the New York Fire Department. *New York Times* 12 Aug. 2005. 27 Sept. 2005 <http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/html/nyregion/20050812_WTC_GRAPHIC/met_WTC_histories_full_01.html>.

Rosett, Claudia. "Shield Us on Sunday Night? No, Just Show Us: Airing the Culture of Denial on CBS." *OpinionJournal* 8 Mar. 2002. 23 July 2005 <<http://www.opinionjournal.com/taste/?id=105001736>>.

Rylant, Chris. "Coming of Age on September 11." *TeeVee* 13 Mar. 2002. 23 July 2005 <<http://www.teevee.org/archive/2002/03/13/index.html>>.

Santner, Eric. "History beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma." *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"*. Ed. Saul Friedlander. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992. 143-54.

Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador, 2003.

Wiesel, Elie. "Trivializing the Holocaust: Semi-Fact and Semi-Fiction." *New York Times* 16 Apr. 1978: Section 2, 1+.

Zirinsky, Susan. Interview with Bill O'Reilly. *The O'Reilly Factor*. Fox News Network. 8 Mar. 2002. Transcript.

Žižek, Slavoj. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. London: Verso, 2002.