

Mediating Catastrophe: September 11 and the crisis of the other

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Everyone now has a set of more or less indelible sounds, images and voices in their heads that mark their own experience and recollection of the media's reporting of those terrible days. Apart from those shattering and, initially at least, endlessly replayed images of the disaster itself, I, in London, have a small number of just such moments. The image of George Bush at his first press conference after the attack, and once he had found his way back to Capitol Hill: sitting alongside his generals and his senior colleagues, dressed in what to all intents and purposes looked like a cross between a battle dress and a wind-breaker: was he about to hunt terrorists or bears? The image of the three middle-aged male workers leaving the site of destruction covered in dust as if, for all the world, they had just been photographed by the National Geographic emerging from a tribal initiation. The voice of John Simpson, the BBC's correspondent on Radio 4, not just reporting, but claiming to be leading, the liberation of Kabul, and bringing, as he did so, a whole new sense to the phrase media imperialism.

These moments mark, both generally and particularly, the distinct way in which each one of us is enabled to construct our own version of those events. But our capacity to do so, indeed the media's own capacity to represent them in the first place, depends on the presence in our culture and in our minds of images that already exist. It was commonplace to say at the very beginning as reporters and audiences struggled to make sense of what was happening, that this was just like Hollywood. Yet the shocking and the threatening has to be made into sense. Despite the singularly catastrophic moments of September 11 the media have a stock of images, frames and narratives available in their conscious and unconscious archive which will hold as well as explain. This is the container of the familiar, the familiar which is claimed, sooner or later, to soften the blow. There is safety in the cliché. There is comfort in the tale.

I want to suggest in this short essay that there is a structural dimension to the mediation of such events as took place on September 11¹. Perhaps there is no such other event. However even in its uniqueness, its catastrophic uniqueness, the media's relationship to it can not be understood only by focusing on the immediate moment and its aftermath. We have to make sense of this relationship and our own relationship to that relationship, in the broader context of how the media consistently and persistently represent the world to us, how they consistently and persistently represent otherness, other peoples, other cultures, and in so doing how they define for us a relationship to the world to which we would otherwise have no access.

Both the immediate image and the live report are unlikely, and we learned this distinctively in the reporting of the Gulf War, adequately to represent an otherwise unmediated reality. Both image and report are constrained by the controls imposed – both legitimately and cynically – by the military and the state, but appear as in some sense a transcendence of those controls. It is of course the case that in war truth is the first casualty, but the vividness of the immediate and the live masks the degree to which understanding is genuinely enabled. It masks too the fact that the media are indeed hard at work: and that this work involves selection, representation, translation, all of which have material consequences for how those of us without alternative sources of information or communication – and that includes most of us – gain what we need to know not to just to understand what is happening out there; but crucially how to place ourselves in relation to it.

I want to address the reporting of September 11 through this frame of media continuity, and comfort. I want to talk about interruption (in the realm of time); transcendence (in the realm of space) and otherness (in the realm of ethics)².

¹ This is, of course, hardly a novel position, see for example Dayan, Daniel and Katz, Elihu (1992) *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press

² These issues can only be dealt with in an extremely cursory fashion here. For more elaborated (but still incomplete) discussions see: Silverstone, Roger (1999) *Why Study the Media?*, London: Sage; Silverstone, Roger (in press) 'Proper Distance: towards an ethics for cyberspace' in Gunnar Liestol, Andrew Morrison, Terje Rasmussen (eds.) *Innovations*, Cambridge MA; MIT Press; Silverstone, Roger (in press) 'Complicity and Collusion in the Mediation of Everyday Life', *New Literary History*.

Interruption

The US film critic and theorist Patricia Mellencamp³, in writing about the media's reporting of the Challenger disaster on January 26 1986, reflected on the question of what makes a catastrophe a catastrophe. Acknowledging the reality of an event is only part of the story. Something becomes a catastrophe, she suggests, when reports of its occurrence are allowed to interrupt the otherwise seamless schedules of broadcast radio and television. And it is that interruption (just before the denouement of a John Wayne movie, or an episode of *ER*) which itself is catastrophic for those whose ontological security in some small measure requires them to be engaged in the continuous narratives of daily mediation. This is a serious point. It addresses the enormous importance of the continuity of media, the eternity of the schedule, to the conduct of everyday life⁴.

Only catastrophes can interrupt the flow and the order of media representation. Only interruptions of that order and flow can be considered catastrophes. The psycho-dynamics of this interruption are clear enough. The continuities of engagement, the always on-ness, the infinite presence and availability of the images and sounds of broadcasting, provide a framework both for comfort and creativity⁵. The securities of everyday life, in so far as there are such securities, are substantially based on the preservation of a transitional space in which audiences and their media, the person and the technology, the experience of the "real" and the experience of the "virtual", are held in creative tension, in the semi-permanence of mediated familiarity. That tension is broken only rarely, for even nightly television and radio news, in their ritualisation and generic framing of story upon story, draw the sting of the

³ Mellencamp, Patricia (1990) 'TV Time and Catastrophe: or beyond the pleasure principle of television', in Patricia Mellencamp (ed.) *Logics of Television*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 240-266

⁴ For a more developed account of ontological security as a dimension of the process of mass mediation, see Silverstone, Roger (1994) *Television and Everyday Life*, London: Routledge, Chapter 1

naked world. Unmediated reality, *a priori*, rarely breaks through the processes of mediation.

Yet from time to time, of course, it does, and on September 11 2001 it did, globally and dramatically. The reporting itself, in its vivid immediacy, illustrated the scale of the interruption, and the challenge that that interruption posed. At least Orson Welles, in broadcasting *The War of the Worlds* in 1938 had a script, and those who flooded onto the streets in mortal fear of the Martians' landing, could, in the end, take comfort that they had suffered from the more common kind of interruption: the interruption of everyday life by its mediated equivalent⁶. But on September 11 it was the reverse. This was everyday life – of a kind – interrupting the media. September 11 was both scriptless, though also pre-scripted and in a sense, too, prescribed⁷. Its reality had to be contained. It had to be dragged, kicking and screaming into the as-if of daily mediation, for without that containment, the containment of metaphor, of cliché, of stereotype, it would outrun our capacity to make enough sense of it; and without enough sense of it, our lives would be unliveable, as indeed they were for a time in New York, where the stench and the drifting smoke of destruction provided a constant reminder of some kind of reality, albeit a reality mightily disturbed.

An interruption, then. But not perhaps for too long, for obvious reasons. Life had to go on. That was the political message, the driving rhetoric of social and psychological resistance and survival. But that was also the mediated message. Not only life, but television, had to go on. Two months after September 11, and after four weeks of anthrax in the postal service in the US, two of the three major American networks refused to relay President's Bush live broadcast to the nation, his first since the anthrax attack began. NBC, indeed, chose not to reschedule an episode of *Friends*.

⁵ See Silverstone, Roger (1994) and the discussion of Winnicott, D.W. (1975) *Playing and Reality*, Harmondsworth: Penguin

⁶ Cantril, H, Gaudet, H and Herzog, H (1940) *The Invasion from Mars: a study in the psychology of panic*, Princeton: Princeton University Press

⁷ The news this morning, as I write, is that President Bush had advance warning of an attack.

Of course time is a healer. But in modern society healing temporality is defined and driven by the 24/7 of our media. The persistent frames of mediated accounting both distance us, the audience, from immediacy and enable an integration of those frames into the patterns of everyday life⁸. Just as the mediated funeral of Lady Diana both mobilised the emotions of nations (can a country cry?) and turned city pavements into shrines (both in Paris and In London), so too has the wreckage of the World Trade Centre become both shrine and tourist attraction. In both guises it reflects the media's containing re-enchantment of everyday life, its sanctification of catastrophe.

Transcendence

In the mediation of terror, just as in the mediation of war, distance is both friend and enemy. And the claims of media, through the annihilation of distance, to be able to transcend the limits of unmediated communication, to provide entirely new forms of liberating global connectivity, are also contradictory. The claim, of course, is that the transmitted image and the live report put us, the audience, in touch, directly in touch with what, palpably, we can not touch.

The media's transcendence of the checks and balances of the face to face, has both costs and benefits. The vivid immediacy of the live event, the plane flying into the side of the World Trade Centre, is transparently mimetic. Distance is eradicated, as is time, in that moment. We, the global audience, are there, and the screen becomes a mirror to the horror being played out across the ocean. However, as the Kurt and Gladys Lang⁹ first noted in a rigorous fashion some time ago in their analysis of the live televised reporting

⁸ Anthony Giddens talks of "the sequestration of experience", the pushing to the margins of social life all those dimensions, death, disability, pain, exploitation, as a constituent component of late modern societies. This is only part of it, for the media, on the contrary, confront us on a daily basis with these things, only in their mediated forms (principally through narrative), and consequently they are visible, but they no longer appear as a meaningful part of either our lives or the lives of others: see Giddens, Anthony (1990) *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press .

⁹ Lang, K. and Lang, G.E. (1953) 'The Unique Perspective of Television and its Effect', *American Sociological Review*, 18 (1): 103-112

of General MacArthur's New York parade on his return from the Korean War, although somehow those images are misleading, they are also better, in some ways, than the real thing. Not being there is actually better than being there. But it is not being there.

So there are two kinds of distance. The first is the distance between the event and the representation of the event, the reality and its image. The second is the distance between the image and the realities of everyday life, in which those images are reflected upon, and absorbed (or not) into another flow, the rigorous continuities of the daily round.

Understanding the mediation of such momentous events requires, therefore, an understanding of the generalities of the relationship between the media and everyday life. There are two points to be made. The media may provide, and indeed do provide, myriad opportunities for utopian or dystopian release from the pressures of the everyday, or for at least a flashing engagement with an alternative, sometimes terrifying, reality. But at the same time they remain a part of the everyday, locked irrevocably into the ordinariness of its times and spaces. The threshold remains, and the separation, a separation which involves the possibility of moving from the mundane to the sacred, from the ordinary to the heightened, requires a return.

The second point, however, is that everyday life is no longer what it was. As John Thompson¹⁰ for one argues, the everyday is already a complex of mediations, of the face-to-face as well as the quasi face-to-face. It is already both a mundane and a heady mix of the physical and, in the broadest sense, the virtual. Our experience of the world is already infused by its electronic mediation. The lived and the represented consequently become the warp and the weft of the everyday, and what is at stake in any investigation of their inter-relationship is the historical and sociological specificity of the ensuing fabric, its strengths and its weaknesses, its coincidences and its

¹⁰ Thompson, John (1995) *Media and Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press

contradictions: the touch and the feel of culture – the ethics and aesthetics of experience.

In this context transcendence is transcendence from an already transcendent world. Or put another way, transcendence is entirely illusory. The media's structural claims are for connectivity, a connectivity enabled and enhanced by the immediacy and vividness of global communication. Accepting that degree of connection, requires that we remain in and accept the electronic as the touchstone for our contact and engagement with the world, and as I have already argued, our capacity to manage our daily lives requires us to do just that. However there is a cost. If we are really to understand the nature of the media's framings, and its implications, then we have to find a way of standing outside them. This is a very difficult, though an essential, thing to be able to do. The media are, in this context, like our own natural language, and as George Steiner¹¹ has noted, we can no more step out of it, than a man from his shadow. The problem is, for the most part, we do not have the tools, the critical wherewithal, to stand outside those frames. We can leave the field, turn our backs on the media's images. But we cannot, except with great effort and difficulty, stand against them.

It is precisely the media's deracination of everyday life, its uprooting of experience, that the transcendence claimed as still possible in contemporary society loses its authenticity. As a result our capacity to imagine and to engage with worlds and individuals beyond our own are, with of course inevitable though infrequent exceptions, entirely contained and limited by the media's own framing. They do not survive much beyond their own screening. Their screening ensures that they will only survive through their framing.

September 11 was a transcendent moment, brought down to earth by the media's continuous rearticulation and naturalisation of both its images and its stories. Such naturalisation would not, could not, and did not, enable understanding. For the media's capacity meaningfully to connect us to the

¹¹ Steiner, George (1975) *After Babel*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

other, even the other in death and destruction, has proved to be an illusion, a pernicious illusion.

The other

I have another radio memory of the conflict. It is of an Afghani blacksmith who, having failed so far to hear any of the US air-plane based, supposedly blanket, propaganda coverage of his country, offered his own account to the BBC of why so many bombs were falling around his village. It was because, he thought, Al Qaeda had killed many Americans and their donkeys, and had destroyed some of their castles. He was not entirely wrong. The appearance of Al-Jazeera on Western screens was an affront, not just because of the appearance of Osama bin Laden in the front rooms of mid-Western homes, but because it indicated that they were reporting on us – we had become their other.

This was certainly a terrible shock. It was a shock because it transgressed a brutal commonplace of western media. That is, that we create the images of them, not they of us. And our relationship to the other in our images and in our narratives, a relationship deeply inscribed too into the frames of our intensely mediated culture, is defined by an inability to recognise difference. Both a personal and a political response to human wrongs and human rights depends on our ability to recognise and acknowledge that those who suffer, as well as those who perpetrate suffering, are human beings who are like us as well as human beings who are not like us. Their similarity enables us to know them, and to judge them. Their difference requires us to recognise that there are things that we may never understand about them.

The dominant narratives of western media tend to refuse this acknowledgement of difference. The others are either seen to be so like us as to be indistinguishable from us, or so unlike us as to be seen as less than human. On the one hand incorporation. On the other annihilation, both literal and symbolic. This polarisation is enhanced, of course, in times of crisis, but

it is not limited to such times. In news reporting, but also in the fragmentary narratives of advertisements and the tabloid press, this acceptance of a common humanity, one that requires a principled ethical relationship of care and understanding, is systematically refused.

Insofar as the media frame their reporting of the world through the particular temporal and spatial, visual and narrative, frames and filters that I have been describing in this paper, the less likely both in general and in specifics will we find ourselves having to confront our own humanity and inhumanity; the less likely we will be able to move beyond the moral blacks and whites of contemporary representation.

These are the frames within which the events of September 11, their immediate aftermath, and the subsequent reporting of the conflict in Afghanistan, have to be understood. The representational tools are ready and waiting to be mobilised in the containment of the catastrophic. Their re-naturalisation in the endless repetition of image and the reiteration and reinforcement of narrative cements a version of the world which moves imperceptibly but entirely into the familiar and unexceptional. Our lives go on, as the spatial, temporal and representational distancing necessary for the threats of chaos to be repressed work its magic.

Though it is difficult to acknowledge, and our languages of media criticism do not come easily to our aid, the base-line of any understanding of the implications of western (and also of non-western) media's reporting of the catastrophe of September 11, has to be an ethical one. In the realm of factual reporting and the making of news, the media have only one responsibility. It is to make the world intelligible. For it is only in its intelligibility that the world, the others who in live in that world, but we who also live in it, become human. The catastrophe of September 11 was plain to see. But there is another catastrophe lying in wait. And that is the slow-burning catastrophe of its representation in the world's media.

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