

The Eyewitness and the Affected Viewer

September 11 in the Media

BRITTA TIMM KNUDSEN

“... because it is pity that has helped the species to survive.” Lars von Trier in “Euroman”, June 2003, p. 44.

Everyone agrees that the terror attack on the World Trade Center (WTC) on 11 September 2001 was a media event. But what exactly does that mean? Unlike the Gulf War, which according to the sociologist Jean Baudrillard did not really happen because the media’s presentation of the war turned the action into something that was unreal, 9/11 took place right in front of the eyes of internet or television viewers. Some commentators felt that viewers were trapped between an aesthetic fascination for the pictures on their screens, and an ethical involvement in the events being presented to them in pictures. Within the field of media research it is widely accepted that the immediate diffusion of news pictures by the media involves the viewers immediately and globally in whatever is happening locally. It is also well known that the media create a discursive framework around the events being presented to us, rapidly providing us with a stabilising understanding of the events in question. In the case of “9/11”, we were presented with victims and heroes (the fire fighters) as well as the people who committed the crime (enemies, Osama bin Laden) and their assistants (Saddam Hussein, the Axis of Evil).

This discursive framing is extremely important, because it led to the political decisions taken in reaction to the event in question. In this connection, the politologist James Der Derian has pointed out that the decision to go to war with Iraq was taken in the days immediately following the terrorist attack on the WTC.

Department of Scandinavian Language and Literature, Niels Juelsgade 84, DK-8200 Århus N, norbtk@hum.au.dk

One slightly overlooked element in the 9/11 attack seems to be the aesthetic fascination that the pictures had for viewers. Instead of regarding these elements and the fascination they seem to exert on us as unsuitable in relation to the horrific event taking place in front of our eyes, this article will argue that the formal elements in the presentation and representation of the event by the media helped to move us as viewers¹. This article will indicate the way in which ethical and aesthetic effects combine in the way the media presented the disaster; and will consider the news presented by Denmark’s two main television channels (DR1 and TV2) on the day itself, as well as two documentaries entitled “Øjenvidner fra Helvede” (Eyewitness in Hell) and “9/11” respectively as examples.

The Eventness of the Event

In the media, 9/11 had an eventness that can be divided thematically into three parts: the relationship of the event to its representation, the nature of 9/11 as a “live” event, and the nature of the event as a trauma. Timothy Rainer defines an event as follows: “We represent objects, but we can only undergo events. The event as such is not something that can be represented. If anything, events are what drive us to representation” (Rainer, 2002:2). An event “washes over us”, and leads to representation and (not least) its limitations. In “Being Singular Plural” Jean-Luc Nancy says that “The surprise – the event – does not belong to the order of representation” (Nancy, 2000: 173). If the event does not belong to the order of representation, it seems relevant to ask where it does belong. The answer must be that the event presents itself by “knocking a hole” in the mass-media representation.

TV2’s programme “Nyhederne Ekstra” at 2.40 pm was particularly interesting in this connection.

The picture of a burning tower filled the entire screen, while the anchorwoman off-screen was saying that the WTC in New York had been attacked by two planes a short time ago. The anchorwoman Caroline Boserup and the journalist Niels Brinch were in the studio. They divided the task of presenting the news between them in an interesting way: Caroline Boserup tried to put the event into a framework of interpretation (by calling the event “an attack”, for instance), while Niels Brinch constantly adjusted this to avoid drawing over-hasty conclusions on the basis of the scanty information available at that early stage. The eventness of this event – its presentation – resulted in a breakdown in the journalistic discourse. The event was something that could not (yet) be represented; it lacked a definition of what was actually going on. This revealed a discrepancy between what had happened and the understanding of what had happened. Several other characteristics illustrated the collapse of the journalistic discourse: sentences that were incomplete, the loss of telephone contact with witnesses and sources, sentences that were interrupted, repetitions, hesitation. Accompanying several pictures of the second plane flying into the south tower, viewers could hear the anchorwoman commenting on her own performance as a journalist (“Oh God, we’re doing well”) She apologised immediately, but the interesting thing is that the collapse in journalistic discourse was noticed by the presenters themselves.

The eventness of this event was presented in the form of a collapse, and its effect was clearly to place everyone (television viewers, politicians, journalists) on the same level in relation to this event: this event quite literally surpassed everything else. The viewers were witnesses to it, and were involved in this global event at the same moment as it took place.

The attack on the WTC on 11 September was designed to be a media event. In a book published as long ago as 1978, entitled “*A l’ombre des Majorités silencieuses ou la fin du social*”, Jean Baudrillard described terrorism as a political activity that refuses to be represented politically (by parties, viewpoints, arguments) – and prefers to present itself via the media. Its strategy is to send waves of shock through the media (Baudrillard, 1978:80).

In his current studies of the nature of terrorism, Baudrillard also points out that modern terrorism utilises the immediate and global diffusion of events as a visual strategy. Events can only achieve a global impact and symbolism if they are visual events: “Reality and fiction are linked inextricably, and our

fascination for assassinations is primarily due to our fascination for the pictures of them ... No, the picture comes first. And our trembling at the reality of such events is a result of the pictures” (Baudrillard, 2002: 164). What comes first: reality or the pictures of events? The point is that the two things occur simultaneously; but if we ask what this simultaneous occurrence means to our perception of events, the answers vary considerably. Baudrillard does not deny his radical constructivist position, which perceives events as unreal (or “simulacra”, to use Baudrillard’s own term). In other words, pictures produce viewers who are attracted by their fascination for these pictures – and who remain at an aesthetic distance from the events themselves.

This article will study the reality effects of 9/11 as a live event. How is the viewer given an ethical involvement? For one thing, by turning television viewers into eyewitnesses of the event (at the same level as journalists, politicians etc.); and by giving viewers information about the event by presenting the accounts of various witnesses, the purpose of which is to communicate a physical and affective experience of the event.

9/11 was a live media event. The television viewer was placed at the scene of the event with only a few minutes’ delay, and was present when the second plane flew into the south tower of the WTC. Mary-Ann Doane has discovered that the “noem” of television (its distinguishing characteristic) is its relationship with time – in other words, its ability to go on the air live in real time, its ability to transmit events live or with only a slight delay. Television – and the television news in particular – has a great ability to present disastrous events because television can be on the spot. Live transmissions involve the viewers in global events both in time and spatially.

Different Kinds of Witnessing

The eyewitness is an important subject position in the 21st century. The media turn us all into accomplices or accessories, and it is no longer possible to claim that we knew nothing about major events (Ellis, 2000). Ellis regards the position of the viewer as paradoxical: on the one hand safe and untouchable, and on the other hand powerless. The electronic mass media can create common ground anywhere, thereby giving viewers excellent insight. But according to Ellis this is coupled with powerlessness. It is true that viewers of the famous 9/11 television loop were turned into eyewitnesses; but when eyewitness accounts are seen and heard the

viewers are also turned into witnesses of their testimony.

Dori Laub refers to witnesses at three different levels. The level at which you are your own witness in your own story; the level at which you are a witness of other people's testimony; and the level at which you are a witness of the witnessing process itself. It is important to be a witness, because this is part of the process of reconstruction of "Oneself", and the most important factor in this connection is "the Other". Dori Laub, who discusses accounts of the Holocaust, concludes that the most important feature for anyone living in a Holocaust world is that we do not have any "Other", that we are not recognised as subjects in the eyes of the symbolic "Other", that we do not have a "You" to address. We are annihilated or dehumanised in the eyes of the "Other", and thus in our own eyes as well. Telling our story is the first step on the path to re-establishing a "You" to whom we can tell it. Being a witness of a story or testimony which may never have been told before and which is acknowledged to be a story or testimony at the moment it is told means that television viewers actually become witnesses of events before the storytellers themselves. As witnesses (television viewers) we are installed as impersonal or anonymous "Others" with regard to the storyteller's testimony.

This makes it possible to distinguish the different levels of eyewitness from each other. The first category can be called the "documenting" eyewitness. The photographer or creator of a documentary film provides documentary evidence of the event, thereby formatting it as an overwhelming event that it is often only a hair's breadth away from engulfing the eyewitness himself. The fine line between being a victim and being an eyewitness which such documentaries reveal places the focus on the balancing act between being a victim of a bolt of lightning in the form of sudden, disastrous death, accident or illness, and being an eyewitness of other people suffering from such events. On 11 September 2001 the Danish television news transmitted other examples of eyewitness accounts at street level. Poul Erik Skammelsen (a TV2 reporter) lives in Manhattan, and he was the first local witness interviewed on the telephone – while being shown on a split screen. He had seen nothing and could see nothing from his local position, and he expressed this very clearly by saying "You probably know more than me". So the camera overview provided for us in Denmark was better than his experience at street level because he was nowhere near the scene at the time. On DR1 there were two distinctive eyewitness accounts at

or near the scene that are interesting. One was a telephone interview with a Danish woman called Marie Billegrav, who was in a building near the WTC. And the other was the account of a terrified woman on the street running away from the WTC, who was crying as she said that she had seen people jumping out of windows in the WTC. These three eyewitnesses provide a good illustration of eyewitness accounts at street level. The witnesses did not have the status of experts, but were just physically present in a dangerous situation. So what we can expect from such local witnesses is a physical eyewitness account. In the news reports about 9/11 the local witnesses did not replace the expert commentary of military experts, USA correspondents, Middle East experts, experts on terrorism etc. They provided an entirely different form of testimony to that provided by such experts. The physical, affective testimony supplemented the analysis.

Such testimonies are not superfluous, and nor do they undermine the level of information provided. But they do communicate the emotions prevailing in the given situation in a physical manner. In other words, these witnesses do not fulfil a cognitive purpose – they fulfil an affective purpose: they tell us what it is like to be physically placed in such a dangerous situation. The television viewer experiences the situation *through* these witnesses, through their bodies. Their real fear and concern are communicated to us. Marie Billegrav's voice trembles with panic and shock. She is virtually unable to speak coherently, and keeps repeating the phrase "I just want to get out of here". Her testimony could be regarded as a testimony of a physically *exposed* body. The third testimony from an *affected* body is from the woman crying as she tells us what she has seen, representing the viewer in the picture. The viewer is involved emotionally in the scenario via a body that has been affected by it.

A Traumatic Event

The disaster broke the flow of news due to its suddenness, its scale, and the collapse of technology. 11 September was a disastrous event, but was it also traumatic? If we adopt a strictly clinical approach and consider shell shock, life as a front-line soldier or stress symptoms caused by reactions to natural or manmade disasters, then there probably are some people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of 11 September. But it is also possible to consider a "milder" form of trauma: trauma caused by events that are out of proportion, events whose significance cannot be appreciated im-

mediately. "Given the nature of the event, this struggle for meaning is something we cannot and perhaps should not easily or quickly resolve. Moreover, this struggle may in any event be unavoidable given that trauma is that which exceeds experience and exposes the limits of language" (Campbell, 2002:1). Trauma exposes the limits of language, but trauma can also be regarded as an event that contains the potential for radical change if we can listen to its message: "To be able to listen to the impossible, that is, is also to have been chosen by it, before the possibility of mastering it with knowledge" (Caruth, 1995:10).

Repetition plays a special role in the representation of trauma, because it both symbolises trauma (thereby processing trauma from something that washes over you into something you can master) and retains it. In other words, repetition is a form of symbolisation that "keeps the wounds open", so to speak. It is a form of symbolisation that keeps a trauma alive as well as processing it at the same time. The familiar pictures of the second plane on its way into the southern tower were shown on the news repeatedly on a loop. This picture and its repetition were the symbol of the event. You could say that it is the repetition of the same pictures that demonstrates the way television formatted the event.

This special aesthetic-ritualistic formatting is interesting because this is what the television viewers will remember – not just because it was repeated ad nauseam and thereby anchored in our memories, but also because it occurred at an early stage before there had been any discursive "framing" of the event. At this early stage viewers were served the silent testimony of the pictures on their screens, and the interpretation of these events was still unknown. The repetition of those pictures, which seem like a slow-motion film, has become the visual memory of what happened at the WTC on 11 September 2001.

In relation to photographic pictures (but it could also be applied to the media representation of disasters in general), Susan Sontag claims that pictures depersonalise our relationship with the world and place us outside the story, which is represented as a fixed entity. In the world of pictures things happen (and will always happen) in one particular way, says Sontag ((1977) 1982: 359). Depicting a disastrous or traumatic event will always make the event itself remote and unreal. Pictures only shock us if they are new; pictures of disasters no longer work for us because we have seen so many of them.

But pictures do not (only) have this de-realising effect. Pictures express a global sense of commu-

nity with regard to this event; a community of affected viewers. The effect is based on a number of factors: on the one hand the contractual relationship between viewers and documentary photographs or news media is entirely clear as far as the authenticity of the material shown is concerned. "The existence or absence of a real world, real body, real pain, makes a difference" (Taylor, 1998: 36). One effect of globalisation is that the space we share with the victims and the rest of the world brings us into closer contact with them. The viewer sees things happen, so the relationship of photographs to time becomes "this is happening now" instead of "this has happened" in the mass media.

This updating of events makes the situation of the viewer even more difficult and morally ambiguous. Because the passive eyewitness situation of the viewer resembles the situation of someone at the scene of a disaster. Repetition is a central aspect of this. Repetition involves the aesthetic formatting of an event which "keeps the wounds open" on the one hand, but also represents mastery of the situation on the other hand thanks to ritualistic repetition.

The Camera as a Shield

In commemoration of 11 September 2001, TV2 transmitted a documentary on 10 September 2002 that was introduced as follows: "A documentary created by amateur photographers who were all witnesses in Hell". The witnesses were present at the time, and happened to be carrying a hand-held recording tool. And in this type of account the emphasis is on the fine line between being a victim and being an eyewitness. "Witnesses in Hell", like Jules and Gedeon Naudet's documentary entitled "9/11", we are presented with a documenting witness whose camera is placed between the body of the witness and the event itself.

The documentary presents live pictures on the same day, combined with interviews or words spoken at a later date. We hear Lucia Davis's own comments on what she sees through the lens, as well as the reactions of other eyewitnesses (e.g. a woman screaming at the sight of one of the towers collapsing). Claus Dieter Rath refers to the live aura that is present in live television. This live aura depends on someone being present at an event that is of great symbolic importance: something that is larger than you are yourself, which you are recording for some other imaginary person (even if you die in the attempt). In one sequence Lucia Davis runs against the flow of people to get as close to the source as possible, ignoring the advice of security staff. As

she says, “I have an inner line of safety and I hadn’t reached that line yet”. The streets are abandoned, and finally she is pulled into a shop – just before one of the towers collapses. Like huge clouds of grey/brown thick dust containing small amounts of material, the huge tower collapses over large parts of Manhattan. Lucia Davis and her hand-held documentary camera are pushed into a shop, and a man screams “Get away from the windows”. The picture shakes violently, and Lucia Davis shouts “Thanks ... thanks”. She later acknowledged that the other people in the shop may have saved her life. The documenting witness illustrates a duality in the function of the video camera: the video camera is hand held, so it can get as close to an event as someone’s body can take it (which is very close). But it is also as if the video camera protects her from the danger of the event: as if experiencing the event through a camera lens also removes any real danger and thus makes the event unreal.

The camera becomes a kind of weapon against the disaster. As if the documenting body becomes a picture itself, making it invulnerable in a physical sense. The documenting witness is one with her camera and becomes a cyborg, and it is not until she has been saved that her vulnerability becomes clear.

The Sublime

Karl Heinz Stockhausen’s description of 11 September as the greatest work of art in the cosmos has been cleverly linked by the uncompromising Danish artist Claus Beck-Nielsen to the issue of the relationship between images and language. The images fascinate us: they are sublime. In other words, from an aesthetic point of view the observers are silent. But the moment the language is added we enter the field of aesthetics, according to Beck-Nielsen. The ethically dubious element occurs at the same moment our aesthetic fascination is expressed in words.

According to Kant in “Kritik der Urteilskraft”, the sublime is not a quality inherent in objects but an emotion aroused in the observer. Kant distinguishes between the beautiful and the sublime: the beautiful is a sense of calm contemplation and immediate pleasure of the soul. Your vitality is increased, and your imagination becomes playful. The sublime, on the other hand, is only an indirect pleasure, because it depends on the observer being both attracted and repelled by the object in question. Your vitality is reduced initially, and then it is increased. The sublime is a feeling that arises when common sense meets its own limitations. Or when the “Ego” reaches the limit of what it can compre-

hend. The things we cannot understand by using our common sense can be presented for the senses, which means that the limits of common sense can be thematised via a sensory presentation.

We can sense the attack on the WTC; but both our imagination (in an extra programme transmitted by DR1 the military expert J.C. Hansen said that this kind of scenario could never have been imagined under the military simulation scenarios he had experienced at the Pentagon) and our common sense are forced to throw in the towel. For one brief moment it is obvious that the event has occurred – but nothing else is clear. At such moments, when events are pure events without a framework, when the traumatic impact of such events hits us and leaves a permanent mark, and when representation becomes presentation for a brief moment – at such moments an aesthetic element may occur and decisive changes can be made ...

Kant concludes that what ultimately saves us is our common sense and ability to form concepts. The framing of the event conceptualises it and places it within a familiar framework of understanding. But while the event is still no more than a pure event, a trauma or aesthetic presentation, it also inspires certain reactions in the viewer – which is why this phase is important. Because this is where the event leaves its most permanent mark. Repetition constitutes a pre-formating of the event, an aesthetic-ritual consideration of the trauma. The question is whether the sublime feeling that the images inspire and the mixture of fascination and disgust that the images create in the viewer makes the viewer land on his own two “conceptual feet” – or whether we are dealing with a form of fascination like that of a horror film in which the viewer’s cognitive resources are challenged.

11 September can be regarded as a monstrous act that is beyond the field of humanity. A monstrous act is not just an inhuman or evil act: it is an act that exceeds our familiar cognitive resources (Carroll, 1990: 31). Horrifying events, or real events, are conceptualised in the sublime; whereas in horror films they are merely admired.

Slavoj Žižek focuses on the passionate worship of the “Real”, which was characteristic of the political culture of the 20th century. Žižek thematises repetition (pictures on a loop) as something that generates pure pleasure in the viewer. Pleasure because the pictures are real, “Like snuff porno in contrast to ordinary sadomasochistic porno films” (Žižek, 2002: 21). Žižek thematises the way these pictures fascinate us, because we are hungry for reality. As an avant-garde work of art, the terrorist act

on 11 September is linked to a “realisation of fantasy”. It turns dreams into reality: the destruction of symbols of the hegemony of western capitalism. It is not content with only representing destruction (like in disaster films) – it actually carries out the destructive act. And according to Žizek, this constitutes the fascination aroused in us.

Viewed from this perspective, there is a clear conflict between the aesthetic attitude and the ethical attitude – the conflict that Claus Beck-Nielsen tries to solve by saying that there is an insurmountable difference between fascination for pictures on the one hand, and the words accompanying this fascination for pictures on the other. But this kind of conflict does not have to be present. The point is that certain aesthetic elements actually demand an ethical reaction. The media’s aesthetic-ritual forming of traumatic events by repeating them is this kind of formal element, in which representation remains open to new forms, new ways of reacting, and new self-knowledge.

The Affected Viewer

In “Distant Suffering”, Luc Boltanski describes various viewer positions in relation to a catastrophic scenario, and in particular he describes the way in which different viewer positions are produced by different formal characteristics in the catastrophic representations in question. Boltanski refers to three forms of involvement produced by pictures of suffering: we can be indignant and pursue the guilty parties; we can feel pity for the victims; and we can gain a sense of the sublime from the visual exposure of suffering. Luc Boltanski’s most interesting concept is undoubtedly what he calls “the politics of pity”. In other words, his exploration of the ability of the media to create a communal sense of pity based on the way disasters are represented. Boltanski refers to television’s ability to communicate between the unfortunate victims in the pictures and the fortunate viewers: television creates a link between the two which he describes as “a politics of pity”. It is immediately apparent that Boltanski does not agree with Susan Sontag in regarding catastrophic representations as representations that risk making their viewers indifferent. On the contrary, the electronic mass media can involve the viewer.

If we are to feel pity for people who are suffering, a certain number of conditions must be satisfied first. The relationship between the viewer and the sufferer must be a pure relationship – in other words, they must not be enemies or friends. The in-

volvement must be purely moral, free of any special interests or other ties. Moral commitment is achieved in the interaction between distance and involvement. And this commitment is not only emotional: it can be converted into action in the form of speech or money.

Boltanski distinguishes between pity and compassion. The role model for compassion is the Good Samaritan, who comes face to face with a sufferer. The compassion shown is concrete, and the help provided is often entirely concrete, silent, and directly physical. Pity, on the other hand, is expressed at a distance – it is mediated. In this relationship the emotions are activated; and unlike compassion pity is not silent and physical, but eloquent. According to Boltanski, the production of speech is a form of action.

Certain formal characteristics have to be present to establish what Boltanski calls a topic of sentiment: 1. We are involved in mediated suffering if our emotions are organised around a benefactor or helper. Our emotional involvement depends on someone acting like a Good Samaritan for us in the pictures we are watching. 2. As viewers we communicate directly with the inside of the sufferers. A metaphysics of interiority is established. 3. We are affected by a tactful camera. 4. The story must be presented using certain narrative techniques derived from the novel. 5. Any tears we may cry are a release. They are the tears of redemption.

The two French brothers Jules and Gedeon Naudet’s documentary entitled “9/11”, transmitted on 10 September 2002 on TV2 in Denmark, serves to illustrate Boltanski’s points. This documentary was originally intended to focus on the life of one particular rookie fireman in New York (station one, fire truck seven). But it turned into a documentary about 11 September because the crew happened to be on duty that day. The event of 11 September cuts through everything and changes everything, as well as fulfilling all our expectations of live television. Live television promises to present us with reality, with the unpredictable – although people often say that this promise is never fulfilled. But on this occasion, when a film about the life of a fireman in New York was turned into a film about 11 September, real life cuts through everything and changes everything. At the same time the framework narrator (Robert de Niro) informs us that the material we are about to see has been greatly edited. Robert de Niro is the framework narrator (he is a film star, and therefore something of a paradoxical guarantor of the authenticity and seriousness of the documentary); but a series of diegetic narrators also perform: the two film makers,

James Hanlon (a fireman who launched the original project, who tells the viewers that “You will see everything”), several other firemen, and the rookie fireman Tony, whose experiences match the pre- and post-structure of the film perfectly: the time before Tony experiences a real fire; the 11 September attack as a test of manhood in which he is ordered to stay at the station; and his subsequent disobedience of this order and reuniting with the other firemen at the station after the event.

Apart from the contributions of the framework narrator, which are added to the film to create an atmosphere of suspense, the documentary is structured around pictures and sound from the scene of the attack (the station, the ground floor in the north WTC tower, the streets), and scenes in which the players in the pictures discuss what they felt and thought in this situation at a later point in time.

Narrative suspense is developed throughout the course of the documentary. There is a clear pre- and post-structure based on Tony’s formative story/test of manhood, and there is clear suspense focusing on the issue of whether he and the others will survive this tragedy. One of the highlights is when Tony finds everyone from station one/fire truck seven alive. This development of suspense would not have been possible if any of the firemen from station one had died. To use Boltanski’s concepts, we can say that the narrative development of suspense, the framework narrator and the various diegetic narrators in a classical framework structure all constitute a form that alternates between giving the viewer a few shocks in the action scenes, and then producing a tender-hearted reaction or compassion in the scenes when the players are discussing the event afterwards. In such discussions the narrator becomes a witness of his own story, and the viewer also becomes a witness – of the eyewitness account and the emotional impression that the event leaves in the minds of the people involved.

When viewers are presented with a perspective in which they see impressions of an event in the eyes, faces and gestures of other viewers instead of seeing pictures of the event (this has often been the case in various visual representations of 9/11 in photographic essays, for instance), they are invited to become emotionally involved in the scenario. The viewers are involved in the metaphysics of interiority with the speaker or person discussing the event.

Another important characteristic of Boltanski’s “topic of sentiment” in which the viewer is involved emotionally in the scenario is the focus placed by pictures on a “benefactor”. And in this

respect the fireman is a wonderful choice of category. Firemen are contractually obliged to save human lives; but when they can only do this by putting their own lives at risk, they suddenly become heroes. Not heroes in a military sense – as in certain iconographical depictions – but as everyday ethical heroes who always fight for a good cause.

This aspect is clear in one scene in particular. One of the brothers, Jules Naudet, has left the basement of tower one, and says that the only thing he can do is to go on filming. His action is to provide documentary evidence of the event, while the others try to save lives or simply try to save themselves. Jules Naudet is running down the street with a group of firemen when there is an explosion – the lens of his camera suddenly turns brown and gritty. The picture tips, and finally goes black. This is the moment when the other tower collapses. Jules Naudet explains in a voice-over that he was not aware until later that a fireman had thrown himself on top of him to protect him from pieces of falling masonry. In this scene the camera becomes indexical, clogged with the dust of reality that prevents an all-round configuration of the event from taking shape. In this scene the Good Samaritan is undoubtedly highly concrete and physical in his life-saving act, and this is what generates emotion in the viewer.

This film can also be used to exemplify one final characteristic taken from Boltanski: the tactful camera. When Jules Naudet and a fire chief approach the WTC after the first fire engines have been summoned, they walk through a small foyer into the main hall. We hear screams, and Jules Naudet says that he can see two people on fire over on the right; but that he does not think anyone else should see it, and prefers not to show it. So although this camera is documenting the event, it still does not show EVERYTHING – it edits. This is an ethical camera that makes choices for the viewer. It protects the viewer (like it protects the documenting witness in “*Øjenvidner fra Helvede*”).

In Boltanski’s view, the point of these considerations of the topic of sentiment is to illustrate the fact that as viewers we are involved emotionally in scenarios as long as certain formal conditions are fulfilled. This involvement is not “free”, but it encourages action in the form of financial contributions and “gifts of speech” so to speak. This topic of sentiment also founds or supports a universal sense of humanity. A universal humanitarian link is created between the sufferers and the people affected.

Some people MIGHT feel that this film by the Naudet brothers is too sugary or “American”, even though it was made by Frenchmen. My aim in men-

tioning it is to plead for a universalistic ETHICAL viewpoint that argues in favour of solidarity with all victims (even though they are Americans). Unlike the more culturalist and traditional left-wing positions, whose only interest is to allocate blame and responsibility (ultimately to the victims themselves), it is possible to conclude with Žizek that “The horrific death of each individual is absolute and incomparable” (Žizek, 2000: 64). A universalistic viewpoint requires unconditional solidarity with ALL the victims, says Žizek, because informing a victim that the tragedy that has occurred is only relative (“Oh yes, but MUCH WORSE things are happening all over the world all the time”) places your argument in a frightening form of mathematics, and ultimately in the logic of terrorism.

This article has focused on an aesthetic study of certain formal characteristics in the way the media handled 9/11. The following conclusions can be

drawn: aesthetic modelling helps to create a universal ethical sense of involvement in the viewer. The universal perspective is established via a topic of sentiment between victim and viewer. Eyewitness accounts and the media’s widespread use of the bodies of witnesses are transmitted to the body of the viewer, who is affected. Repetition is a third aesthetic characteristic of 9/11 in the media. On the one hand it keeps the wounds open for the viewer, revives the event before it is placed in a framework. On the other hand, repetition also serves to process the event ritually.

For the viewer of 9/11 in the media the choice did not lie between aesthetic fascination and ethical involvement. Instead, aesthetic fascination led to an ethical and universally humanistic form of involvement which demands our support – even though the politics pursued by the USA are also open to criticism in a great number of ways.

Note

1. Lilie Chouliaraki has made a brilliant and detailed analysis of the moralisation of the viewer in the live-footage from September 11. My aim in this article is to show how the viewer is bodily touched or affected through different aesthetic strategies that the media news and documentaries use in presenting and representing this event.

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