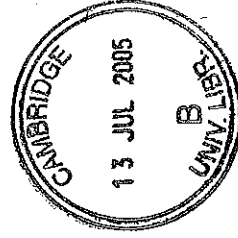


Trauma at Home

After 9/11

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Press, 1996), 21. Subsequent page references in the text are to this edition.

7. Jonathan Hensleigh, quoted as epigraph in Nitin Govil, "The Metropolis and Mental Suite," *The City as Spectacle and Performance*, Sarai Reader, 2002. <http://www.sarai.net/journal/02/PDF/04spectacle>.

The War of the Fathers: Trauma, Fantasy, and September 11

Susannah Radstone

In designating experiences "traumatic," the meanings of those experiences are understood to be elusive or impossible to grasp. According to current understandings of trauma, it is the "anomalous" nature of certain events, their "resistance to categories and conventions for assigning them meanings," that renders them traumatic.¹ On this account, experiences that elude sense making and the assignment of meaning cannot be integrated into memory, but neither can they be forgotten. This is an understanding of trauma that contests earlier (Freudian) psychoanalytic understandings of psychical disturbance and unease. While contemporary trauma theory emphasizes the impact of shocking events in the production of psychic disturbance, Freudian-inspired psychoanalysis emphasized (and continues to emphasize), rather, the part played by the conflict that arises from unconscious *fantasy*—perhaps, but not necessarily, prompted by an event—in the emergence of symptoms.² The events of September 11 were terrible for those who experienced them and for those who witnessed them. In the discussion that follows, it is not my intention to suggest otherwise. However, in this essay I do want to propose that, in designating such events as traumatic, they are, in fact and paradoxically, being *assigned* particular meanings—meanings that follow from their designation *as* traumatic. In this essay, then, I want to contest the meaning-making process that follows from designating September 11 and its aftermath traumatic by suggesting, instead, that cultural analysis attend to the fantasies in play in the construction of the meanings of September 11.

Well before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, it was already commonplace to suggest that the twentieth century would be "remembered as the century of historical trauma"—a century marked by events of previously unimaginable "nature, scope and implications."³ The ascription of trauma to events of recent history such as the two world wars

and the Great Depression rests on their unprecedentedly overwhelming and unimaginable nature: on this account, their range, their lack of boundaries, and their far-reaching implications combine to stymie the capacity to make meaning.⁴ From the perspective of trauma theory, such events short-circuit the mind's and the culture's (defensive) sense-making capacities. Instead of passing through processes of narrativization and memory making, they pierce those defenses, lodging in the mind or in the culture as the shrapnel of traumatic symptomatology.

This view is contestable on two grounds: on the claims it makes for the unprecedented impact of events of the recent past and on the theory of trauma that it associates with the impact of catastrophic events. The contestability of this view of recent and now contemporary history as unprecedentedly *traumatic* is belied, however, by the ubiquitousness with which the turn to trauma has come to color discussions of the personal and the political. The "increasing salience of memory in the public domain" has been matched by a cultural fascination with trauma.⁵ Now, as the events of September 11 emerge as auguries that diminish hopes for a "new" millennium, the "turn to trauma" appears to be deepening. The turn to trauma is more usually criticized for its tendency to debase the value of the concept by applying it too liberally to both major historical catastrophes and personal life events.⁶ In this essay, however, I want to suggest that trauma may be of only limited value in aiding understanding of the impact of large-scale events such as those of September 11. The questions I wish to raise concern the stakes for discussing recent history—and now September 11—in the context of theories of traumatic memory. What does it mean to say that the recent past, including, now, these most recent events, will be remembered as historical trauma? And are there alternative approaches that need to be set besides what has become a popular academic script? In what follows, I want to suggest that the trauma perspective may obscure from view aspects of September 11's potential meanings in cultural memory that might be illuminated by other approaches.

To speak of September 11 in the context of trauma prompts analyses of the hidden wounds etched on cultural memory by these attacks. On this account, the shocking impact of the events leaves its mark as a gap or absence where memory should be. Though this gap can never be made good, a belated acknowledgment of that which has not been fully experienced and remembered remains a possibility. This is a theory that proposes a passive, acted-upon victim or culture. The traumatized individual or group has played no part in shaping their experience; they have simply been overwhelmed by the unexperienced happened, and it is their psychological

wounds that become the focus of attention. According to trauma theory, the impact of catastrophic events closes down free association: that creative process through which experience, memory, and fantasy are woven into the texture of a life—or a culture.

Moments after the first plane flew into the first tower, news of the events of September 11 was broadcast electronically, on radio, and, most spectacularly, on TV. It might be suggested that the continuous replay on TV of images of the planes hitting the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center signified not the beginning of meaning making but a cultural equivalent of the traumatic symptom of the flashback. As Thomas Elsaesser has suggested, "the recurrent repetitive aspect of the media's treatment of (historic, public, shocking) events" might be related to "the obsessive time of (subjective) trauma memory."⁷ Yet the alignment of the media's response with the processes of subjective trauma memory belies the preexistence of meaning-making paradigms into which these events, shocking as they were, could tentatively be located. That is, events do not impact onto a *tabula rasa*. Watching the events unfold on TV, one screenwriter, Lawrence Wright, remarked that "this looks like a movie—my movie," while Steve de Souza, director of the movie *Die Hard*, commented that "the image of the terrorist attacks 'looked like a movie poster, like one of my movie posters.'"⁸ These comments were broadcast during a fascinating edition of the British television current affairs program *Panorama*, in which it was also suggested that "as millions of people watched the horrific spectacle of the Twin Towers collapsing after the September 11th terrorist attacks, many eye-witnesses and survivors compared the dramatic images to a Hollywood movie."⁹

This is interesting for what it suggests about the ways in which one might begin to understand how the experience of September 11 began to enter cultural memory. Trauma theory suggests that the shocking nature of the events produced a cultural response similar to that of subjective traumatization—incomprehension, flashbacks, and the like. For trauma theory, it is the unanticipated, unimagined quality of certain events that renders them so shocking. The mind has not prepared itself for an event that traumatizes—it has not been able to shield itself in advance. Yet the *Panorama* program arguably suggests that, in the case of September 11, U.S. culture had anticipated events of this nature: indeed, not only had the movies anticipated such events but filmmakers had made movies based on similar occurrences.¹⁰ Indeed, one CIA case officer, Robert Baer, commented that Hollywood's anticipatory representations of terrorist attacks on the United States came closer to realism than did the Pentagon's pre-September

11 VIEWS ON THE UNKINDHOOD OF SUCH EVENTS: "The way I look at Hollywood is it has more imagination than the government. The government is made out of bureaucrats. Hollywood takes the facts as they see them in life and turns them into these scenarios that are very close to reality in a certain sense. The only difference between Hollywood and reality is Hollywood has a happy ending, and there's a hero."¹¹ Though Baer sees little difference between real life and the movies, he acknowledges, nevertheless, the place of the imagination in the cinema. Much has been written on the ways in which the cinema draws on, speaks to, or provokes fantasies that are already circulating, albeit unconsciously, among spectators and in cultures.¹² Contra this CIA officer, I would want to place greater stress on the relation between film and the imagination or fantasy. Whether or not witnesses, survivors, and journalists had memories of actual films to draw on, their sense making of September 11 will have been shaped, in part, by that reservoir of fantasy scenes that also informed the movies that uncannily predicted September 11. This cultural process that weaves events into preexisting fantasy scenes, which shape the sense made of lives, is a process that trauma theory cannot address.

The approach I want to advocate here would acknowledge the shocking impact of September 11 while contending that trauma and fantasy need not be sharply counterposed.¹³ An event may prove traumatic, indeed, not because of its inherently shocking nature but due to the unbearable or forbidden fantasies that it prompts. Or, conversely, an event's traumatic impact may be linked to its *puncturing* of a fantasy that has previously sustained a sense of identity—national as well as individual. How might an attention to fantasy illuminate processes of cultural memory after September 11? I want to propose that fantasy scenarios underpin the formation of those dominant cultural memories, which testify to the transformation of events into meaningful experience. Psychoanalysis suggests that the world of fantasy (of whatever kind) is inextricably connected with sexual difference and with desire. Psychoanalytically informed feminist analysis (of many hues) has long advocated modes of analysis attentive to fantasy's traces in order that the hidden dynamics of sexual difference might be articulated. At times of national crisis, such as September 11, these fantasy scenarios emerge starkly. In what follows, I want to suggest that an analysis of the fantasy scenes emerging post-September 11 might pay attention, in particular, to those fantasies' imbrication with the dynamics and politics of sexual difference.

It is possible to discern a range of fantasy "scenes" beneath themes that have emerged in commentary on September 11. The first fantasy upon

which I want to focus is that of impregnability or invincibility. Though the scale of devastation wreaked by these events is not unprecedented on any world scale, in recent commentary the attacks of September 11 emerge as "unimaginable." What needs to be acknowledged here is the cultural specificity of this response. What rendered these attacks unimaginable was precisely what *had previously been* imagined. The dominant cultural imaginary of the United States has been shaped, in part, by *fantasies* of impregnability and invincibility, and, dreadful as the events themselves were, it was also the puncturing of these fantasies that contributed to the shock of September 11. Though fantasies of invulnerability are associated with narcissism, they are hardly gender neutral, since, as feminists have repeatedly argued, under patriarchy, male narcissism defends itself by projecting its vulnerability onto women.

Second, in the "wanted dead or alive" Western rhetoric of the war against terrorism, "justified," "measured" violence pits itself against a force represented as perverse, evil, excessive. Here, a battle between the sons of two fathers can arguably be glimpsed, as those expressing loyalty to the chastened but powerful "good" patriarchal father encounter the corrupt potency of those representing the "bad" archaic father of the primal horde. In this Manichean fantasy can be glimpsed the continuing battle between competing versions of masculinity. This Manicheism arguably projects disavowed aspects of masculinity onto the attackers, while revealing, too, perhaps, that fantasies of disorder and transgression, such as those mobilized by some Westerns, undergird the sustenance of social order. What requires further analysis within this scenario is, first, the (hidden) place of women and, second, the complex places of religious and ethnic difference within this "battle of the fathers."

The notion that after September 11 nothing would ever be the same again needs reevaluating in light of the fantasy scenarios glimpsed here. If the nation constitutes an "imagined community," the reimaginings of gender prompted by September 11 appear anything but new.¹⁴ Fantasies of invulnerability and of a battle between different orders of paternal power appear to leave women on the margins of a war that is at once political, psychical, and cultural. This is, however, a situation that might be challenged.

Events do not come out of nowhere, and neither do they leave their mark on a previously blank page. The "problem" with trauma is that the subject it proposes—the victim—is too absolutely passive. One might argue, indeed, that trauma theory feminizes its subject. Trauma suggests an unreadable scar that might, with difficulty, be accorded some meaning. Fantasy, on the

other hand, shifts attention to the activities of the fantasizing subject or nation and to the processes of meaning making (albeit unconscious) that give rise to scenarios that shape minds, cultures, and events.

NOTES

1. Hayden White, "The Modernist Event," in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 21.
2. For a longer discussion of the debates concerning trauma, events, and fantasy, see Susannah Radstone, "Screening Trauma: *Forrest Gump*, Film, and Memory," in *Memory and Methodology*, ed. Susannah Radstone (New York and Oxford: Berg, 2000).
3. Suzette A. Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life Writing* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1998), xi; White, "The Modernist Event," 20.
4. The examples of recent historical events are taken from White, "The Modernist Event."
5. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), xiii. Antze and Lambek have noted the central place given to trauma in contemporary memories of the past (xii–xiii). For an argument that suggests that the attainment of "full" historical subjectivity may now be inextricably tied to an encounter with "trauma," see Lauren Berlant, "Trauma and Ineloquence," *Cultural Values* 5, no. 1 (January 2001): 41–58; and Lauren Berlant, "The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy and Politics," in *Cultural Studies and Political Theory*, ed. Jodi Dean (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 42–62.
6. In her book *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), Ruth Leys proposes that the ubiquitous deployment of the concept of trauma in relation both to large-scale catastrophes and to the arguably less catastrophic experiences of individuals may be debasing its value (2).
7. Thomas Elsaesser, "Postmodernism as Mourning Work," in "Special Debate, Trauma, and Screen Studies" (special edition edited by Susannah Radstone), *Screen* 42, no. 2 (summer 2001): 197.
8. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/audiovideo/programmes/panorama/news.d-1875000/1875186.stm>.
9. "September 11th: A Warning from Hollywood," *Panorama*, BBC1, March 24, 2002; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/audiovideo/programmes/panorama/news.d-1875000/1875186.stm>.
10. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/audiovideo/programmes/panorama/news.d-1875000/1875186.stm>.

11. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/audiovideo/programmes/panorama/transcripts/transcript-24-03-02.txt>.
12. For a useful introduction to cinepsychoanalysis and the place of fantasy in film studies, see Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), esp. 90–95.
13. This is an argument that I flesh out more fully in Radstone, "Screening Trauma."
14. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).