


Theresa Henkes

Dr. Jacobs


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Crossing the Line: Remembering September 11

In the first four days after September 11, the three major news networks—CBS, NBC, and ABC—lost around \$400 million in revenue due to commercial free news coverage of the terrorist attacks (Eisman 64). In the more than ten years that have followed, countless television stations, magazines, and companies have issued special programs and products to “commemorate” and “pay tribute” to 9/11 and its victims. These institutions want the public to believe their productions are a token of respect, and perhaps some of them are. However, many industries are simply capitalizing on this tragic event, more than making up for any monetary loss they initially suffered in 2001 with the sheer number of television programs *alone* produced for each anniversary. With every new movie, comic book, or exposé, Americans shell out their money to get a sensationalized version of what really happened. This excess of exposure, and the corresponding greed, is causing more harm than good. If the displays of “respect” for 9/11 were not only more spontaneous but also conscientious and truly reverent, the truth about those tragic events would remain clearer for most Americans. 

Many different industries invested in the business of 9/11. Not surprisingly, the entertainment industry was one of the biggest hitters, and from them came a mass of television shows, magazines, movies, video games, and comic books that aimed to make the most of the terrorist attacks. In the days following September 11, 2001, the news industry was among the first to respond. Major television networks suspended commercials, and magazines like *Time*

produced commemorative issues *sans* print ads. However, this generous attitude was short lived. In her article “The Media of Manipulation: Patriotism and Propaganda—Mainstream News in the United States in the Weeks Following September 11” published in *Critical Quarterly*, April Eisman claims, “Following a loss of approximately \$400 million in ad revenue during the four days of commercial-free news coverage after the attacks, television networks were keen to keep viewers and advertisers, and therefore pulled or ‘killed’ anything that caused—or could cause—controversy” (64). 

The reports on September 11 began to resemble propaganda, and overexposure crept in as the news sources tried to re-make money. Even now, over ten years later, the news industry is trying to make money on 9/11. For two straight weeks or more every September “special features” run constantly on television and in magazines and newspapers. Take, for example, *People Magazine*’s cover story on the ten-year anniversary of the event. It was called “Remembering the Father I Never Met,” and it features ten or so children whose fathers perished in the twin towers before these children were even born. Each child is shown close up with a solemn, almost haunted, expression. They look miserable. It is unlikely that those fathers would have wanted their children portrayed like this on a national magazine, exploited to sell a few copies. 


Then there are the films that are sure to follow every major world event. One popular example of a big budget September 11 movie is *World Trade Center* released in 2006 (Frago, La Porte, and Phalen 58). In this film, two police officers are trapped when one of the towers collapses, and they spend the next twelve hours under the rubble until they become two of only twenty people who are rescued (65). Although based on a true account and relatively well received in the box office, this film was still a money-maker. In their article “The Narrative

Reconstruction of 9/11 in Hollywood Films,” Marta Frago, Teresa La Porte, and Patricia Phalen, faculty of the University of Navarra and The George Washington University respectively, write, “*World Trade Center*’s origin is much more conventional: a proposal made by producers, bought by Paramount, with a higher budget (US \$65 million). The project attracted A-list director Oliver Stone and actor Nicholas Cage.” (64). Any film with a \$65 million dollar budget is sure to be created with revenue in mind. Additionally, Frago, La Porte, and Phalen say, “If we bear in mind Stone’s earlier filmography, the critics’ surprise at the results of *World Trade Center* is understandable. The film does lack the commitment and critical tone of some of his other projects...” (64). This is a director with experience in touchy subjects, and although an effort was made at being respectful, it is highly unlikely that the producers and the actors created the film as a charitable contribution to society. It was designed to evoke emotions and open wallets.


The video game industry is not the first industry that comes to mind in connection to 9/11, but they have been some of the worst offenders in taking advantage of a horrible tragedy. In her article “Kodak Moments, Flashbulb Memories: Reflections on 9/11,” Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains that after 9/11, antiterrorism/war video games briefly disappeared. However, they soon returned with a vengeance. She tells of one video game that features Osama Bin Laden:

Ethan McKinnon and Drew Baye... ‘decided to express their anger by developing a game based on the popular first-person, teamwork oriented game in which the search for and death of Osama bin Laden would be the central theme.’ After gaming companies refused to consider the idea, in part because they did not wish ‘to be seen as cashing in on the September 11 tragedy,’ McKinnon and Bayes founded their own company. (18)



Another video game that appeared on the scene allowed players to shoot the hijacked planes from the sky on 9/11 (18). The fact is the video game companies that refused to produce these products had a good reason; these games are a form of “cashing in” on a national tragedy. They serve no functional purpose. They do not help young people express their feelings in a healthy way, and they do not respectfully pay tribute to the victims of September 11. Instead, these games desensitize players to the real tragedy and promote the kind of violence that caused 9/11 in the first place. 


With all of this said, the public needs an outlet for remembering September 11. However, Americans need one that does not use violence, drama, and greed like the entertainment industry products. The community can come together without manipulating the truth about what happened, and many have already done so in a local setting. As an example, consider the impromptu photo memorials that cropped up in NYC right after September 11. In her “Kodak Moments” article, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes one of the most famous photo memorials called *Here in New York*. She describes a display of unframed photographs in an empty store-front in Manhattan submitted by anyone and everyone (20). All photo submissions of September 11 were accepted and displayed. Volunteers, both amateur and professional, ran the gallery, and each print was sold for the exact same price (21-22). Best yet, all \$600,000 in revenue (at the time of publication) were donated to the Children’s Aid Society (22). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes, “With a collection of 7,000 photographs, which is still growing, and 1.5 million visitors to the exhibition worldwide thus far, ‘*Here is New York* is without question the largest archive of its kind in history, and may well become the most looked-at exhibition of our time’” (21). This is an example of a community grieving and remembering together. This is a beautiful, self-less token of love for a battered nation. They did not need a big

budget or an angry dramatization; they simply asked for those who were willing to contribute to do so, and the floodgates opened. 

Many museums across the country sponsored similar non-profit events in the aftermath of 9/11. “Kodak Moments” also tells of some of these exhibits and special events:

Museums were encouraged to work closely with their local communities in planning events. Many museums developed special exhibitions and programs and honored local rescue workers; hosted concerts, ceremonies, and dialogues; and provided opportunities for visitors to reflect upon and express their thoughts and feelings in journals, murals, and albums...Museums were encouraged to extend their hours and many offered free admission to these commemorative events (33).

The results included everything from the “Wall of Prayer” in The Museum of the City of New York to the hourly ringing of the American Freedom Bell at the Charlotte Museum of History (32-34). Even now small, tasteful community events like these still persist. Even in minor cities like Bangor, Maine there are events like a free local concert entitled “Pops on the Green” to bring the community together on the tenth anniversary of September 11. That is what remembering should be all about: bringing the public together.

The way to pay tribute to such a day of infamy is through voluntary, reverent displays of recollection. It does not need to be enhanced with a theatrical production to generate income or sell papers.  Rather these ostentatious displays devalue the raw emotions of the day. They twist the truth out of greed. Although many industries have tried such tactics to make money, they are not the ones that should help us remember September 11. Instead, we should remember that day as it really happened through the eyes of ordinary, everyday people because these people were the real victims, heroes, and survivors of September 11, 2001.

Works Cited

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