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**Media and the Un-Representable:  
The Brief Time of Audience-as-Witness to 9/11**

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Jill Geisler, a former television news director, was on her way out the door, heading for the airport and a conference. She paused for one more look at the morning news. It was about 9:15 a.m. Realizing she wasn't going anywhere that day, she started to keep a minute by minute log of the broadcast news

Jill Geisler:

“9:41 NBC cuts to correspondent Jim Miklaszewski, who reports from the Pentagon that ...” it appears to be a small blast.

9:42 ABC's Clair Shipman reports smoke coming from behind the Old Executive Office Building. There is video of the smoke, ... no definitive word on what we are seeing.

9:45 Fox reports that the Pentagon event may have been a helicopter crash.

Jennings is having problems knowing which of several video feeds are being shown to viewers --he asks his crew to give him the information he needs.

9:54: Dan Rather: 'There is much that is not known.'

10:00 ABC shows video of the southern tower of the WTC folding, noting it happened moments ago. Jennings begins to speculate that in order to demolish a

building, there must be detonation at its base. Reporter Don Dahler steps in to change the direction of the thinking: ‘The top part was totally involved ... the weight at the top collapsed the building ... there was no explosion at the bottom.’

10:06 CBS’s Harold Dow is breathless as he reports from a subway station around the corner of the fallen tower. He describes the scene from which he just escaped as “surreal and devastating.” (Geisler, 2001)

CNN: “Good lord,” says correspondent Aaron Brown, “there are no words.”

In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth offers compelling perspectives on what makes a traumatic event traumatic. She argues that when we experience an event as traumatic, it’s not because of something inherent in the event itself. And it’s not because of the personal or idiosyncratic meanings that we, as individuals, might attach to the event. Rather, she argues, what makes an event traumatic is *the structure of its experience or reception*. We experience an event as traumatic because of the *terms* in which we experience it—because of the terms in which it addresses us. (Caruth, 1995, p. 4).

In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, literary critic and trained psychoanalyst Shoshana Felman, explores how people have used literature, poetry, and film to gain access to memories and experiences of traumatic historical events otherwise obliterated by the deaths of those involved or (necessarily) repressed by witnesses who are unable to bear their significance. According to Felman, we experience an event as traumatic when our reception of it is structured something like this: an event occurs, but its witnesses or victims cannot assimilate or experience the

event fully at the time (Felman, 1995, p. 7). Because in order to survive the event itself, the people experiencing it cannot bear to witness it directly, contemporaneously. They may be running, literally, for their lives, focusing not on the event itself, but only on taking the next breath. Even when the witness is in no immediate physical danger, if the event occurs at the limits of what we can bear emotionally or conceptually, if we can survive it psychically only by not allowing ourselves to look at it—not really—then we survive at the cost of killing the witness within. By not really looking, we deny the event the power to overwhelm us with its full immediacy, impact, and meaning. A traumatic event, then, is an event “not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it” (Caruth, 1995, p. 4).

This brings us to a second feature of the structure of traumatic events. Traumatic events challenge any preconceived understanding of experience. Lying outside the range of usual human experience, they “bring us to the limits of our understanding,” unsettle us, and force us to rethink our notions of experience, but also, of communication (Caruth, 1995, p. 4). A traumatic event occurs not only at the limits of what we can bear, take in, or live with emotionally and psychically—it also occurs at the limits of what our language can bear. A traumatic event is one “whose effects explode any capacity for explanation or rationalization” or description (Felman, 1995, p. 17). All of this not because we have had too little or too indirect an access to an experience ... but “paradoxically enough, its very overwhelming immediacy is what produces” these gaps in experience, and the resulting dislocations in language. (Caruth, 1995, p. 6).

And this brings us to a third feature of the structure of the traumatic event. A traumatic event holds us hostage and gives us no choice about whether or not we will be

appointed witness. To be its witness is to be “appointed to the testimony”—to be caught up in events beyond one’s will or control and subjected to “a radical human condition of exposure and vulnerability” (Felman, 1995, pp. 14-16). It is to find oneself suddenly positioned as an involuntary, unwitting, inadvertent witness to a crime, outrage, accident, or horror.

These, then, are the three features of the structure of traumatic experience that I’m going to work with here: first, that what seems to inhabit all traumatic experience is the inability to witness fully the event as it occurs (Caruth, 1995, p. 7), second, that the experience explodes any capacity for explanation, understanding, or rationalization, and third, that the witness to a traumatic event is involuntarily possessed by the event, appointed to the testimony, implicated in the burden to bear witness, to bear the responsibility to respond.

Felman’s work on teaching the Holocaust explores how some events create not only individualized experiences of trauma, by subjecting individuals to personal exposure and vulnerability. They are also capable of exceeding the personal and involving the social and the cultural. They are capable of traumatizing broader cultural sensibilities by breaking socially constructed frames of reference and ways of making sense of the world. (Felman, 1995, p. 16).

The breakage of the verse in poetry about the Holocaust and the emergence of free verse, Felman declares, “enacts the breakage of the world” (Felman, 1995, p. 32). On the morning of Sept. 11, the breakage of television news coverage enacts the breakage of cultural sensibilities and socially constructed frames of reference.

Felman describes the testimony of the witness to a traumatic event this way:

“Testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be construed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference.

What testimony does not offer is, however, a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events.” (Felman, 1995, p. 16)

The witness’s testimony forces language to speak ahead of its knowledge and awareness, and breaks through the limits of its own conscious understanding. In testimony, Felman says, “Language speaks beyond its means.”

CNN:

Anchor: Okay, go ahead.

Winston: I would say the hole takes about -- six, seven floors were taken out. And there is more -- people are running, hold on. We have an explosion right now. You got people running up the street.

The whole building exploded. The whole top part. The building is still intact. People are running up the streets. Am I still connected!

People are running up. We are getting word that perhaps -- hold on, people here are -- everybody is panicking.

I don't know how much longer I'm staying. I'm inside of a diner right now.

Anchor: If you could give us a call back.

I don't want to panic on the air.

Anchor: Let's take some of our pictures from news chopper 7.

TV news speaks too soon, before it is quite ready, before it quite knows what its subject is about. And yet, because it is witness to “an accident known,” because it does know that an accident has taken place, and because the accident “pursues it,” television news has got to speak “already”, almost compulsively, even though it has not had as yet

the time to catch its breath. It thus speaks in advance of the control of consciousness; its testimony is delivered “in breathless gasps.” In essence it is what Felman calls a precocious testimony (Felman, 1995, p. 29).

CBC: over images of the collapse of the first tower, we hear workers in the CBC newsroom shout out in horror, there are groans, then silence.

Television news coverage has, of course, conventions for framing, containing, and making sense of breaking news. But on Sept. 11, even those conventions failed to contain the linguistic, social, and cultural disruption and displacement. As a result, the television news audience witnessed the breakage of television conventions—they witnessed the networks’ inability to cover much more than the impossibility of covering this event. “The scope of the accident is vaster, more profound and more difficult to grasp than the sheer formality of the concerns that convey it and that are its vehicle (Felman, 1995, p. 29).”

This event was beyond the scope, even, the conventions of breaking news.

Work routines are broken on the air, in full view. Anchors and reports metacommunicate about news practices and the work of reporting—making the constructedness of the news visible (Urrichio, 2001). Journalistic conventions are broken—as events are reported, incorrectly, before they are confirmed. In an uncanny resemblance to the feature film *Signs*—the same thing is on every station, breaking what some argue is the most significant convention of television—its flow. As the same thing is on every station—with no regard for branding:

From Jill Geisler’s notes:

“11:21 ShopNBC is carrying MSNBC coverage

Shop at home network, home shopping network and QVC also suspend programming. Onscreen messages direct viewers to “turn to your news channel”

TBS is carrying CNN

TNT is carrying CNN

ESPN 2 is carrying ABC live coverage

FX is running Fox News live

Court TV is covering the story

VH1 is broadcasting coverage from WCBS” (Geisler, 2001)

In place of coverage then, in the wake of breaking coverage, television offered not the news, but testimony to “an accident known.” In courts of law, testimony is called for “when the facts upon which justice must pronounce its verdict are not clear, when historical accuracy is in doubt, when both truth and its supporting elements of evidence are called into question.” Testimony, thus, is called for when there is a crisis of truth. And, Felman argues, testimony dramatizes a crisis of truth (Felman, 1995, p. 17).

On Sept. 11, the news enacted what was unrepresentable—a crisis of truth—a failure of knowing, an impossibility of comprehension.

Two hours after the attack on the first tower, networks struggle to restructure their address to viewers and shift from responding to uncertain events to imposing form and meaning upon them. They struggle to “recover” from failures of convention, and to reposition viewers *as* audience—that is, as consumers of the news, of specific media networks or commentators, or of preexisting cultural frames, categories, meanings, and traditions.

Jill Geisler: “10:50: Fox has slapped a label on its coverage: “Day of Terror”

10:55 CBS labels its coverage “Attack on America”

Coverage of Sept. 11 is now and forevermore, branded.

Quickly, other conventions are reinstated. The networks impose graphic form on their images. They reinstate familiar rhythmic forms, as the footage of the jet smashing into the second tower is repeated up to 30 times per hour. They reinstate familiar narrative forms, as Bin Laden is quickly used to provide evil with a face and name—even though at the time it was anything but clear. Quickly, commercials, voices of authority, music themes, and sound bites return. And the audience’s gaze is restructured, from that of witness to that of spectator. The images on the screen cease to be events in themselves, and begin to border on spectacle.

But, for those first two hours on Sept. 11, television’s broken coverage exceeds the representational and entails the performative. Television news is no longer simply an artifact that represents something elsewhere, at some other time. Instead, it exists in the moment, and it exists, in part, as an appointment to witness that cannot be escaped.

Offered the position of witness to the breakage of history through the breakage of news conventions, viewers nationwide are aligned in a relationship to the events that is, perhaps, unprecedented in media history. It was a brief relationship whose power continues to shape private and public responses to Sept. 11.

In *Fables of Responsibility* (1997), Thomas Keenan writes: “There is a cry for help, addressed not to me in particular, not to anyone in particular, but to me as anyone—anyone can help...” (Keenan, 1997, p. 22). Even if I fail to acknowledge the address of the cry for help, or refuse to acknowledge it—this “in no way disqualifies me or indemnifies me—the cry ... insures that I remain in place, even if it is not ‘my’ place”

(Keenan, 1997, p. 23). It is the call of the address—not anything special or “heroic” about me—that becomes the condition of my response.

I simply happen to be there, without deserving it (Keenan, 1997, p. 23). Viewers during those first two hours are caught up, implicated in, enfolded by the traumatic eventness of television’s address. As we step unwittingly into the structure of address that constitutes the position of witness—by turning the corner into the kitchen where the tv happens to be on, or by turning on the tv for one more look at the news before heading for the airport, we are carried beyond ourselves, into the address of the cry. And thus, Felman argues, we are condemned to an indeterminate, interminable labor of response (Felman, 1995, p. 57).

Felman continues: The responsibility to testify to what we have witnessed, appoints us to speak to and for others. It appoints us to a dimension beyond ourselves—a dimension in which we are simultaneously alone and aligned with the horror experienced by other witnesses (Felman, 1995, pp. 14-15).

Might television’s structure of address in those first two hours account for what people reported, over and over again—that they had to do something in response. The days after Sept. 11 were marked by outpourings of self-sacrifice, charitable donations, volunteerism, donations of blood, outpourings of art, music, expression, of patriotism, education, nationalism, memorial services, the offerings of free legal and psychiatric services.

Might a consideration of television’s structure of address in those first two hours give us a way to understand the incessant repetition in the media of particular traumatic images? The unavoidable failures of all modes of representation—photography, video,

journalism, poetry, art—to capture and reveal the true significance of the days’ events and their aftermath, returns us to the literal event itself, to those initial images—the images that did not represent the event, but rather constituted the event. Unwilling to “falsify” the event, to dishonor it, to diminish it, through symbolic representations that will forever fail to live up to the event’s full significance, there is resort to the closest thing to its fullness—the literal repetition of the event itself.

Might a consideration of television news’ structure of address those first two hours of Sept. 11 give us a way to understand why some tv news sources have tried to replicate and perpetuate the power of the performative—and failed? The seemingly incessant tags: “breaking news”, “live”, “news alert,” ubiquitous tickers—give the illusion of eventness—of the breaking of history as they offer us the position of consumer of spectacle.

Might the concept of structure of address be used to understand the apparent breakdown of the boundary that otherwise separates those inside the event from those outside the event. Were television news audiences across the country inside this event in ways more similar than different compared to those with much closer proximity to the towers? Is the insistence among survivors and family members to have a determining say in memorials and the future of the site, a way of asserting the existence of a different inside—asserting that —it IS different for us?

I’ve been calling the time of audience-as-witness to Sept. 11, those first two hours, a brief time. But it is? Was the duration of tv’s address to viewers as witnesses that morning actually a long time given the history of tv news? Is this call to witness, the breakage of history enacted through the breakage of tv conventions, unprecedented? If

so, was it in part a function of American television's innocence—its unpreparedness—its reluctance to believe that it needed to prepare for the unthinkable? What are tv news departments doing right now to manage and brand the kinds of breakage of tv conventions that we witnessed on Sept. 11?

When we use the concepts of witnessing and the performative to read the structure of reception and response staged by television news coverage in the first 2 hours of September 11, we produce a reading that suggests that this event may have enfolded an unprecedented number of people into the position of witness. An unprecedented number of people may now be hostage to the interminable labor of responding to this event. What might that experience—of being called to bear the responsibility of response—mean not only to cultural, aesthetic and professional practice, but also to political and military actions taken in the name of responding to the events of Sept. 11?

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