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What reality has misfortune?

Paddy Scannell
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When disaster strikes it seldom comes with its meaning branded on its forehead.¹ An immediate issue for broadcasters is to establish, as quickly as possible, what in fact has happened and what in fact it means. News coverage, ordinarily, has a retrospective character. The original event has already taken place ‘off-stage’ and the resources and narrative strategies of television newsrooms are committed in the first place to catching up both with what has happened and the immediate consequences for those most nearly and fatefully caught up in it. On September 11th 2001 the original event—the first plane crashing into the north tower of the World Trade Centre—did indeed take place ‘off-stage’ from television but it was, within minutes, brought live into morning news programs in the United States. It instantly became a catastrophe that unfolded ‘live-to-air’ on television screens around the world. At first it was utterly incomprehensible but, by the end of the day, the situation had been accurately analysed and correctly understood. Immediate action had been taken and future courses of action predicted and assessed.

In what follows I attend to both these moments—the breaking news story at the beginning of the day as shown on CNN, and retrospective accounts and analyses at the end of the day, in the BBC’s main nightly news programme at 10 pm. These two moments have different temporalities; the *future present* of live-and-in-real-time coverage and, on the other hand, the *historic present*² of nightly news as it looks back on the events of the day. Summary accounts of CNN and BBC news coverage are followed by a brief discussion of what they reveal about the role of broadcast news when disaster strikes.

I

CNN live coverage

It is a normal day on CNN’s rolling early morning news program, *Live at Daybreak*.³ At 8.45 am, Eastern Time, the studio has a live-to-studio report on a New York fashion show of clothing for pregnant women. It is a light hearted piece with the CNN reporter at the venue interviewing three very pregnant models and the designer of the outfits they are wearing. There is playful banter between the female studio anchor, the reporter and the interviewees. As the item is wrapped, the programme cuts out to advertisements and then back to a short report on business news followed by promotional ads for the Station’s corporate business sponsors. Coming out of the ads, what is displayed next is a shot of a skyscraper with smoke billowing from its upper storeys against the backdrop of a clear, blue morning sky. Chromakeyed across the bottom of the screen is a double strapline:

BREAKING NEWS
WORLD TRADE CENTER DISASTER

CNN
LIVE

¹ A shorter version of this article was first published as ‘Quelle réalité du malheur?’ in *Dossiers de l’Audiovisuel* no 104: July-August, 2002. I am grateful to its editor, Daniel Dayan, for permission to publish this revised essay, ahead of its appearance in a forthcoming book, based on the special issue of their journal, to be published by L’Institut National de l’Audiovisuel. I have made some minor alterations and additions to this English version.

² For more on the immediate present, the future present and the historic present as integrally related dimensions of the phenomenal now of daily broadcasting, see the discussion of prospective and retrospective narratives in Scannell (2004)

³ The following account of CNN news coverage is deeply indebted to Paul Pheasey’s undergraduate dissertation, ‘Convention in Chaos. CNN’s Search for Meaning on September 11th, 2001’. I have drawn extensively on his videotape and superb transcription of the first fifty minutes of CNN’s live coverage of the breaking story, from 8.50 am onwards (Pheasey 2002).

For the next fifty minutes CNN continues to hold on screen static shots of the World Trade Center, nearly all from the same camera position, about two miles away from the buildings and showing only their upper section. Advertisements are scrapped and coverage is continuous. Over images of the towers (and it is not easy to distinguish one from the other) there is what has, in effect, become a voiced-over radio commentary from the news program's two anchors, Leon Harris and Carol Lin:

CNN: 11.09.01: 8.50 am⁴

Lin: Yes (.) This just in (.)

You are looking at obviously a very disturbing live shot there.

That is the World Trade Center and we have unconfirmed reports this morning that a plane has crashed into one of the towers of the World Trade Center

CNN center right now is just beginning to work on this story

obviously our sources and trying to figure out exactly what happened

But clearly something relatively devastating happening this morning

there at the south end of the island of Manhattan.

That is once again one of the towers of the World Trade Center

Harris: Well you can see these pictures

It's obviously something devastating has happened

and again unconfirmed reports that a plane has crashed into one of the towers there

We are efforting more information on this subject as it becomes available to you

In retrospective news stories, the newsroom informs its uninformed audiences of what it knows. There is an asymmetry of knowledge between the producers and tellers of the news and those for whom it is produced and to whom it is told. But in this breaking story the CNN news team knows no more than viewers about what they are looking at on screen. Moreover in retrospective news coverage the boundaries of the event are apparent, precisely because it has already happened and is now over. It is available as a whole and, as such, can be narrated, discussed and assessed. But again, at this moment and for the next few hours, the boundaries of what is happening cannot be foreseen. Indeed, at a certain point (when the newsroom is trying to cope with the attack on the Pentagon as well as the World Trade Center and then the collapse of the two towers) the most terrifying aspect of the unfolding chain of events is that there is no apparent limit to it. It seems to be a spiralling disaster without end.

Throughout all this the two CNN presenters fronting the live coverage maintain their professional focus. The disaster is treated, without hesitation, as a *story* right from the start. Everything that follows is work on discovering what the story is, done live-to-air. There is no panic. A coherent flow of news-talk is maintained. Lin and Harris make clear, at all times, the status of what they say; whether or not it is confirmed, and by whom. They refuse to speculate. Even in the direst moments the situational proprieties of news routines are maintained. The overriding concern is to establish what, precisely, is happening and, beyond that, how it *could* have happened. Desk-bound in the newsroom, as viewers are bound to their TV sets, the production team searches continuously for witnesses who can testify to what has happened and what is now going on. Thus the most immediate thing to establish, as a matter of fact, is that it was indeed a plane that crashed into the building (and which one) and this is confirmed within seconds by the first over-the-phone witness (a senior manager of CNN) who actually saw the plane go into the World Trade Center.

In the next ten minutes or so CNN, while always holding on screen shots of the smoking towers, cuts away to live reports from two of its affiliates, WNYW and WABC. Both stations provide live to air interviews with a succession of eye-witnesses who establish that it is the north tower that has been hit at around the 80th floor. At 9.02 am the WABC anchorman is talking, from the studio, to a downtown eyewitness, Winston Mitchell, who confirms that the plane went 'totally into the building' and lodged in it. He is then asked if there is a lot of debris:

⁴ All times given are for Eastern Time (ET), the time in New York.

CNN 9.11.2001: 9.02 am

Static shot of the top half of the north tower from a WABC traffic-monitoring helicopter

Winston: No because it looked like it inverted with the impact everything went into the building. The only bit that came out was a little bit of the outside awning, but I'd say the hole is
(.) just let me get a better look right now

WABC: OK go ahead

Winston: The umm (.) I'd say the hole takes about six or seven floors were taken out

A plane comes into frame for a split second and disappears behind the tower. The image cuts out for a moment and then returns to show a fireball mushrooming out of the side of the building

And there's more explosions hold on people are running hold on

WABC: hold on just a moment we've got an explosion inside the

Winston: The building's exploded! You've got people running up the street! I don't know what's going on

WABC: OK just put Winston on pause there for just a moment

Winston: The whole building just exploded the whole top part the building's still intact people are running up the street.... Am I still connected?

Another full screen shot of the north tower

WABC: Winston this would support what Libby⁵ and you both said that perhaps the fuselage was in the building that would cause a second explosion such as that

Winston: Well that's just what's happened then

WABC: That would certainly (background sounds of shouting in the studio)
We are getting word that perhaps

Winston: OK hold on the people here are everybody's panicking

Zoom to close-up of the tower. Shot obscured by helicopter boom

WABC: Alright (.) you know Winston let me put Winston on hold for just a moment

Winston: I dunno how long I'm gonna be here I'm inside of a diner right now

WABC: Well Winston you know what if you could give us a call back (.) I just don't want panic here on the air (.) Let's just take some of our pictures from our news chopper 7

Cut to long distance shot

Now one of our producers said perhaps a second plane was involved let's not let's not even speculate to that point but at least put it out there that perhaps that may have happened (0.2) ermmm (.) the second explosion which certainly backed the theory from a couple of eyewitnesses that the plane fuselage perhaps stayed in those upper buildings

Cut to close-up shot in which both towers can now clearly be seen with smoke and flames coming out of them

Now if you look at the second building there are two both twin towers are on fire now this was not the case—am I correct?—a couple of moments ago. This is the second twin tower now on fire (.) and we're gonna check on the second flight if perhaps this happened.

This all began at about 8.48 this morning.

Again, what we know, in case you're just joining us. A small plane not a Cesna type

Cut to full-screen shot that focuses on flames coming from the second tower

or 5 or 6 seater but instead perhaps a passenger flight ran into the north side of the World Trade Center As you can see the second explosion that you're looking at now, the second twin tower has spread much debris, much more debris than the first explosion or accident

Aah if there is, is Winston still on the line with us? (0.2) OK he's not there

Do we have—I'll just talk to my producer—do we have an eyewitness that perhaps sees better than we do from these pictures?

Again you can see that there is debris falling off

OK we actually have an eyewitness news reporter Dr Jay Adelberg who was downtown at the time and he is on the phone with us live.

Dr Jay what can you tell us?

At the moment that the second plane crashes into the south tower, the ABC anchor, focused on his live-to-air eyewitness interview, fails to see what is clearly, but only for an instant, visible; a plane coming in low from the right hand side of the television screen and disappearing behind the north tower. It is not

⁵ An earlier interviewed eye-witness

immediately obvious that it has, in fact, crashed into the south tower. Winston responds immediately: 'The building's exploded... the whole building just exploded.' The anchor interprets this to support the point that Winston and an earlier witness have established; that the first plane is embedded in the north tower and hence may have caused a secondary explosion—an assessment accepted by the eyewitness. What is in vision on screen is hard to interpret because the two towers are not clearly distinguishable from each other. Now, as in all the early minutes of the unfolding catastrophe, there is a continuing demand for 'an eyewitness that perhaps sees better than we do from these pictures'. The instantly upcoming interviewee, Dr Jay Adelberg, confirms that a second plane came in, moments ago, at a low altitude and appeared to crash into the World Trade Center. This is followed by a sequence of replays of the plane going behind the north tower and, after a fraction of a second, a spectacular fireball exploding from the side of the barely visible south tower.

Thus far, all interviews have been with ordinary people who are on air simply because they have either a better line of vision on what is happening than the newsroom (and viewers) or else actually saw the planes going into the buildings. Next up is the first expert witness, Ira Furman, a former National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) spokesman. In the course of a lengthy discussion Furman makes it plain that it is inconceivable that two planes could accidentally crash into the towers given the perfect flying conditions and that, in the case of the second plane, the smoke billowing from the first stricken tower marks it out as a visible disaster area to be avoided. Harris concludes the phone interview with a thanks and the observation that 'the longer we talk the less convinced many will become that this was an accident'.

From now on there is an incremental accumulation of information from varied sources, including the major press agencies—Associated Press and Reuters—that begins to flesh in the background to the thus far inexplicable disaster that fills the television screen. An AP report talks of 'a possible plane hijacking'. An FBI official tells CNN that the possibility of terrorist acts is being investigated. Rescue operations are under way. A further AP report describes the plane crashes as acts of terrorism. Reports come in that President Bush will shortly make a news statement from Sarasota where he is visiting an elementary school. At 9.29 am, fifty minutes into the breaking story, the President's brief press statement is chromakeyed on screen in a small framed box but with the stricken towers still the dominant visual image. Bush speaks of 'a national tragedy' and 'an apparent terrorist attack on our country'.

At 9.40 the strapline across the bottom of the screen changes to 'reports of fire at Pentagon'. The newsroom catches up with this new headline within a minute via a phone interview with CNN's Chris Plante in a car near the Pentagon. Reports are coming in that the White House is being evacuated. At 9.50, for the first time, the smoking towers in Manhattan are displaced by a shot from Washington of a huge plume of smoke behind government buildings in the foreground. Again the initial on-screen picture is far from clear and there is an immediate off-screen search for clarification of what is happening. The flow of background information increases as the volume of separate incidents rises. The Federal Aviation Authority has grounded all flights in the USA. John King, CNN's senior White House correspondent in Washington, reports from there that everything that's happening is being treated as a terrorist attack and that the initial assumption, according to an unnamed official source 'was that this had something to do or at least they were looking into any possible connection with Osama bin Laden. The administration recently released a warning that they thought Osama bin Laden might strike out against American targets'.

CNN now has a third anchor, Aaron Brown, established in the open air on a rooftop with a clear and unimpeded panoramic view of the two smoking towers standing high above the Manhattan skyline. He continues the commentary live to camera against this backdrop. At 9.58 CNN cuts to a full-screen shot of what is clearly the Pentagon engulfed in a huge black cloud of smoke. Voiced over this is a down-the-line report to Brown from Jamie McIntyre, CNN's senior Military Affairs Correspondent at the Pentagon:

CNN 11.09.2001 9.58 am

Full screen shot of Pentagon from WUSA

MacIntyre: Again it appears that an aircraft of some sort did hit the side of the Pentagon. The west part which faces sort of towards Arlington National Cemetery. It's a corridor where a lot of army officers are located

Brown: Wow! Jamie Jamie I need you to stop for a second. There has just been a huge explosion
Cut to tight close-up of a side of the still standing north tower and behind it a great cloud of smoke.
The camera begins to pull back

We can see a billowing smoke rising and I'll tell you that I can't see that second tower. But there was a cascade of sparks and fire

Cut to Brown on rooftop against the Manhattan skyline

And now this it almost looks like a mushroom cloud an explosion.

This huge billowing smoke in the second tower this was the second of the two towers hit.

And I you know I cannot see behind that smoke

Cut to panoramic shot of Manhattan, smoke rising high above and behind the north tower and rising below and all around it, enveloping all buildings in the area

Obviously as you can't either (background sound of sirens) the first tower in front has not changed and we see this extraordinary and frightening scene behind us of the second tower (.) now just encased in smoke
What is behind it.. I I cannot tell you (.)

But just look at that.

That is about as frightening a scene as you will ever see

Again this is going on in two cities.

We have a report that there is a fire at the State Department as well and that is being evacuated

So we've got fires at the Pentagon (.) evacuated

The State Department (.) evacuated

The White House (.) evacuated on the basis of what the secret service described as a as a credible terrorist threat

We have two explosions (.) we have two planes hitting the World Trade Center here in New York

And what this second explosion was that took place about (.)

A part of that would be the south tower has apparently collapsed

In the live coverage of breaking news, as time moves on implacably, the newsroom is journeying forwards into the unknown, while looking back over its shoulder in a continuing effort to catch up with and make sense of what has just-now happened. Continuously aware that, from moment to moment, new viewers are joining the program, the presenters regularly re-cap and summarise what has thus far happened and what is thus far known about what has happened. Along the way incoming bits of information are added to the snow-balling narrative. But even so, fragments of data, which will later turn out to be hugely important may, in the first instance, appear to be no more than straws in the wind. Barely an hour after the first plane crash into the World Trade Center the name of Osama bin Laden has been mentioned by CNN's Washington correspondent in connection with what is happening. But at this moment it appears to be no more than an incidental detail, a passing conjecture that is instantly blown away and lost in the onrushing whirlwind of events.

II

BBC end of day news coverage

In the UK ten o'clock at night has long been the time-slot preferred by the national broadcasters, the BBC and ITN, for their main end of day news program precisely because by then the events of the day have 'settled' and there has been time for the newsroom to gather, assess and organise data from all available wide and varied sources. Breaking news, urgently seeking information from moment to moment, accesses incoming data along the way, and transmits it with hedges and cautions precisely because there is no time to check and confirm its evidential status. Retrospective news, by contrast, enjoys the benefit of hindsight that only time can give. There has been time to sort and sift, to check and cross-check, to pick the most telling moments and the most incisive quotes. Above all there has been time to sort out the events and its telling and present it within an interpretative frame and a story-format: the frame is 'terrorism', the story-format is 'disaster', the narration is direct, authoritative and without qualification:

BBC News, 11.09.01: 10.00 PM
Peter Sissons, BBC news anchor:

Sissons, in studio, direct to camera

Terrorists attack the heart of America with catastrophic loss of life

The second plane crashes into the south tower

Hi-jacked planes smash into and destroy New York's tallest buildings

Close-up of the top of the north tower as it begins to collapse

Both towers of the World Trade Centre collapse with thousands trapped

The Pentagon wreathed in clouds of smoke

Another plane explodes on the Pentagon, mocking America's defensive might

Crowds in Manhattan fleeing an approaching dust cloud

In the streets panic, and the certainty that casualties are horrendous

Prime Minister Blair about to make a press statement

Tonight Britain imposes drastic security measures as Blair condemns the terrorist barbarism

These are the top-of-the-news headlines, read out before the signature music and captions that lead in, each night, to the ten o'clock news. The first and last headlines set the overall frame of 'terrorism' within which the catastrophe flagged in the four intermediate headlines is to be understood. The overall frame is political. The disaster is not. Those most immediately caught up in the disaster, those who suffer—the dead and dying, the injured, their relatives and friends—demand immediate attention *because* of their suffering, irrespective of any question of their causes.⁶ The narrative format of news disaster stories has a structure whose logic is determined by a hierarchy of relevance in which the imperative issue is always the nature and scale of the disaster and its fateful impact on human life. Thus the first half of the BBC news program on the night of September 11th recapitulates the sequence of events, assesses the scale of their impact in terms of human suffering and attends to the rescue efforts in their immediate aftermath. Only after this has been dealt with, does the news turn to the wider political implications of the disaster as a deliberate act of terrorism.

First the precise chronology of events is set out under the banner headline: AMERICA UNDER ATTACK. The first detailed report 'on the day that terrorism struck at the heart of the world's most powerful nation' is from the BBC's diplomatic correspondent, James Robins. It is a brilliantly edited sequence that draws on the most powerful visual images and most telling eyewitness accounts taken from the huge stock of footage available hours later to the news room. The live-and-as-it-happened images available to CNN as the story broke were visually of poor quality, static and low in information; the visuals in the end-of-day report are riveting. There are spectacular shots of the second plane going into the south tower both in close-up and from a distant panoramic shot (an amateur video clip) across the bay with the whole of Manhattan in view. The shots of the towers going down are simply heart-stopping as are the images, moments beforehand, of the doomed souls trapped in them, hanging out of windows, waving in vain for help. Intercut with shots of the buildings are sequences from hand-held, mobile cameras at ground level, that graphically capture the panic on the streets as the police try to control and direct the fleeing crowds. The ambient sound of running footsteps, of shrieks and cries powerfully evokes what it was to be there caught up in the disaster zone. None of this was available in the first hour of CNN's morning coverage. The eye-witness interviews again are in sharp contrast with those used in the breaking story. Those consisted largely of people looking out of their windows at the World Trade Centre and describing, over the phone, what they saw. The interviewees were in the same position as the newsroom and the television viewers: observers, onlookers at a distance. The straight-to-camera interviews with men and women on the streets in the disaster zone have

⁶ For a detailed discussion of this point see Boltanski (1999:7-11) who links it to the parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable has a direct political significance in present day France where individuals have a legal responsibility to come to the assistance of anyone in distress or danger. A key point of the parable is the provision of immediate aid *irrespective* of the identity and status of the victim and the wider politics of the situation. That is, immediate help should not depend on *who* the suffering individual is, nor wait upon clarification of the circumstances that caused the injury. All considerations of the factors that may have led to an attack on the injured, and any questions as to whether or not such an attack may have been justified or not must be set aside and immediate assistance given.

a direct and compelling character:

BBC News, 11.09.01: 10.04 pm

Eyewitness, New York:

I wuz just standing here watching the World Trade Centre after the first after the first plane hit (.) I just saw a second plane come in from the south and hit the whuh south (.) tower half way between the bottom and the top of the tower its gotta be a terrorist attack I can't tellya anything more th'n that (.) I saw the plane hit the building

To re-live a moment such as this testifies to the *pain* of witnessing. The anguish in the face and voice, in the whole body of this anonymous 'man in the street' as he tells what he just saw is all caught in the recording. His assessment of what he saw is immediate, certain and precise. It has to be a terrorist attack. It is the only interpretation that makes any sense of what, no matter how many times one watches it, is simply unbelievable—a plane flying into a world famous landmark out of a clear blue sky. The final shot in the report, from across the broad and shining expanse of the bay, of the Manhattan skyline in the early evening, the towers gone and the whole area involved in a drifting shroud of smoke, is unforgettable.

Robins' report, towards the end, touches briefly on the rescue efforts in the aftermath of the collapse of the second tower. This is the focal concern of a follow-on report from Niall Dickson. The numbers of the dead are beyond calculation, but they will be 'more than any of us can bear' says Mayor Giuliani of New York, leading the rescue response, in a hastily organised press conference. The hospitals are stretched to breaking point, dealing with more than 2,000 injured. A call for blood goes out as the hospitals are running out, and improvised centres take donations from a host of volunteers. The scenes of the rescue services picking their way through the dust and rubble of the ruined heart of the city are eerily quiet. The report attends to the fatalities at the Pentagon, and the support for the wounded. Again no precise figures can be given. The one exact figure, at the end of the report, is that 266 people died in the four aircraft; the two that went into the World Trade Centre, the one that went into the Pentagon and the one that came down later in a field near Philadelphia.

The scale of a disaster is always measured in terms of its fateful impact on the lives of human beings. In terms of this event its immediate impact and consequences were immeasurable, and initial responses registered stunned shock, astonishment and disbelief. A middle aged man talks to camera of how he escaped:

BBC News, 11.09.01: 10.07 pm

Eyewitness, New York:

.uhh big boom (.) come down the steps. Everything fine till we get to the basement then everything just fell in (.) I wuz got trapped under there with another guy (.) crawled out (.) kept getting hit on the head (.) bashed all around finally we crawled our way out over the rubble (.) we did alright

It is not what he says but the sight of him standing there, in the debris—his head and face covered in blood and dust, his clothes in tatters—that confirms the enormity of what has just happened to him. For the victim himself the significance of what has happened, at this point in time, is beyond the reach of words. What is not beyond the reach of words is the strategic significance of what has happened, to which the news now turns, having dealt with the events and their immediate aftermath. 'Terrorists attack the heart of America with catastrophic loss of life' were the first words of the whole programme, but who the terrorists might be is neither mentioned nor dealt with until half way through the programme:

BBC News, 11.09.01: 10.20 pm

George Eakin, BBC reporter:

And it's this wealthy Arab fundamentalist the Americans are already naming as an immediate suspect. Osama bin Laden. He controls and finances al Qaeda, an umbrella network of Islamic militants and he's vowed to destroy the United States.

The report gives further details of bin Laden's activities against the US. It notes that while the possibility is not excluded, no-one is suggesting that it could be [like the Oklahoma bombing] an act of domestic

terrorism. It further considers the possibility of a 'rogue state' being behind the attack but reports that initial US responses think this unlikely. Following on from this Peter Sissons goes to a live interview with the BBC's World Affairs Editor, John Simpson, in Islamabad, who was in Afghanistan the previous week. He is asked whether bin Laden could have done it, and replies that he certainly could: 'he's got the fanaticism, he's got the followers, he's got the money and he's frankly got the imagination'. Sissons then asks, if the United States wanted to go after bin Laden, how difficult would that be?

BBC News, 11.09.01: 10.24 pm

John Simpson:

Well it's easy enough to hit at Afghanistan and I do think it important to draw the distinction between the Taliban government in Afghanistan who are bin Laden's hosts, not perhaps all that willingly his host, and the man himself. I think frankly it's going to be extraordinarily difficult for the Americans to hit him. He's got his own peculiarly difficult and complex system of communications which they simply can't break into (.) er I think frankly they'll they'll if they're going to attack if they decide that the attacker came from there they'll hit Afghanistan very hard. They'll hit the hosts but frankly I doubt if they'll get the guest.

Towards the very end of the program in a studio interview, the BBC's Diplomatic Correspondent, James Robins (who compiled the lead story on the events of the day) confirms the assumption that there will be retaliation on a massive scale from the Americans against bin Laden. He is then asked whether heads will roll in America's intelligence community who failed to see this coming:

BBC News, 11.09.01: 10.40 pm

James Robins:

I think that's also a very distinct possibility. It is extraordinary that both the CIA and the FBI failed to detect a threat and failed to prevent four separate concerted and synchronised attacks...[...] It's very hard to believe that the American intelligence establishment can escape the blame.

Now, two years later and with the wisdom of hindsight we know that Simpson has been proved right. The Americans did, indeed, hit the host but missed the guest. And it did begin to emerge, months later, that American intelligence had picked up on the imminent possibility of terrorist hi-jacks in the USA in the weeks before September 11th. That, in turn, gave rise to questions as to why the Bush administration apparently did nothing about such reports in the weeks before September 11th.

III

The politics of the present

In his splendid study of *Distant Suffering* Luc Boltanski asks 'What reality has misfortune?' (Boltanski 1999: 149-169). How can 'the moral spectator'⁷ believe the accounts of human suffering that he or she reads about in newspapers or sees on television? At the heart of this question is the problem of witnessing (Peters 2001). To be a witness is to be present at an event of some sort and thereby to have direct and immediate access to what is taking place. A witness 'has' (owns) the experience of 'being there' and thereby has moral and communicative entitlements. Witnesses have the moral entitlement to evaluate and pass judgement on what they witnessed (they are entitled to their opinions on the matter), whereas others who were not there have no such rights. Arising from this moral right, witnesses have further communicative entitlements. In particular they have the right (indeed the duty) 'to bear witness'. They can,

⁷ Boltanski derives this term from that 18th literary taste public discussed by Habermas (1962) as the precursor of the critical opinion forming public of the late 18th century. Both note the significance of two key early English magazines, *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*; the former constituting the reader as a gossip and the latter as one who gazes on the social scene. Boltanski stresses the importance of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* which includes a discussion of the spectacle of suffering and the moral sentiments it inspires in those who witness it (Boltanski 1999: 35-54).

and must, speak to others of what they saw. Such speech, no matter how banal, has a compelling truth for those who were not there.

We, television viewers, were not there on New York's *dies irae*. The structures and routines of news are designed to produce effects of truth in such ways that we can believe what we are told and shown. It is precisely because mediated narratives, told in the third person by a news presenter, lack the force of first-person narratives by those who are there, that broadcasting institutions invest such high-cost technical and human resources in order to establish first-person accounts and evaluations of 'news'. The camera crews who are 'there', the reporters who are 'there', the eye-witnesses who are 'there', the correspondents and analysts who are 'there' all combine to furnish compelling evidence as to the primary facticity of what has happened and is still happening. All of them, in their different roles, act as witnesses to the truth of the event, not on their own behalf, but for the sake of absent audiences for whom they show and speak of what is happening. They do this so that anyone and everyone who watches will 'own' the experience and thereby be entitled to have and to speak their opinions on the matter.

Boltanski criticises the hermeneutics of suspicion directed against the humanitarian movement. He wishes to defend a politics of direct and immediate response to disasters. While others sit at home in their armchairs and criticise, humanitarian aid, at least, is there trying to do something, dealing with the situation, bringing relief and comfort to the suffering. 'Ultimately what justifies the humanitarian movement is that its members are on the spot. Presence on the ground is the only guarantee of effectiveness and even of truth' (183). There has to be room for a politics of the present, one that is responsive to what is happening now: 'to be concerned with the present is no small matter. For over the past, ever gone by, and over the future, still non-existent, the present has an overwhelming privilege: that of being real' (192).

And this applies, with equal force, to broadcasting. It is part of the familiar critique of 'the media' not merely that they are parasitic on events, but that their presence distorts them and their accounts misrepresent them. Dayan and Katz's pioneering study of media events began to correct that view (Dayan and Katz 1992) as do the foregoing brief accounts. Television coverage on the day established the truth of what was happening and of what was being done. It came up with explanations and anticipated future courses of action that remain unchallenged to this day. There would be no politics of the present without the presence and participation of broadcast media. In the responses of the day, on 11th September 2001, the whole world witnessed, through the mediations of television, the immediate, instinctive repair work to the torn and damaged fabric of everyday existence. In such rare moments the politics of the present achieve a transcendent character. And this is something that we get to see and understand through the power of live broadcasting, whose ordinary, worldly news routines shore up, on behalf of us all, the meaningful character of existence even when it appears to be collapsing in ruins before our disbelieving eyes.

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