

ETNOFOOR

Not Being There

Author(s): Meg McLagan

Source: *Etnofoor*, Vol. 15, No. 1/2, SCREENS (2002), pp. 65-69

Published by: [Stichting Etnofoor](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25758023>

Accessed: 03-07-2015 16:21 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Stichting Etnofoor is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Etnofoor*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Not Being There*

Meg McLagan, New York University

ABSTRACT The attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 reshaped mediascapes around the world as people deployed and engaged with various media forms to communicate information and views about what had happened. Written from the (somewhat anguished) perspective of a New Yorker living abroad for a year, this essay analyzes the limitations of the mass mediation of 9/11.

Tuesday September 11, 2001, 3:55 p.m. It is a beautiful day in Amsterdam and I'm in the ladies' toilet in the basement of a cafe on the Museumplein. My two young daughters are playing with the bathroom stall doors which you can see through but which become opaque when the locks are turned. As I wash my hands, I notice two television screens on the wall. There's no sound, just a blurry grainy image of two towers aflame. The picture quality is so poor I don't recognize what I am seeing. It vaguely reminds me of a scene from *Born in Flames*, the feminist classic directed by Lizzie Borden shot in lower Manhattan in the early 1980s (www.firstrunfeatures.com/vid/flames.html). Unaware at this point of the irony of this association (the film depicts a group of armed female anarchists who take over radio and television outlets in a futuristic New York City), I gather my girls and leave the building.

Over the next few days, as the full magnitude of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. begins to settle in, we realize how fortunate we are to be away from home for a year, home being downtown Manhattan, not more than a mile from 'Ground Zero' as it will soon be called. We can't smell the horrible smell, we don't have to look at the sad pictures of lost loved ones posted on bus stops, and we don't have to listen to ominous sounds of fighter jets crisscrossing the city sky. At the same time, strangely enough, I have a strong feeling of wanting to be there, of having missed something that I should not have missed, or perhaps do not deserve to have missed. From a distance, it is hard to believe the towers and so many people inside them have disappeared. How many nights have I lain in bed, lost in thought, watching the lights on the top of the towers blink alternately in order to ward off low-flying aircraft? (My father recently told me about a bomber that crashed into 40 Wall Street during WWII, the original event demonstrating the need for such warning devices.)

If seeing is believing, my feeling of disbelief is intensified by a lack of access to our usual televisual news sources such as New York 1. Having said that, basic cable service in Amsterdam includes an impressively wide range of foreign language channels: Dutch, Turkish, Arabic, Spanish, French, German, Italian, British (BBC 1, BBC 2) and American (CNN International). My compulsive viewing of news reports in languages I can't understand forces my attention onto visuals and the style of presentation – I notice that framing is the same on nearly every channel, regardless of country of origin. I am quickly frustrated by the genericness of it all, by the overreliance on conventional tv grammar of short shots and fast cuts more evocative than informative. I want specifics, I want to know what is happening in our neighborhood, on the edge of Soho; what aspects of daily life have changed? Paradoxically, this yearning for place and for being there only grows stronger the more I submerge myself in the multiply-mediated world of 9/11.

The contrast between my hunger to get more information and my discomfort with mainstream media coverage grows as times goes on. In a forthcoming essay on 9/11, anthropologist Allen Feldman writes about 'narratological numbness'¹ which he defines as 'not the inability to tell the story but rather the recourse to axiomatic story forms and emplotments that primarily restore our belief in our ability to narrate, to suture an experiential wound with logos, tales that forge an interventionist memory, a memory that both shows, screens, and eliminates, and thereby denies disaster itself as historical experience.' Evidence of this numbness is clear in the televised American responses to the attacks that I see. Out of the initial inchoate murk of disaster and trauma, a set of problematic narratives begins to emerge and circulate in the mass media. It soon becomes too painful to watch my fellow compatriots in vox pop interviews tell CNN reporters that radical Muslims are 'just jealous' of our prosperity, our peace, our way of life. Surely not everyone at home believes this I think, despite George W. Bush's assertion to the contrary that those who committed these acts did so because they 'hate our freedoms. . . '.

In his widely read essay 'Collective Passion', Edward Said attacks such formulaic expressions of grief and patriotism.² 'What is most depressing' . . . he writes, 'is how little time is spent trying to understand America's role in the world'. Said's argument that anti-Americanism 'is not based on a hatred of modernity or technology-envy' but rather is based on a different narrative, one of 'concrete interventions, specific deprivations, and . . . cruel and inhumane policies administered with a stony coldness'.

But it is a misnomer to call it anti-Americanism. Rather there is huge compassion for the U.S. mixed with a strong sense that the U.S. is now reaping what it has sown. This schizophrenic combination of sympathy and solidarity with America along with skepticism of its foreign policy characterizes the reactions of many Europeans I know. For days after the attacks, our Dutch and English friends, aware we live in New York, stop me on the street or at school, eager to offer their condolences for those lost in the attacks, their emotions mirrored by the huge display of flowers, heartfelt notes, and candles left in remembrance of those killed on 9/11 in front of the American Consulate. At the same time, though horrified by what has happened, my European friends are not all that surprised.

The existence of these dual feelings is made dramatically clear to me in the weeks following September 11 when I watch BBC 1's current affairs program 'Question Time'. On the show, members of a live studio audience – British voters – are given the opportunity to quiz top decision makers on the events of the day. One evening British Prime Minister Tony Blair takes the studio audiences' questions about 9/11 and his government's response.³ Blair's performance on the show is impressive; he engages his audience in vigorous debate, answering questions directly and without making the sort of infelicitous locutions for which Bush is famous. During the program Blair reiterates his claim that Britain stands 'shoulder to shoulder' with America in its time of national tragedy. Blair's sympathetic tone contrasts dramatically with that of a previous edition of 'Question Time' which aired on September 13, just two days after the attacks. On that program, members of the studio audience queried panelists, which included the former U.S. ambassador Phil Lader, about the attacks and the US response. The vehement critiques of American foreign policy – with some British Muslims in the audience claiming the U.S. must take responsibility for the deaths of its own nationals as well as of Britons because of the 'hatred' their 'anti-Arab' policies in the Middle East have generated was so intense it almost reduced Lader to tears.⁴ (The BBC was forced to issue an apology several days later.)

Once again, my distance from the events in New York and Washington enables me to see things than I might not otherwise if I were home. 'Question Time' presents the British public (as well as BBC viewers the world over) with the opportunity to observe British politicians listening and responding to concerns of fellow citizens, some of whom make trenchantly critical comments directly to their faces. The fact that these encounters are broadcast on national television is mind-boggling and is a stunning display of the difference between American and British political culture. The former ambassador's astonishment at his audiences' confrontational questions, while understandable given the fact that the show aired only 48 hours after the tragedy, highlights this difference. His tears reveal a huge gap in Americans' self-perception as peaceable, generous people versus the way we are viewed by the rest of the world. Yet the behavior of the most vocal British Muslims on 'Question Time', betrays a complicated frustration rather than a totalizing opposition to the U.S., their pointed observations reflecting tension within the European left between support for the U.S. and a decided unwillingness to accept the particular narrative forms that comply with American power and hegemony, that 'divorce disaster from a multiplex and open-ended history' as Feldman puts it.

Like millions of others frustrated with the American mass media's narration of 9/11 which evacuates it of this complex history, I turn to my computer for more information. First-person testimony is a much needed antidote to the canned stories available on CNN, and I am grateful that in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, a few of our friends in New York keep online diaries. These accounts are by far the most interesting and articulate records of daily life in New York that we will receive, though they soon taper off. (Other friends, overwhelmed by the task of communicating at such a moment, especially to those of us who are *not* there, send only brief messages, reassuring us they are okay but communicating little else.)

I soon discover websites devoted to post-9/11 news and analysis, many of which offer counternarratives to the Pentagon-generated stories about Bin Laden and Al Qaeda, which have begun to proliferate. I find myself in places I've never been before on the Web, occasionally surfing sites that are more conservative than the usual dot.org sites I tend to frequent such as www.debka.com, a Jerusalem-based site run by two Israeli journalists. I start reading postings forwarded by my brother from [debka](http://debka.com) and atimes.com, gulfnews.com, among others – area-based websites that offer more sophisticated, if at times exaggerated, ideological, and just plain scary geopolitical analyses than the circumspect international affairs reporting offered by mainstream media outlets in the States.⁵ Despite the obvious drawbacks of online 'information uncertainty' due to bias, reliance on rumors, and other questionable journalistic practices, these sites provide resources for more historically nuanced interpretations of 9/11 and the events leading up to it, ones that locate the tragedy in a much broader global context and in distinctly less cautious and euphemistic terms. They do so in the local vernacular, giving English-speaking audiences access to opinions of non-westerners, such as those of the much-discussed 'Arab street'.⁶ Indeed, no American flag *jpegs* frame these sites. . . .⁷

Branching out from my daily 'site seeing' of non-western online news digests and analysis, I also visit: stratfor.com, www.janes.com, spiked-online.com/sections/politics/attackonusa/index.htm, www.emergency.com/ennday.htm, www.drudgereport.com, and globalinfo.org. These sites take me even further afield geographically and politically than I've ever bothered to go before, deep into the realm of conflict, crisis communication, and the Internet.⁸ The intrigue such online reading offers is addictive, and I am quickly turning into an intelligence junkie, eager for my next fix. Yet there is something deeply disconcerting about the speed of news flows in this post-9/11 world. I wonder at the usefulness of a global information environment where stories such as the one about the Bush administration's revision of its nuclear posture can come and go so rapidly. By saturating ourselves with information, do we end up diffusing the possibilities for a considered political response, for instance, to the Administration's emerging doctrine of power, the genesis of which is explored in detail by Nicholas Lemann in the March 25, 2002 issue of *The New Yorker* (www.newyorker.com). Are we focusing too much on the next installment in the narrative instead of stepping back and reflecting on the big picture. Is that even possible in these times of global terrorist networks and anthrax scares, the spectacular nature of which makes such careful thinking less likely? And how should we understand the burgeoning industry of online foreign affairs reporting and punditry? Checking in with meta-media sites such as www.ojr.org, www.watsoninstitute.org/infopeace, www.usip.org/oc/virtual.dipl.html, www.pewinternet.org, poynter.org, I find that, unsurprisingly, nobody seems to know where it all is headed.

Eventually, after months of obsessive surfing, I become less and less interested in Bin Laden's whereabouts and similar stories that have kept me hooked since September 2001. Although I have learned a great deal about global geopolitics and the current state of the world from my various forays into 'screenal reality,' as tactical media practitioner Ricardo Dominguez puts it⁹, I am still dogged by a feeling of absence. My engagement with

the mediation of a place I know intimately but which has been forever changed remains strangely unsatisfying and serves only to further reinforce my sense of not being there. It also reinforces my sense of being an outsider here. Neither here nor there, then, I look forward to our return to New York now, to being present, to being home.

E-mail address: margaret.mclagan@nyu.edu

Notes

- * This piece was originally written as a contribution to a collaborative web-based pedagogical project on tactical media after 9/11 which will launch in December 2002 and can be found at www.nyu.edu/fas/projects/vcb. The idea for a 'virtual casebook' on this topic was conceived by Barbara Abrash at the Center for Media, Culture, and History at New York University and supported by funds from the Rockefeller Foundation.
- 1. See: www.arts.adelaide.edu.au/anthropology/social_analysis/socfrnt.html
- 2. See: www.ahram.org.eg/weekly/2001/552/op2.htm
- 3. See: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/question_time
- 4. www.guardian.co.uk/broadcast/story/0,7493,583623,00.html
- 5. Other popular websites about Middle Eastern politics include <http://electronicintifada.net>, www.palestinechronicle.com, www.bitterlemons.org, <http://memri.org>, <http://amin.org>.
- 6. See: www.ojr.org/ojr/world_reports/1017959968.php
- 7. The term jpeg (pronounced 'jay-peg' in English), refers to a standardized image compression mechanism. The initials themselves stand for Joint Photographic Experts Group, the original name of the committee that wrote the standard. Jpeg was designed to compress either color or black and white still images.
- 8. See: www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue7_4/bucher/index.html
- 9. See: www.thing.net/~rdom/