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Documenting Horror: The Use of Sound in Non-Fiction 9/11 Films

by Jesse Schlotterbeck

Conventional documentaries of the events of September 11th focus on the most known and visible images of the attack. Both *CBS News: What We Saw* (2002) and HBO's *In Memoriam: New York City, 9/11/01* (2002) show much of the original live footage of the attacks. The HBO project also privileges the visibility of lesser seen footage, such as particularly long-takes of the planes approaching in amateur footage not widely circulated or aired by mainstream news coverage.

I analyze three films that work against this tendency to portray the attacks with footage that emphasizes visibility. *9/11* (2002), *11'09"01 - September 11* (2002) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) conspicuously avoid the television news coverage of the towers and portray the attacks primarily through sound. These films avoid or scantily interject the too familiar footage, working instead with the audio track's ability to convey the horrors of the event. Where *11'09"01 - September 11* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* work with sound apart from the image, *9/11* features footage from Ground Zero, highlighting sounds in off-screen space.

By emphasizing sound, these films address a challenge familiar to documentary studies: how to appropriately represent a historical event whose tragic scale makes aesthetic representation questionable. This problem has been debated extensively regarding Holocaust documentaries. As with September 11th, images of the Holocaust are very familiar. In both cases, documentarians are faced with the fact that prior footage has largely lost its capacity to move the viewer due to its saturation in mass media. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis writes that Holocaust documentarians must consider

the possible neutralizing effect of excessive footage of atrocities. The newsreel images are so horrible, so viscerally disturbing, that defense and denial are unavoidably invoked. Yet how does one document the inconceivable horrors



and incalculable pain? How does one maintain the image's power to show without evoking either total disbelief or incapacitating grief? (Flitterman-Lewis 1998: 205)

It is notable that Flitterman-Lewis refers to "the image's power." The use of the image as a synonym for film reveals the tendency of scholars to consider film primarily a visual medium. The decision of these filmmakers to evoke the events of 9/11 via the audio-track more than the image is related to Flitterman-Lewis' observation about the dynamic relationship between visibility and horror. Moore and Iñárritu's departure from the 9/11 television coverage works to a similar effect as Alan Renais' choice to avoid newsreel footage of death camps in *Night and Fog* (1955). Annette Kuhn argues that the question of style in documentaries is often "disavowed and subject to a work of effacement" based on the assumption that "the image 'speaks for itself'" (Kuhn 1978: 72). Yet, in documenting historical catastrophe, filmmakers work under the assumption that the best known and most direct images of these horrific events had lost their power due to their familiarity. Filmmakers covering the Holocaust or 9/11 are left to find less familiar footage of the subject, or devise more creative nonfiction works.

Studying Holocaust documentaries, Ilan Avisar finds that filmmakers have tended to restrain their experimental or artistic ambitions out of respect for subject material: "The singularity of the Holocaust reality, combined with the urge shared by many filmmakers to relate excruciating and extreme experiences accurately, lead many to feel that faithfulness to the historical material is more important than poetic adventures" (Avisar 1988: 182). No such prohibition is active with *11'09"01, 9/11*, and *Fahrenheit 9/11*. These films, instead, embrace the Griersonian definition of documentary as a "creative treatment of actuality," taking broad artistic license to present this historical event in way that it had not been seen, or rather, heard before. (Winston 1995: 11)

Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* earned over \$119 million at the box office to set the record for the highest grossing documentary of all-time. This indictment of George W. Bush's first term particularly emphasizes the administration's response to 9/11 and the "war on terror." The film opens by revisiting the attacks in an unconventional manner. Moore does not include the towers under attack, focusing instead on sound mixing and shots of eye-witnesses. I argue that this sequence succeeds in presenting the events of 9/11 as horrific in a way that extant television footage no longer could.

As Mikita Brottman notes, while newscasters continuously spoke of the "horror" of 9/11 images, "the broadcast footage of the collapse of the WTC is remarkable not for its horror but for its absence of horror" (Brottman 2003: 166). Brottman argues that:

In Western culture, particularly in America, we've come to associate "the horrifying" with visually explicit representations of violence, usually violence



done to the human body (dismemberment, evisceration, decapitation, and so on). For anything to be considered truly horrifying, it has to be seen—and, preferably, rendered as graphic and lifelike in detail as possible. (Brottman: 164)

I disagree and argue that it is precisely the absence of images of bodily trauma that places the sound-centered representations of the events of 9/11 in dialogue with the horror. While Brottman defines horror entirely through the visual with an absolute correlation between degrees of explicitness and horror, films in this genre often depend on the power of suggestion, the use of off-screen sounds, empty or black screens, and the auditor's ability to imagine unseen destruction.

The producer of the horror film *Halloween* (1978), Irwin Yablans, describes how a radio aesthetic informed his approach to this horror film: "I grew up with radio, Inner Sanctum, Lights Out, radio horror shows. I think that's why great writers came from that time, because you had to be descriptive...and I said I want [*Halloween*] to be like a radio show. I want it to be spooky, scary, but leave much of it to the audience" (Rockoff 2002: 58). Moore's sequence works similarly. It lacks explicit visual horror, suggesting it, instead, through sound.

Fahrenheit 9/11 begins with an empty frame. In lieu of the familiar images, the attacks unfold as a sound collage over a black screen. First, a distant jet engine rapidly grows louder until the sound is nearly deafening. A loud crash is immediately followed by screams of disbelief. At this point, the tracks blend to a less distinct but more densely layered soundscape. Still, the auditor can make out certain sounds amongst the chaos. Someone says by telephone line, "Something has happened here at the World Trade Center: flames and an awful lot of smoke." Another voice recorded on location says, "Oh man!," a woman screams, even louder, "Oh my god!!" We also hear police sirens, footsteps, another resounding impact, and the sounds of debris. Many sounds are revealingly unclear, and can be best described as crunching or debris-like; the sounds of certain but vaguely defined destruction.

Though the track makes use of live-recorded sound, it was also clearly edited, mixed and layered with other recordings. This is not a simple multi-track live recording, but a condensed, selective collage of sounds. For instance, while the two crashes into the World Trade Center were separated by more than 15 minutes, in *Fahrenheit 9/11's* sequence, two distinct crashes are clearly audible in a minute-long sequence. Other aspects of the 9/11 narrative are also selectively sampled. Voices are carefully balanced between ordinary citizens and city employees. We hear multiple male and female bystanders, who react with expressions of disbelief. This sound sequence effectively manages two tasks: to clearly tell the story of the towers under attack, while also presenting the event in an original way. The next film I analyze is also motivated by the same purposes.

11'09"01 - September 11 features a series of 11 films from directors of different national origins. Each film has eleven minutes, nine seconds, and one frame to



reflect on the terrorist attacks. The most artistically ambitious aspect of Alejandro González Iñárritu's contribution is the sound. Similar to the opening of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the screen is black for the majority of this short film.

Iñárritu's film opens with layers of indistinct, processed voices over darkness. After only a few seconds, a sharp intermittent knock is added. Semi-tonal, repeated notes are layered on top of these sounds. We hear a radio broadcast comment that it is "really a splendid September day." This comment is looped, fading-out, four times. Similar to Moore's film, we hear an approaching jet-engine and a crash. This is quickly chased by chaotic sounds and eye-witness commentary. This is followed by an introductory jingle to a talk radio program, just breaking the news of the first crash. We hear, on-air, as a caller witnesses the second crash. News reports from around the world, in various European and Middle-Eastern languages, follow this account. The images of falling bodies gradually become more frequent. They are now accompanied with a dissonant, semi-tonal crash instead of knocks. Radio or television broadcasts again become part of the sound-track as processed voices discuss the horrible sight of falling bodies, shown with increasing frequency. We also hear phone messages left to loved ones from people trapped inside the towers and the roar of emergency rescue vehicles. Iñárritu further disassociates sound from image at the conclusion of the film, when an increasingly dissonant noise-scape abruptly drops out before two very brief images of each tower collapsing. The image goes black, again, and the soundtrack returns to soft, indistinct chatter. Emotive orchestral music is gradually more audible and the black screen fades to grey, then bright white.

Iñárritu's film, like Moore's, works both as a narrative (the radio reports of a "beautiful day" come before discussions of the attack) and as a collage (flashes of bodies appear before any reports that the World Trade Center has been hit; expressions of disbelief also precede the first attack). Audio and visual elements are often asynchronously related. The knocking or crashing sounds that sound analogous to impact, incongruously, accompany bodies falling. The shock of this sight is impactful -fitting perfectly with the accompaniment- but there is simultaneously, a second, understood and even sickening register of the sound as anticipated impact.

The inclusion of a radio station's live coverage of the event interestingly pairs the discourse of news outlets with shocked, first hand witnesses: a caller to a radio program comments, "I will tell you from the size of the gap the wing span would have to be- Oh my god, the next building just blew up! Oh my god! The explosion is incredible! Oh my god! I don't believe this!" The radio host attempts to comment over the caller that "There's been another one - another plane just flew in" but he is unable to interject as the caller continues an incredulous stream of oh-my-gods. Here, audio versions of the event are not presented for their informational value, but to emphasize different points of view. While more conventional documentaries like the CBS and HBO projects emphasize the visibility of their content, Iñárritu's film, devoted more to affect than information, is intentionally less clear. Iñárritu



highlights the different experience of the eye witness from someone like himself, a media professional.

The mundane expressions of witnesses point to the gap between the sensation of shock and the ability to convey it. Moore and Iñárritu's attempts to recreate the initial horror of that morning also highlight its difficult expression. Horror, by definition, eludes full understanding. Consider, by contrast, the more sober discourse of mainstream news commentators. In a portion of the original CBS broadcast included in *CBS News: What We Saw* (2002), Dan Rather opens his coverage with this fatherly introduction: "It is important to say these things at the very beginning: The word from almost everyone that is trying to deal with the situation is steady. Steady." Moore and Iñárritu's films, oppositely, separate the attacks from any expository or interpretative context so that a more disturbing and vague sense of horror remains.

The final film I will analyze, *9/11*, was shot by a pair of French-Canadian brothers, Jules and Gédéon Naudet. Relatively inexperienced filmmakers, the Naudets originally planned to make a modest documentary on the training of a Manhattan fireman. They ended up filming hours of first-hand footage of the attacks, including the only known footage from inside one of the World Trade Center towers that morning. *9/11* was originally aired on CBS and French television, six months after the attack, before its release on DVD. Brottman reports that in the original American television broadcast, "the sound was edited to cut out the noises made by bodies landing on an awning outside the World Trade Center, in case some viewers might find them too disturbing." (Brottman: 165) The original audio track was restored for the DVD version of *9/11*. Scenes which include the sounds of falling bodies are the most unique and compelling moments of the film. The fact that these awful sounds occur off-screen puts the Naudet brothers' work in dialogue with *11'09"01* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

All these films attempt to convey the horror of September 11th primarily through the audio track. In *9/11*, the sense of horror is also conveyed by sounds coming from off-screen space. Jules Naudet comments over shots of the firefighters looking up, in the direction of the crashes: "You don't see it, but you know what it is, and you know that every time you hear that crashing sound it is a life extinguished. It's not something you could get used to, and the sound was so loud." The sounds of falling bodies, like the flaming towers in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, command our full attention, even as they remain in off-screen space. The Naudet brothers include eye-witness testimony that explore the unimaginable position of the victims. A fireman comments, "I remember thinking, how bad could it be up there that the better option is to jump?" With hours of compiled video footage, literally at ground zero, it is revealing that the most horrific scenes of *9/11* center upon sounds that have no visible location.

These films by the Naudet brothers, Moore, and Iñárritu work in the documentary tradition, as a witness or testament to a historical event. Yet, they also define new versions of the event apart from the familiar televisual image,



which lost its capacity to shock through endlessly broadcast television replays. *9/11*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and Iñárritu's segment of *11'09"01* consciously invert the typical sound-image relationship, eschewing images for empty screens and layered sounds. These films address an auditor more than a spectator. Though metaphors for comprehension (e.g., vision, view, imagine, perspective) are typically associated with sight, these films position sound as a more effective route to experiencing and commemorating the events of 9/11.

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