

9/11 The Last Shard Standing

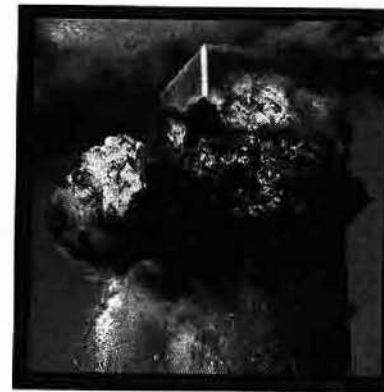
Grasping the Fossil Object and the Recollected-Image Psychoanalytically

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This meditation on the event of 9/11 emerges from a certain perplexity on my part concerning an elision on Lacan's part regarding the *materiality* of vision as developed in Seminar XI (*The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis*). Many cinematic theoreticians and art historians have returned again and again to his discussions, "Of the Gaze as Object Petit a," to establish the definitive distinctions between the *look* and the *gaze*. To briefly recap this well-known territory, the look is attributed to 'natural' perception. That is, to the initiative and power of the subject as *moi*. This means the ability to place people and things at a proper distance from the self, constitute them as objects at the ego's disposal. The ego (as *moi*) has the capacity to continually misrepresent and deceive itself. The look more properly belongs to the working of the spectacular imagination and not the Imaginary which, for Lacan, always implies a framing by the limits of perception itself, by that which threatens the very stability of the ego. We can never occupy this zone outside framed perception, or "true infinity" in Hegel's terms. We can only perceive the illusionary false infinity of geometrical space. The Imaginary presupposes the inclusion of a *screened* non-spectatory dimension which Lacan attributes to the unconscious Real, specifically naming it *object a*, a skewing of geometrical space into non-Euclidean possibilities of ex-imate space/time. The imagination remains confined to the preconscious *cognito* (I think) whereas Descartes' *cogito*

(I am) is rendered as the subject of the unconscious. The *Je*, becomes the 'true' subject of the symptom.

When we come to the gaze our mastery over perception fails. Proper distance collapses as 'something' is found not to be in its proper 'normative' place. Something ordinary now becomes extraordinary. It stands out as *object a*, metaphorically speaking, as a bit of the Real. It has become 'too close' or unthinkably distant, 'too far' away since the ego is unable to grasp or contain it. It enters into the twilight zone of ex-imate space, a place of "impossibility." The experience is described as shattering of the ego's co-ordinates. Strangeness, uncanniness, shock mark its effects. The *Je* is directly affected by a psychotic moment where the object gazes or stares back.



The blurring of simulated Hollywood violence and the event of 9/11 places this complex issue of the traumatic Real in the forefront of our concerns. The destruction of the World Trade Center was most certainly Osamar ben Laden's wildest fantasy coming true. As many commentators have remarked, it was impossible to watch the event—over and over again in disbelief—without the intertextuality of the Hollywood disaster films in mind.

Lacan makes clear in Seminar XI that what attracts and satisfies us by a *trompe-l'oeil* effect is certainly its constructed nature, its artifice. Hence, when we view the images of actual destruction...



...the shock of the Real comes when that very artifice “materializes,” takes on a ‘lived reality,’ collapsing the Symbolic Order in a death drive, as the Jumbo Jet bullet, almost piercing through the brain of each Tower, exploded, splintering its gray matter in all directions. At that moment of impact, the ‘lived body’ and the ‘imagined body’ of the building suddenly collapsed into one another, the gap between them disappeared, and we spectators found ourselves facing the dread of the Real, located at ‘ground zero’ —the sight/site/cite of the Trade Tower collapse. With the fantasy of American capitalist invincibility momentarily ruined, consumerism began to drop and reality TV no longer became appealing. There was a turn to conservative programming and comedy sitcoms. Community values began to take on renewed meaning. Even Bible sales went up in New York by 60%. Major Rudy Giuliani was redeemed from his sex scandals and economic controversy to emerge as a leader who could handle a crisis situation, providing the kind of leadership of calm and determined nerve New Yorkers needed to see and hear.



It is the viscosity of the image, its penetrating nature, the optical touch of the image which perhaps seems undertheorized in Lacan’s section, or is at least glossed over. Lacan, however, made two provocative asides, both in discussions after his presentations which relate directly to the question of optical tactility.

The first is that the stain of the Real in the scopic drive is not homologous with all the drives. “[I]t is the [scopic] drive that most completely eludes the term castration.” (S XI, 78) This scopic drive is on the side of the gaze and the evil eye which arrests movement through the power of fascination; the fascinum being the *object a* which captures the subject.

For Lacan there seems to be no “good eye,” no eye that blesses, only a voracious, greedy, and “evil eye” (*ibid.*, 115); a possessive eye which can arrest (castrate) movement. It is here that Lacan introduces his second aside which recognizes the reciprocity of the gaze from the realm of the Other—more specifically art, nature and another human being. He introduces a dialectics of horror and beauty, of laughing and crying. Against the evil eye Lacan sees art and nature as providing a *dompte-regard* effect, a “laying down” of the gaze.

It is the fascinating power of nature and art to tame and civilize the evil eye of the gaze. The capturing of the subject by the object is experienced as an arrest of movement, where the “thing-itself” is affectively experienced as an intensity of sensation. In horror, this ‘presence’ of a thing is felt radically as an “outside” which becomes a suffocating intrusion “inside,” reversing and confounding the body’s boundary. This moment of sublime beauty always already suggests a moment of awe, terrifying and beautiful at the same moment. Such sublime horror certainly describes the experience of the event of 9/11.

How are we to grasp the materiality of this Real encounter, especially when it comes to recording and memorializing, and mourning such an event as this? What are the ways such a tragic event becomes embodied by the media? To get at a tentative answer concerning the materialization of the Real, I have turned to the writings of Deleuze (1986, 1989) on cinema, especially the concept of time-image as opposed to the movement-image, and to his notions of the recollected image and the fossil object. I have then tried to apply these conceptualizations to images which have emerged during and since the event of 9/11.

Fossil Image The Last Shard Standing



I am particularly drawn to a metonymic fragment of the World Trade Center that remains standing—almost alone, as if refusing to fall down. It is an iconic shard that continually emerges in the media, again and again, as it beacons to be photographed. Reminiscent of a cathedral ruin, this shard presents the remains of a memory that cannot be assigned a present, only a mechanical objective signifier it seems, an

ironic and fortuitous 'freak' signifier that is homologous to the call for help—911—of an event that breaches and then makes history.



The *New Yorker* produced a double "black cover" where the World Trade Center's ghostly presence became visible as a slightly contrasted pitch-black outline against a dark background of almost equal value. The degree of tonal difference between ground and figure demanded that the viewer dwell on the cover so that the two towers could be differentiated once the top cover enouncing the date of the event was removed. The building's mortal remains became metonymically present. (Unfortunately, the available technology prevents the cover's reproduction here.) Like a phantom limb, the ghosts of the buildings hovered over New York as the cover so ably illustrated. But the shard is neither the building itself nor any sort of "reality"; it is neither the building as it was nor another thing—rather it has become an iconic sign in the sense that its presence gives us the event immediately. Like a cadaver, it becomes an iconic sign in the Real—a monumental uncanny object that is doubled as an apparition of the original, resting in absolute serenity as if it has found its place. And where it stands is where it died, relying heavily on the weight of the ghostly spot—as if this is the only place left for it. I can't image it being carted away to the dump. That would constitute a sacrilegious act.



The shard is a fetishistic 'fossil objet' in Deleuzian terms, an irreducibly material object that encodes the collective memory of the event. It has come to embody the "resilience" of a nation—"still standing" as a witness to the event that no narration of signifiers can ever adequately narrate. In this sense it is a recollection-object. Its lattice shape speaks to the skeletal bones of a building, the ruins which have taken on a mysterious and magical significance. The mysteriousness of its direct presence is captured in such a way that one might almost taste and smell the ash and smoke of the event. The sensible body of the building can be felt in this way.



It is presented to us as a ghostly form, a haunt in the distance, as if its steel girders are made of fine, thin lace, able to rise effortlessly above the ground.

The graininess of the image makes this an affected-image in Deleuze's terms—an image which arouses emotional and visceral responses. Rather than opening up forms of action, it opens up experiences of time, or reverie.



In the flood of artificial light during the night, the shard takes on an eerie feeling of hard-tempered armour. It stands like an avatar looking on as the excavation work progresses.

Its pesence looms in the distance. Watching. Recording the events around it.



Yet, unlike the cadaver that collapses the lived and imagined body together to produce the sublimely beautiful body with its organs still intact, this shard is much more terrifying. It has shed its blood and guts to remain a sublimely beautiful skeletal structure.



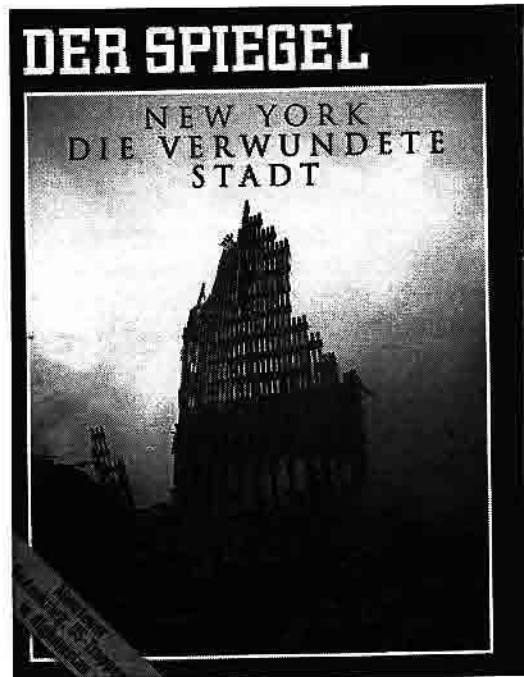
In another context as a skeletal steel sculpture with a flag beside, it recalls the memory of "The Iwo Jima Memorial" where 6,821 sailors and soldiers had died. As a fossil object it has condensed time within itself. If it remains standing, it will in the future expand outward in time, becoming a "radioactive fossil," throwing out pulse light, made more ominous by the smoldering of ground-zero which never seems to end.



But this is not a thing out of place, too horrible to look at. Rather, its fascination rests also in being able to capture the mental resolve of a nation. This is the *objet a* which it veils. Here it stands aglow with the rising sunlight where even the smoke takes on a warm pink glow.



It is perhaps no accident why this "remainder" has become the front cover of *Der Spiegel's* cover story— New York: The wounded city. It remains standing in the clear light of day. This recollected-image, bathed in the fire of the sun and its own smoldering heat, remains an embodiment of the "resilience of American democracy."



The shard has become a fetishistic object, an auratic object, and hence an embodied object. Benjamin wrote that aura is the quality in an object that makes our relationship to it like a relationship with another human being. It seems to look back at us (1968, 188). Aura is the sense an object gives us that it can speak to us of the past without ever letting us completely decipher it. It is a brush with involuntary memory, memory that can only be arrived at through a shock. We return again and again to it, still thirsty, because it doesn't satisfy our desire to recover or forget its memory. This shard as an auratic object maintains its distance no matter how closely we attempt to embrace it. It remains distant from us even when it is present in space. The shard as an auratic object remains a fragment of the social world that cannot be read from on high, but only as the witness of the object. Its aura is what makes the fetish volatile, for it incites us to memory without ever bringing

memory completely back. When a fossil is radioactive it hints that the past it represents is not over, and it beckons the viewer to excavate the past, at his or her peril. Meaning is encoded in such objects not metaphorically but through physical contact—the embodiment of the event in the shard's case. Such objects tell stories and describe trajectories, the unresolved traumas that are embedded in them—why *was* America attacked? Why is there so much hatred for its foreign policy? Benjamin's auratic fetish and Deleuze's fossil have in common a disturbing light, an eerily beckoning luminosity. In the fetish it is called an aura, in the fossil it is called radioactivity, and in Lacan it is called the pulsation of the drive, the *objet a* as it stares at you from the Real.



Time-Image/ Movement Image The Portraits



Like the shard that, to my mind at least, has become the iconic embodied image of the event—a fossil object—the iconic portrait of heroism has emerged as a testament to the bravery of firemen and policemen, and the loss of life in the line of duty. These portraits, found in the November issue of *Vanity Fair*, are held together by iconic signifiers marking their dutiful place in the Symbolic Order first, and followed by their proper names second. (eg., Firefighter,

Steam Fitter, The Trauma Team, The Bucket Line, etc.) Each slide tells briefly what the men and women were doing during 9/11 and after.



The contact print photos remind us that thousands and thousands of rolls could have been shot, each categorical signifier signified by an endless number of personal names. What might have become clichés, commonsense hegemonic images without reflection that extend unproblematically into action—what Deleuze termed sensory-motor images of the movement-image cinema—have been deconstructed and tuned into something else—into what Deleuze calls “optical images” characteristic of time-image cinema.



One is struck immediately by a frozen-moment of silence and the absence of any action. Perhaps it is the silence that recalls the Real event of 9/11 most profoundly. As an excavation of recorded history, these contact prints show us that cultural memory is located in the gaps between the recorded images. Silence, absence, and hesitation are the marks of the very inability to speak, to represent objectively one's own culture, history and memory. This is where the trauma of the Real lies—in the gaps beyond the signifier.

The affection-image is the domain of what Deleuze calls ceremonial cinema—the ceremonial body. The ceremonial body is introduced at the very moment when all other action has become impossible. Aren't these the portraits of the ritualized body, wearing the uniform of duty? Ritual connects individual experience with collective experience, activating collective memory in the body. This is precisely what these photos are about. The search for memory images turns out to be a process of collective mourning: of ritual. Here the poses are staged. What kinds of moments are these? They are still—silent—in honor and mourning of the wandering ghosts—a collective grief arising from individual stories.

No Bodies: Acts of Re-Collected Memories The Memorials



In the beginning there was hope that someone alive might be found at ground zero, but after several days of desperate searching Major Guliani released the terrible news that no live bodies were expected to be found. The search and hope of survivors was effectively over. New

York City remained haunted by 6,000 missing bodies. Outside Bellevue Hospital "A Wall of Prayers" grew and grew. Hundreds of such shrines began to appear throughout the city.

Here the portraits enact their revenge against any form of symbolic categorization and containment attempted by the Symbolic Order. Each posting screams out for a specific body to be found, remembered by the very materiality of an image caught in memory of a happier time, described by age, weight, height, the floor that they were on, the company they worked for...



These are "thin" images, optical and recollected images of another sort. Bare in what they are able to solicit, the "missing person" floats in a decontextualized space, yet pointing to a singularity that demands of the perceiver not "perception" in the cognitive sense, but what Deleuze refers to as an "attentive recognition." It demands that the viewer draw on his/her own reserves of memory as s/he participates in an attempt to recreate the missing person.



The contrast of this form of portraiture from *Vanity Fair* (as presented above) is starting. They present to us the way an image always splits time into two parts. In Deleuzian terms—borrowing from Bergson's philosophy of *durée*—there is the time that moves smoothly forward—the present that passes—and the time that is seized and represented (if only mentally) as the past that is preserved. Hence, the actual image and the virtual image are the two aspects of time as it splits. The very moment that they diverge, the two types of images create two disjunctive representations of the same moment.

The personalized portraits, the prayers for the missing persons try desperately to capture and being back the actual image of the loved one. They are recollection images, the unofficial histories and private memories which compete with the official histories, the virtual iconic portraits of *Vanity Fair* that speak to duty and bravery in the best possible way. But these portraits of the missing point to actual time, not virtual time. They are portraits which belong to the Real and not the Imaginary. They live in those “missing” gaps.

The moment of crisis shows itself as being the least available time to present the missing loved one—a desperately found photograph, a few lines of description written in haste to capture the loss. There is a pressure of desperation that these thin, minimalist recollected-images call on—a representational ownership that is nowhere to be found. They are inadequate for what they request, but it is in their very inadequacy that they beg for “attentive recognition.” They are but traces of the bodies that they call out for in desperation. Most disturbing is that in their inadequacy, in their failure to summon a reconstructed image, in their cry to have a memory assigned, these images of prayer turn into anonymous photographs that no longer correspond to any experience. They can lose their aura and become like yellowed photographs found in a high school yearbook at a flea market; or worse yet, become like those Holocaust photographs of anonymous Jews who died in concentration camps. Their bodies also vanished. Forgotten.



But the 6000 have not been forgotten. To remember their spirits memorial sights like Union Square became gathering places of mourning. There, fossilized objects found a resting place. These memorial sites contain many different and incommensurate stories—personal stories, fantasies, and hopes depending on who was looking at the objects.

The recollection-images and objects in these memorial sites—peace banners, flags, crosses, teddy bears, fireman’s hats, ribbons, photographs, poems, candles, flowers—confront what cannot be represented. They are an attempt to bring them into dialogue with memory of the missing. They cry out to tell histories, lives of which they are an index. It is a road back to particular memories and partial histories. It is these inexplicable images that testify most profoundly to the forgetting of both official history and private memory. They are multisensory bits which call upon a sense knowledge that cannot be reproduced nor represented. These are rituals that are necessary and crucial for psychic survival. Let us remember that rituals, including rituals of mourning, are not final acts but beginnings.

Postscript: Since the writing of this essay, the shard has been removed for safety reasons. It will not be used as a monument to mark the 9/11 monument. The winning design is to have two beams of broad light projected into the night sky to commemorate those souls whose bodies remain forever lost. They await justice so that they may finally rest in peace.

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Tagging A Boxcar In An Anxious Age

Jim Edwards

On Wednesday, September 12,th scheduled to fly from Salt Lake City to San Francisco, I found myself instead driving a rental car from Logan, Utah to the Bay Area. I left early – at daybreak, on a clear morning, just at that turning point when summer slides into autumn. Several hours later, on Interstate 80 east of Salt Lake and along the Bonneville Salt Flats, the National Public Radio station began to crackle and fade. By the time I crossed into Nevada, and moments after turning off the radio, I slunk into a state of sad resignation. Two hours of news about the horrors of the collapse of the World Trade Center and attack on the Pentagon were all I could take. The talk of war had put me in a sullen mood.

Ahead on the horizon were storm clouds and every mile or so a short stretch of wet pavement. There were few billboards or manmade distractions of any kind. The traffic was very light – mostly semis. The overcast sky added to the general bleakness. But as I continued driving westward through the Nevada desert I had the strange feeling of moving towards the light, even though I could see piled up clouds ahead of me. The openness of the desert seemed to amplify the sense of light and space. There is an austere beauty to the desert, and trapped in the comfort of the car, this sense of sublime beauty seemed almost reachable in real time. Looking through the windshield of the car was