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ROUND TABLE: MIMETIC MOURNING AT THE 9/11 MEMORIAL MUSEUM

Alexander Etkind, in his study *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied*, advances the concept of Mimetic Mourning: “a recurrent response to loss that entails a symbolic re-enactment of that loss,” an experience epitomized by the Victims’ Balls in eighteenth century France. By transposing this notion to contemporary America, the permanent exhibition at the 9/11 Memorial Museum – dedicated in New York City in 2014 – may emerge as one more prototypical case of the elaboration of trauma through the exteriorization and re-enactment of the loss it brought about. Regarding collective memory as a negotiation between past event and contemporary culture – as postulated by Maurice Halbwach in *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* as early as 1925 – one may point out that the visit to the 9/11MM is informed by Mimetic Mourning in the sense that the explanation of the traumatic event is expressed through means pertaining to contemporary American culture as the Victims’ Balls pertained to post-revolutionary French society.

The narration of the 9/11 terroristic attacks is staged according to principles and sensibilities that are touchstones of our experience as individuals historically, geographically and socially situated in contemporary Western society: multi-sensoriality, importance of personal commodities as emblems of the individual, and predominance of immediate, visual performance over detached narrative. The exhibition offers the visitor a synesthetic encounter with the day of September 11, 2001: the visitor’s phenomenological journey is studded with screens endlessly showing the images from the attacks and the subsequent rescue efforts, and touch displays providing access to the museum’s registries (such as the Witnesses and Survivors Registry and the Memorials Registry). The exhibition halls resonate with the contemporary TV and radio coverage of the event and the voices of the victims’ phone calls and taped messages trying to reach loved ones. The interactive timeline (covering 39 different moments of that day) and the “Wall of Faces” – an exhibition corridor along which photographs of the nearly 3,000 victims are hung and more touch screens allow the visitors to learn about each person by displaying photographs, images of

personal belongings and producing audio remembrances by their family – broaden the observer’s learning about the historical occurrence and, at the same time, intensify their emotional involvement.

This recreated, synesthetic reality, together with the emotional response it raises, are furthered by the great display of personal, every-day objects which the curators turned into mementos: enshrined in glass cases and spot lit, these items remind the observer of the victims’ lives and, furthermore, they evoke the momentousness of the instant that interrupted them because they captured it in their wrecked condition forever. Todd Beamer’s Rolex watch, Florence Jones’ Kenneth Cole pumps, and Giovanna Gambale’s wallet are only a few examples of the nearly 800 artefacts on view at the Museum; items that bear the aura of intertwined dichotomies: a personal story with a universal significance, a sign of death conveyed by every-day life objects, the ordinariness of common things and the extra-ordinariness of a pivotal, historical event.

The immediacy of the sensory historical account at the 9/11MM provokes in the visitor feelings of emotional identification and empathy representing the milestones of the commemorative experience. This sentimental, rather than cognitive, involvement appears to be in line with the most recent studies in the field of Cultural Memory, such as Marianne Hirsh’s concept of “post-memory” (the cultural transmission of traumatic memories, which are consequently deprived of their specific historical, geographical and societal connotations); Eva Hoffman’s “hyper-mediated memory” (the fetishisation of memory through media fostering empathic feelings); and the meditations on the relevance of the instant usability of history in contemporary society. Therefore, at the 9/11MM the mimetic mourning seems to be performed as re-enactment of the 9/11 trauma through videos and audios (by extension, through media as cyphers of our time); through the empathic identification with the victims engendered by their individualization (by means of photos, personal belongings and private anecdotes) and, hence, through the active role that the visitor is called to play in the construction of the narrative of the event. This understanding of collective memory highlights the importance of sharing in mourning and emphasizes the connection between past event and present memorialization.

This last thought introduces one more concept drawn from Etkind’s argument, the Fifty-Year Effect. According to Stephen Greenblatt and Dmitry Bykov (both quoted by Etkind), it takes two cultural generations “for literature to estrange the tragic past, process its experience and elaborate a convincing narrative” and considering that the 9/11MM was conceived of shortly after the attacks and dedicated thirteen years on, it is safe to state that the cultural memory developed there has not benefited from the Fifty-Year Effect yet. Etkind frames his discussion in this trans-generational context, and he outlines the different responses entailed by a catastrophic event in the subsequent generations: loss for the first generation, trauma for the second, and mourning for the third. In this light, the narrative of the 9/11 attacks presented at the 9/11MM appears to weave together these three aspects thus producing an intertwined account and a

multi-layered reading. The victims and their loss, the survivors' trauma and the need and will to mourn on the part of America and the world are all essential threads of the exhibition's fabric.

Collective memory is, therefore, both symbolically and materially illustrated by the communal activity of quilting, of which the Victims' Quilt displayed at the 9/11MM is a result.

The patchwork quilt may be assumed as metaphor not only for the juxtaposition, within the framework of the memorialization of 9/11 at the Museum, of differing degrees of emotional response, but also for the coexistence, in the 9/11MM narrative, of "the three energies structuring post-catastrophic world" postulated by Etkind: the cognitive striving to learn about the occurrence; the emotional desire to mourn its victims; and the will to find justice and take revenge against the perpetrators. If in post-Soviet Russia the first and third energies are difficult or virtually impossible to be pursued, one may conversely assert that at the 9/11MM the narrative of the events is informed by all the three dynamics and this heterogeneous nature of the mimetic mourning at the 9/11MM seems to suggest that 9/11 mourning is also a warped memorialization.

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